

Prologue

Ten Years Before...

Gone.

Her father was gone. Dead. And Maddie Temple had felt every second of it.

She'd been across town, studying with Keifer. Prepping for SATs—in the back seat of his VW Beetle. His hands in her bra, hers in his pants...sweet desperation and discovery and confusion, with just enough fear to make the bite of it sweeter. To make sure she was feeling her own need as much as his. Wanting him. Trusting him. Opening her mind and letting the world flood in, and her heart fill, and reason release.

No more barriers.

No more safe.

No more careful.

She'd been so close to finally knowing. To feeling normal, like other girls.

Then her mind had exploded.

She'd started to scream, and she'd kept screaming. She'd run from the car. From the shock on Keifer's face that confirmed she was a freak and she always would be. She'd raced through the rain and the dark, misty woods. Weaving, blind, toward nothing. Toward the sister whose unnatural link with Maddie was consuming everything.

Pain. Their father's pain. His shock and acceptance, both brutal and unfair. Every emotion he'd felt had rushed first through Sarah's mind, then Maddie's. Flashes of panic and denial. Silent screams that she'd heard from miles away. Overwhelming and obliterating and terrifying and endless. Then one final moment of blinding agony.

It had stopped so suddenly, Maddie had stumbled to her knees, wind-shredded pines shifting overhead. She'd lost the drive-in burger Keifer had sprung for, on their way to the mountain-rimmed lake that was a local favorite for parking. Emptiness had churned inside her. She'd been totally alone for the first time in her life. It had been excruciating.

It still was. After her mother's hysterical cell call, telling Maddie to get to the hospital any way she could. After

Maddie's twenty-minute walk through the rain. After hours of waiting.

She'd been so sure tonight was the night. She'd been tired of hiding. Tired of being afraid of what would happen if someone saw her—really saw her. Her sister's mind had unraveled, but Maddie had been so sure she was free of it. She was finishing high school next fall, then heading for pre-med. She was going to have a life of her own. But it turned out, all she'd really been was blind. Desperate, at sixteen, to feel something real. Something besides careful and cautious.

Now her father was dead, and her family was destroyed.

"He didn't suffer..." Maddie's mother sat beside her in the ER waiting room. Her posture—unnaturally straight—was denial personified.

Phyllis Temple's broken arm was in a cast. The gash in her forehead had required fifteen stitches. Her mild concussion was a concern, but she'd been thrown clear of the crash, same as Sarah. Separated from the family car that had been pulverized, leaving Gerald Temple crushed within, to face the fire and the explosion alone.

"They said—" Phyllis swallowed. Her hand fussed with the bandage covering her sutures. She'd never been able to face life's shadows and failures. Every intrusion into the "happy"

world she clung to was an assault on her mind. "The rescue crew said it was instantaneous. The he wouldn't have felt—"

"I know exactly what he felt!" Maddie shot to her feet. She paced across the too-bright waiting room. She clenched her fingers into fists. Rubbed her arms. Tried not to fall into the emptiness in her mind. Tried not to hate her mother and Sarah for being so weak, while Maddie had so far found a way to keep it together. "He...he... Daddy felt..."

"Don't, Maddie," her mother hissed. "You know I don't want to hear—"

"—the truth?"

"Maddie—"

"The truth is, Sarah's insane, and I—"

"You're fine!"

"Fine?" Maddie swallowed the memory of puking away panic and fear that hadn't been hers. "*Protect the secret at all costs... Isn't that what you told us when we were kids? Hide what you're feeling. No matter what. It's the only way...* Now Daddy's dead, and Sarah's somewhere in there—" Maddie motioned toward the doors leading to the trauma area. "—in a comma, or worse. Out of her mind, after causing all this... And it's fine?"

"I never told you to hide anything." The guilt in

Phyllis' expression said she knew she was lying.

They'd only been six, Maddie and Sarah, when they'd found the crinkling, decaying piece of paper in the attic. And with it, a hand-drawn portrait of a woman, a relative, no one had ever talked about. A woman, dressed in black with a scarf of some kind over her head, who'd stared at them from the picture. The writing on the paper had been hers, Maddie and Sarah had somehow known. A prophecy? A curse? Something about magical powers to be hidden until a pair of twins were born. Until a legacy could be released. A warning that both light and darkness would follow.

There'd been more. But Maddie and Sarah hadn't really understood what they were reading. Any more than they'd understood the strange things that seemed to always be happening around them. Their mother had found them reading the paper. The picture and the prophecy were snatched away, disappearing forever. Within the week, Phyllis had had her first full-on breakdown. When she'd recovered, she'd made Maddie and Sarah promise to keep what they'd found, and everything they were feeling, a secret. No matter what.

The lies had snowballed from there.

"When is it going to stop, Mother? What else has to happen, before—"

"Tonight was an accident." Phyllis rushed to Maddie's side, grabbed her by the shoulder with her good arm, and shook Maddie with surprising strength. Her dark eyes flashed, crazed and dangerous—eerily like Sarah's. Then they cooled. "It has nothing to do with—"

"How long did it take?" Maddie pulled away. "How many years, until you could believe that all the other times were just accidents, too? Sarah, knowing what went on in the neighbors' houses. Both of us, thinking we were crazy when we dreamed about the future—good things, bad things—and then watched our dreams come true before our eyes. Sarah, changing other people's feelings. Weaseling out of one screw up after another, because she could make people forget. Make them not care. We're not normal, Mom. Stop pretending we are! That anything is going to be okay. Sarah... We—"

"You're not Sarah." Phyllis' face was streaked with tears and blood. "You're not! You're fine. Sarah was always dangerous. Nothing seemed to help. Your father and I wanted to believe she would get better. The doctors gave us hope. Only there was nothing anyone could do to help her. But you're fine. It doesn't have to come true for you, too..."

"What doesn't have to come true! What are you so afraid of, you wouldn't tell any of us, not even Daddy?"

Phyllis swallowed, her eyes too bright. Too large for her delicate face.

"He... He..." she stuttered. "Gerald loved you girls so much, we both did. And I let myself believe that that would be enough. But...but now he's gone. And Sarah, maybe she's gone, too. And it's all falling apart, and I can't... I can't take this. I... It's all my fault... Oh, God. Your father... Sarah... Where's the doctor! Why aren't they telling us anything? I can't lose Sarah, too. And I can't lose you. I—"

Phyllis dropped her head into her hand, her legs crumbling. Maddie guided her to a chair. The scattered things her mother had said, and everything she hadn't, settled deep. The stupid curse would haunt Maddie for the rest of her life. It had something to do with Sarah's self-destruction. Phyllis' emotional frailty. Their father's death. All of it was tied together, somehow.

But there would be no real answers. Not unless Maddie wanted to face the future alone. Phyllis needed her lies to survive. And Maddie needed her mother, her only remaining family.

"I'm not going anywhere," she heard herself promise. The same promise she'd made to her twin, back before she and Sarah had learned to hate each other. When Sarah's mind had started

becoming more and more fractured, while Maddie had somehow learned to turn off the noise—other people's voices and thoughts and feelings and pasts and futures, their hopes and dreams. "Whatever happens, I'll be here for you, Mom."

Sarah's head injuries were grave. She might never recover. Never again torture Maddie with the dark mysteries of their minds. Which was a relief, in a way. An unholy gift that Maddie's mind shouldn't be grasping hold of as if it were a lifeline. But what would life be like, without her twin's mania for a constant companion?

"She's going to make it." Phyllis rocked from side to side, her tears breaking Maddie's heart. "My baby. Sarah. It's not her fault. It's never been her fault. She has to make it. She just has to..."

"Mrs. Temple?" A man wearing rumpled scrubs rushed into the waiting area, reading a clipboard. "I'm looking for the Temple family?"

The doctor looked up. His frazzled expression said it was almost more than he could manage to focus on them, instead of whatever was going on in the ER.

"How's my daughter?" Phyllis pushed out of the chair. "She was on my side of the car, not my husband's...not where the truck hit us. We were thrown clear and—"

"She struck her head against a tree." The doctor was absorbed in his chart again. "She was discovered unconscious at the scene?"

"Yes." Maddie had felt her twin's mind jerk from terror to stunned blackness, then to nothing at all. "She hasn't woken up since."

He nodded his head in agreement, reading statistics that were telling him what Maddie already knew. "We've stabilized her condition. The next forty-eight hours will be crucial. But I'm sorry. Even if we can keep her alive, the swelling to her brain has caused significant damage. If we can't reduce it quickly enough—"

"No!" Phyllis wailed.

Thank, God, Maddie silently prayed, shame flooding her. Relief and shame, at the thought of being free of the damaged part of her. The sister who'd never had a chance to be right.

Maddie didn't want her twin to die. She didn't want to face alone the future and the daunting task of taking care of her mother. She didn't want to keep hiding what she was, what Sarah had become. But, God forgive Maddie, Sarah couldn't wake up. Ever. It was horrible. But it was the only way.

As long as her twin's mind slept—as long as whatever they'd been together stayed silent—Maddie might still have a

chance to believe their mother's lies...