

## Chapter 1

*She's not dead.*

I sit bolt upright in bed, my heart pounding, and my mind racing with thoughts about my twin. I pull my knees to my chest, wrap my arms around them, and rock back and forth. The movement calms me. When I turn toward my nightstand, my gaze locks onto the clock. *It can't be one-thirty.*

The doorbell rings, followed by muffled voices filtering through my bedroom door, most likely my parents, and whoever's visiting. Curious, I get up, open it, and am nearly knocked to the floor by my mastiff. He greets me with hugs and licks.

"Good afternoon to you, too, Pepper. Mommy loves you. Yes I do, sweetie." He barks and makes a run for my bed. I sit next to him and smooth my hand over his soft coat of thick, shiny tan fur. "I had a dream about Melissa, Pepper." I look into his eyes, wondering if he would have loved my twin as much as he loves me. High heels clicking on the other side of my bedroom door interrupt my thoughts.

"Happy Birthday, Maddie," Ruby says, sashaying her way into my room. "Are you just waking up?"

I feel a flush spreading over my face and neck, surprised she's already here. We hug and so much love oozes out of her I get choked up. There's nothing like a BFF.

Before I can get a word out, Pepper barks. Ruby and I crack up. "Pepper, what are we going to do with this woman?" Ruby asks. He raises his ears and tilts his colossal head. More giggles.

There's always laughter when Ruby comes around. The kind that makes you pee your pants and get raccoon eyes. I step back and stare at her regal face.

"What's wrong with you, Maddie?"

"Nothing's wrong," I say, flopping down onto my bed. "I'm surprised you're here already, and yes, I'm just getting up."

Squinting, she gives me *that look*. It's the one I get when she thinks I'm keeping something from her. Next she'll be planting her hands on her slender hips. I knew it. I swear she could be a model. Five-foot eight, a whole three inches taller than me, almond-shaped eyes, legs that go on forever.

"When did you get here?"

"An hour ago," she says, patting her afro.

"An hour ago? I thought that was you ringing the doorbell just now."

"No, I've been here. That was your grandmother. I was downstairs helping your father with his desktop computer and his new Dumbphone."

"Wow, I wish I had known, I would have come down and saved you."

"No worries. Your mother finally got him to give me a break and then she sent me up here to wake you. Maddie, we all know you like to get your beauty rest, but damn, it's almost two. Your party starts in an hour."

"I know. I didn't sleep at all last night. It was almost six by the time I finally got a little shut-eye."

"I can tell. Your baby blues are red. Have you been crying?" she asks.

"No," I say.

"Then what's going on?"

"I guess I have a lot on my mind. It's June, but it feels like December. You know with graduating last month, the upcoming move, starting my new job in a week. And I feel so *old*."

"Madeline Louise Patterson, you're twenty-two, not ninety-two! Since when is twenty-two old?"

"I know but—"

"We're grown now. We asked for this," she says, towering over me, looking at me with her 'I got your back' smile. "It's all good. Remember when we were in the tenth grade how we used to fantasize about being grown-ass women, being able to stay up all night, screwing good-looking guys, and marrying rich ones?"

"Yep, I sure do," I say, rising. "But..."

"But what?" she asks.

"Melissa's still alive."

"What do you mean, she's still alive?"

"She's alive. I had a dre—"

"Don't do this, Maddie. Not today. Let it go."

"I knew you were going to react like that," I say.

Before she has a chance to go off on me, I run into the bathroom, lock the door, and slip out of my tattered sweat pants and favorite UCLA jersey. Entering the shower, I turn the faucet on full blast. I ignore Ruby who's now on the other side of the door, probably with her hands on her hips, calling out to me.

"We need to talk, Maddie. Right now. Get out of the shower right now, please."

"I can't hear you," I say, reaching for my favorite shampoo.

"Madeline Louise Patterson, open this door right now."

The water rains down on my head, soaking my hair, and I sing Pharrell's "Happy" because I am happy. Melissa's alive. She's not dead. I know I'm not supposed to believe that. I'm supposed to believe the investigators, the reporters, the naysayers, the nosey neighbors, the psychics, the pundits, all those people nineteen years ago and several years after, that gave up on the little three-year-old-girl who was driven away by the bad guys, never to be seen again. I'm supposed to believe my parents and my best

friend that Melissa's dead.

I shut my eyes and concentrate. Why can't I remember the day she was taken? It's always bits and pieces. Like a puzzle. I see my mother's face, her smile, her eyes. She's wearing a coat and so are we. Our matching red and blue jackets with the hoods trimmed in fake fur. I see Melissa's mouth. It's open wide and she's crying. Everything is meshed. Our SUV, our car seats. I press on my head trying to remember, but I can't.

The dream I had last night or I should say this afternoon, wasn't the first dream I've had about my sister, but it's the first time I've dreamed about her being an adult. All the other times she was still three. I used to have other dreams, too—dreams about people coming in and out of our house. Strange men in suits and ties, wearing big guns and badges. Men and women with cameras and microphones, gawking at me, pointing at me. Sometimes my dreams were nightmares starring my parents. My father falling over drunk, slurring his words, hitting the wall until his fist bled. My mother, comatose, out of it, a bag of bones, hopeless, helpless, barely alive. Everything is jumbled and mixed up, dreams, real life. I can't put it together.

While getting out of the shower and drying off, the silence gives me pause. "Ruby? Pepper?" Wow, I was on one. I totally forgot about Ruby. That's what happens when I start focusing on Melissa. I'm not supposed to focus on Melissa. I'm supposed to take care of myself, my life. That's what I've been told, and believe you me; I have worked hard to do just that. But it hasn't been easy. How can you forget about a part of yourself? It's like asking a leg amputee to forget about his or her legs.

I unlock the bathroom door and step into my empty bedroom. Ruby and Pepper are gone. I hope Ruby's not pissed with me, but I didn't want to get into it with her. I can't stand it when she tells me to not go there. To let it go. To be grateful I'm still here and that God has His reasons.

My eyes lock onto the wall near my bedroom door that's covered in family photos that make me all misty-eyed, especially the baby pictures. The crazy photos I have with Ruby lift my spirits. We took some kick-ass graduation pictures. I laugh out loud at the one where Ruby's pointing to her head and rolling her eyes. COMPUTER GEEK is scrawled across the front of her black cap.

I enter my walk-in closet that's filled to the brim with clothes and shoes. I check out the red dress section. Yep, I'm anal like that when it comes to my wardrobe. I rifle through my favs. I had thought about wearing pants, but Ruby's got a thing about dresses, and I want to get on her good side. I'm going to need an advocate when I tell my parents I want to reopen Melissa's case.

I set the dress to the side, brush my teeth so well, my dad would be proud, blow dry and style my hair, and put on my makeup. By the time I choose the perfect red shoes, and am dressed, it's almost three. Sizing myself up in my standalone mirror, I smooth my hand over my dress and toss my hair over my shoulder. Sighing, I take in my room. I'm going to miss it. I'm going to miss this house.

"Maddie! Where are you? Your guests are arriving."

My face breaks into a huge smile when I hear my mother's voice. I've always loved her voice. It's so melodic. I go to my door, open it, and say, "I'll be down in a minute, Mom. In a minute."

"Okay, hurry. There's someone here who's dying to see you. You're going to be so surprised."