SWEET DESIRE, WICKED FATE
By
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CHAPTER 1

Family. Until now Jaden had done her best to hold onto the comforting idea that family meant something. That you supported one another and cared about each other.

"Get over it, Jaden. Stop acting all broken-hearted."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Jaden glanced at her sister. Ava was punching buttons on the car radio with one hand and steering with the other. Music blasted as they swerved off the pavement skirting a section of the bayou onto a dirt road. Jaden watched it stretching in front of them like an open wound, slicing through the remains of a sugar cane field and ending at Guyon Manor, the old plantation house they'd inherited.

Tears welled in her eyes. She knew she cried too easily. She'd never seen Ava cry. Ever. A glance at her own faint reflection in the car's passenger window reminded her how different they were in both temperament and appearance. Ava had their father's hazel eyes, and his chestnut colored hair. Jaden's hair and eyes were dark as a new moon, and her features held a hint of their mother's Asian ancestry.

Jaden considered Ava's words. "Broken-hearted." Her sister was seventeen but still clueless. What Jaden felt was not a broken heart. It was the broken bond between siblings. But then, how could a sisterly bond be broken when it had never even existed?

Ava started in on her again. "Don't be all pissed off at Briz. No guy's ever going to be interested in you," she smirked. "You're a joke. An immature *goodie good.* Or is it all an act?" Jaden knew that Ava wielded sexuality like a sword. It was her weapon of choice to successfully maneuver through life, to gain power over men and the rest of the world. Why would today be any different?

"Oh yeah," Jaden replied, "I'm really just like you, an evil back-stabbing baboon-faced princess!"

Baboon-faced princess; Jaden hadn't called her sister that in years. She was fifteen. Couldn't she have come up with something better? Anyway, it set Ava off.

“Get out of the car!” Ava’s hollering drowned out the screeching brakes.

“No way,” Jaden snapped, but she didn’t shout. She knew she’d already sent her sister into Ava mode.

“Don’t say *no* to me.” Ava punched Jaden’s arm.

“Is that what you said to Briz before you had sex with him?”

“He wanted it. He was practically begging me.” She shoved Jaden toward the door. “Now get out!

Walking a few miles in the heat won’t kill you.” Ava glanced out the window. “Maybe the rain will wash off your pissy attitude.”

“Stop it!” Jaden looked at the approaching storm clouds, then glared at Ava. “I’m not walking anywhere.”

“*Get out now!* I don’t want to see your ugly face anymore.” She gave Jaden another shove. “Why don’t you make us all happy and disappear? Or better yet, *drop dead!”*

Jaden climbed out of the car to escape her sister’s malice. She slammed the door and jumped back as Ava sped off, tires throwing bits of dirt at her; tiny stones stinging of hurt and rejection. Drawing her hands over her face, Jaden wiped away the summer heat along with her tears and searched her mind for reasons why Ava hated her so much. She answered her own question.

I was born.

A damp stillness hung in the air as she walked toward the manor. Her hair felt heavy and hot against her neck. Running her fingers through her hair, she pulled it up and twisted it into a thick knot, hoping it would cool her off. It didn’t. Why hadn’t she thought of grabbing her backpack, or at least her bottle of water, when she got out of the car?

Jaden plodded forward watching the distant clouds’ bulging underbellies grow darker. She imagined a funnel cloud sinking down to the ground and spinning toward her as if she were a target in a video game, whipping her up and tossing her body into the bayou, broken and battered. Or dead.

She walked faster.

A quarter of a mile up the road she came to an overgrown path that disappeared into the cane. An abandoned building lay half hidden under a cluster of trees at the far end of the field. Taking in her dismal surroundings, and in her opinion, her sorrowful life, she thought, *Why not? A little detour would be good for Ava. Let her think I’ve disappeared*.

Vanished, forever.

Jaden glanced down the road in the direction of Guyon Manor. Gripping her hands as if squeezing out her misgivings, she stepped into the sugar cane. It rose six feet high, its dried spindly leaves consumed by thorn-covered weeds. Plants scraped against her bare arms and legs. The soles of her tennis shoes left deep imprints on the soft path. She thought of a time when this plantation had been fertile and thriving, when plows drawn by mules eased over this trail until they were replaced by steel-wheeled tractors, then rubber- tired vehicles. And then forgotten.

Steam spiraled up from the ground as she climbed over shrubs and through the cane, dodging webs that wove from one plant to the next. She imagined poisonous spiders finding refuge in her hair. Raindrops drifted over her mixing with her perspiration and trickling into her eyes. Stretching up on her toes, she watched as the prowling storm dissolved into a wall of rain. Lightning shot through the air, splitting apart like electrified arthritic fingers reaching for earth.

Jaden counted. Twenty seconds passed before the thunder responded. "Four miles away," she said out loud.

The rumbling silenced the crickets and birds, amplifying the buzzing of the mosquitoes that fed on her skin. "Worthless *draguitoes*." Her eyes tightened. Saying the name she and Briz had given the dragon-sized insects made her heart ache.

A rustling and crackling of twigs behind her made her eyebrows spike up. She hadn't considered what might be roaming through the field. Her imagination toyed with her nerves. *Alligators? Pythons?*

This is crazy! She thought about ending this senseless adventure and heading back to the road.

Instead, she walked further into the cane, intent on healing her fractured self-worth by being brave . . . *within reason*. After all, she wasn't in the backwaters of the Congo. This was just an abandoned sugar cane field in Louisiana.

She hurriedly pushed another branch aside, wishing that she had a machete. It would be nice right now. It would cut through the growth easily and give a lot more protection than her dad's small pocketknife, which she always carried.

Checking the time on her phone, she saw that she'd been on her little excursion for less than half an hour. She would have to be gone longer than half an hour if she wanted her mom to worry—or Ava to be reprimanded. *Ava punished. Ha.* Seven years ago, the night before

Jaden's eighth birthday, she realized that "Ava punished" would never happen. Ava had snuck into her bedroom and cut off hunks of Jaden's hair while she was asleep—and their parents had blamed Jaden for making her sister mad in the first place.

"Ava: the illusion of the perfect daughter they always wanted."

A branch poked Jaden's arm. She snapped it in half. "*My* birth wasn't planned. I was a mistake. They didn't want . . ."

Her throat tightened as something slithered over her foot and coiled around her ankle. She stood still as a marble statue while the pressure tightened around her foot. Losing her balance, she fell to the ground and came face to face with her adversary.

"A root . . . *a root!* I thought it was a friggin' snake." She yanked the clinging vine from her foot. "Ava's right, I am a wuss." Grateful that no one was around to witness her candy-ass nature, Jaden scrambled to her feet, wiped her muddy hands on her shorts, and moved forward. She quickened her pace before she could change her mind.

The clouds were drawing near. Raindrops were tapping harder against her skin, as if warning her to hurry. If she could reach the old building in time, she could wait out the storm inside. She was almost there; the tops of the trees were looming. Taking hold of another spider-infested shrub, she shoved it aside then stopped.

In front of her stood the remains of a small house. Vines wrapped tightly around its ghost of a railing and covered its decomposing walls and roof. It was like an experimental "green living space" that had gone terribly wrong.

What am I even doing here? She took a step back, expecting something to burst through the door and pounce on her. The rolling sound of thunder sent a shiver up her spine.

I've come this far; I can't wimp out now.

She inched up the stairs to the door, turned the knob, and gave a jittery laugh. It was locked. At the far end of the sagging veranda she found an open window curtained with dense vines. She tugged them out of the way and climbed in. For a moment she stood motionless while her eyes adjusted to the gloom. The walls were coated with a thick layer of mildew that permeated the air. Mushrooms sprouted from the floorboards. When she strode across the room, the floor squished under her feet as if she were walking on slugs. Jaden unlocked the front door and flung it open. Raising her arms victoriously, she declared, "I am fearless!"

A crushing sound came racing through the field blasting her brave moment into oblivion.

The storm had arrived.

The wind caught the door, banging it shut. Stumbling back, she felt her knees buckle along with her courage. Her muscles tensed while she listened to the rain pound against the building. It was trying to claw through the walls. An old rocking chair thrashed back and forth in the corner. The window next to it rattled as if someone was beating it with heavy chains, then it burst apart. Jaden covered her eyes as glass flew into the room. The rocking chair slammed against the wall, breaking into large pieces.

A bolt of lightning struck a massive oak tree in the backyard and thunder boomed overhead. Her heart jumped into her throat as more lightning illuminated the house. She imagined her dad glowing in a tunnel of light, beckoning her.

"Holy shit! I don't want to die," she yelled. Her voice was lost in the roar as the tree was ripped out by its roots and came crashing through the kitchen ceiling. The impact lifted the house off the ground. She fell back against the wall, fearing it would collapse on her as the wind razed the house, dismantling it.

She desperately tried to push the door open. It was stuck. Tears washed her face as she cried, "Let me out!" Giving up, she turned back toward the room. Mold and dust whirled around her.

Then, just as quickly as it had hit, the storm ended.

Jaden inhaled a shaky breath.

The tree shifted, groaning as it settled. Jaden steadied herself, trying to keep her balance on the swaying floor.

"I'm so out of here." She pushed on the front door one last time. It didn't budge. A hysterical giggle erupted from her. Between her sister and the storm, her day had just gone from bad to worse. It felt as if she'd gone through a mini-rite of passage, its sole purpose to force her to grow a thick skin and learn to be brave.

Did I pass the test? Am I done now?

"Help!" A faint voice came from the kitchen; a distinct plea. Then the voice was choked off by a loud cracking of a branch.

"What now?" Jaden whimpered. "I want to go home."

Straining to hear another sound she pulled back her shoulders, swallowed hard, and stepped into the kitchen.

The tree had demolished the room's exterior wall as well as most of the ceiling. Its trunk, stretching across the width of the room, shifted again. The weak floor rippled under her feet. A clump of damp leaves moved and a rat poked its head out. Seconds later two more appeared. The squealing rodents scampered across the limb onto what remained of the counter, past remnants of melted candles and shattered glass.

"Rats." Jaden released a puff of air. "I thought I was hearing voices. I need to get a grip." Stepping over the debris, she walked through the opening where the back door had been.

The yard resembled a slimy marsh. An old barn, worn by years of storms, had long ago been flattened against the earth. Nearby, the remains of a group of equally battered dwellings rested.

"Slaves' quarters," she said in a hushed voice. "My ancestors owned slaves." Jaden had never considered that before. Guilt burned her throat.

She jumped from the porch down to the ground and saw a gaping hole where the tree had stood. A nest of mud-covered ceramic jugs was tangled in the exposed roots. Nudging one with her foot, she thought of cremation urns. The sealed containers were half buried, bigger than she'd thought at first glance.

A loud cawing interrupted her morbid thoughts. She glared up at the remaining hunk of roof; several crows were excitedly hopping around. The noise reminded her of the way Ava was always squawking at her, committed to bringing her down. She could hear her sister's voice saying, *"Briz was just using you to get to me."*

The sting of betrayal latched onto her thoughts now. There was no way that she could compete with her sister. Ava stood five-feet six-inches tall and was curvaceous. Jaden was three inches shorter than Ava, and her body was still deciding what it wanted to be.

Short. Tall. Curvy.

No wonder Briz wanted Ava instead of her.

Well, she can have the jerk. I'm not going to cry anymore over some stupid guy. Jaden picked up a handful of stones from the mud and hurled them at one of the jugs, pretending it was her sister begging for mercy.

Forgiveness. Jaden laughed.

As each stone struck the container, a spider web of cracks spread further across its surface. Despite the still air, leaves swirled around her like a swarm of green moths fluttering up toward the screeching birds on the roof.

“I’m not always good! I can be bad!”

She heaved the last stone as hard as she could, and the jug broke into large pieces. The crows flew away with a loud flapping of their wings. A putrid odor floated up from a murky brown syrup that spilled onto the ground. The hairs on Jaden’s arms rose as she saw the jug’s strange contents slowly unfold. Tiny limbs stretched, bony fingers moved the ceramic shards off a distorted face, and citrine-colored eyes sprang open.

Jaden’s body went rigid. She sucked in a ragged breath as wiry tendrils lashed out from the malformed thing and plunged their sharp tips into her ankle. A searing pain tore through her, bursting in her head with a blinding light. Her heart beat erratically. She rocked back and forth, then sank down and passed out in the mud.

END OF CHAPTER ONE

You can read chapters 1 through 4 for on my website at http://wrayardan.com