

## Chapter 1

I hid out at the library until it closed at six. God, their summer hours were more depressing than a Hemingway novel. Less time spent at the library meant more time spent at home. And that was never a good thing.

I pushed the library door open and jogged down the concrete steps. The hot, muggy afternoon had given way under the evening sky to an almost ten-degree temperature drop. As a girl who lived in black clothing, I was beyond relieved—the color wasn't exactly sun friendly.

I walked down postcard-perfect Main Street, passing frou-frou stores like Monique's Evening Wear and Gail's Gifts-n-Such. The shops greeted me like wealthy, disapproving strangers while the smell of fresh-roasted coffee beans wafted by from the overpriced café, Javalation. As much as I hated the bitter drink, its scent made me smile. My mom used to brew a pot of coffee every morning before my sister and I were even out of bed.

Once I reached the end of the block, I crossed Edison Street and headed for Sanders Park. Cutting through the park would shave about ten minutes off my time, but I had to keep an eye out for the classmate clusters that always seemed to gather there. Apparently, being the only "goth" girl—as *they* referred to me—in school made you an obvious target.

Avoiding the more popular, tree-canopied parts of the park, I trampled through the overgrown soccer field instead, which put me two blocks from my street once I was across. I checked the time on my phone: 6:15. Oh, joy. Just in time for my favorite meal of the day.

Dinner at my house sucked for a lot of reasons. First of all, if it didn't come from the freezer, my aunt couldn't cook it. I'd eaten more fish sticks and tater rounds in the past two years than should be allowed by the FDA. Second, my aunt was a major Bible-thumper, which meant I had to endure a sermon the entire time I tried to eat my plate of flash-frozen faux food. Finally, my twin sister, Jade, was rarely home for these "family dinners," so I usually had to endure them on my own. Jealous yet?

My Aunt Sarah came to live with Jade and me after my mother's death three years earlier. My mom and aunt didn't get along and hadn't talked much in the years prior to her death, but because my aunt was our only family—and a "good Christian"—she volunteered to be our guardian. Sure, living with my aunt meant my sister and I didn't have to go into foster care, but it

also meant living with a religious nut job who spouted random Bible verses more often than my sister checked her iPhone.

Even though I dreaded what awaited me at home, I was somewhat relieved when I finally reached it. My throat was parched, and my feet were so hot that sweat squished between my toes—that'll happen when you wear combat boots in eighty-degree weather.

Despite my thirst and my nasty feet, the moment I swung open the front door, I was tempted to turn around and leave. Laughter from one of the bedrooms down the hall hit me like a blow to the gut. It wasn't the laughter that bothered me but the voices—my sister's unmistakable giggle mingled with a deep, masculine murmur.

I clenched my teeth with so much force I thought my fillings might turn into diamonds. Jade knew she wasn't allowed to be alone with guys.

“Jade, I'm home!” I shouted, shutting the door with a bit more force than necessary.

“Yeah, so? You want a gold star on your forehead?”

I took a deep breath though what I really wanted to do was go back to her room, grab her by the hair, and drag her into the living room—or as I referred to it, the place where Christ and his crew hung—apparently, my aunt never got the memo from Martha Stewart that creepy religious photos in ugly, dark wooden frames were out.

“Is Aunt Sarah home?” I shouted back.

“No, she called. She's going to be late. Something about a crisis during her prayer-group meeting.”

I rolled my eyes. My aunt was at church at least three days a week. She tried to get me to go with her on several occasions, proclaiming I was the “good” twin and would need God on my side to strengthen me in my “cause.” Of course, I didn't believe a word of it. I didn't doubt He existed—I already knew there was a devil, so I had to believe there was a God—but anyone who would let my mother succumb to her addiction and then desert her in her time of need was clearly someone who'd throw me to the wolves or at least look the other way.

I took my boots off and tiptoed past the life-size portrait of Jesus and down the Hall of Crucifixes to my bedroom, which was next to my sister's. Her door was cracked open. I didn't hesitate; I had to make sure she wasn't doing anything stupid. I inched as close to the door as I could and peeked in.

Jade's room looked as it always did—Barney-purple walls littered with posters of obscure rock bands, clothes poking out from open drawers, and makeup littering her desk. But when my eyes settled on her twin-size, white poster bed, I sucked in a breath. Jade was lying beside Matt Kerison with her head in the crook of his muscular arm, her face turned up toward his.

“So, are you going to kiss me?” Jade asked. The tone of her voice was a cross between a coo and a purr, and it totally made me want to dry heave.

“Eh, I don't know. Let me think about it for a while.” Matt yawned and stretched before turning onto his side and hooking his arm around her waist.

“Well, just so you know, I didn't invite you over here to snuggle,” Jade said as she rolled over to face him.

Matt pulled Jade closer until their bodies looked as if they'd been melded together. “No?” he whispered as he turned his baseball cap around and leaned closer to her face.

For a split second, I got lost in the moment, imagining what it would be like to be Jade, to not care about the consequences, to allow someone to touch me the way Matt was touching her, to let a guy see the *real* me. But all it took was the sight of Jade leaning in toward Matt's lips to pull me back to reality.

I threw her bedroom door open. “Oh!” I said, clasp my hand over my mouth and practically lifting my eyebrows to my hairline. “I'm so sorry, Jade! I didn't mean to interrupt anything. It's just... Aunt Sarah texted me and asked us to get dinner started.”

I thought I had just put on a performance worthy of an Oscar nomination. Too bad my sister wasn't buying it.

Jade glared at me. “Oh, really? And when exactly did Aunt Sarah start texting? Because last I checked, she said it was an excuse to avoid human interaction and, thus, un-Christianlike.”

Ugh. Of course my aunt would say that.

I stared back into Jade's cold, dark eyes as I wracked my brain for a comeback. “I didn't mean a text. I meant a voicemail.” The hint of a sneer and a slight rise of her eyebrows told me she wasn't buying it, but I didn't care. All that mattered was shattering the mood. “So, yeah. Matt, you better get going. You wouldn't want Jade to get into trouble.”

Matt glanced at Jade, then at me, and back to Jade. “Yeah, that would suck. It’s all right, babe,” he said as he flipped his cap back around, momentarily revealing the same crew cut half the guys on the football team sported.

Jade’s mouth pulled down as she stuck out her bottom lip.

“Hey now, don’t pout,” Matt said, rubbing her shoulder. “We’ll pick up where we left off another day.”

With a bat of her eyelashes, Jade’s frown curled into a seductive grin. She reached over Matt to grab her hair tie off the nightstand, guaranteeing that her yellow V-neck and push-up bra told him she wanted that day to come as soon as possible.

Jade stood and gathered her long, dark hair into a ponytail, raising her arms just enough that her belly button and tiny waist showed. “Come on, Matt. I’ll walk you to the door.”

They walked past me, leaving me to trail behind. I cut into the kitchen to give them at least the illusion of privacy though I could still hear everything as if I were in the room with them.

“So, how about a good-bye kiss?” Matt murmured.

“A kiss from me would be like nothing you’ve ever experienced before. I don’t think you should be standing when it happens,” Jade said.

Little did he know she was telling the literal truth.

Matt let out a low growl. “Tomorrow?”

“Ma-a-aybe-e-e,” she teased.

I heard the door open and shut and then my sister stomping her way to the kitchen.

Jade’s lips were pursed, and her eyes slit so just a sliver of dark brown showed. “What the hell was that about?”

“I could ask you the same thing. What exactly were you trying to do?”

Jade crossed her arms as she leaned against the pea-green countertop. “What did it look like I was trying to do?”

My shoulders slumped, and a heavy sigh escaped.

“Come on, Allison. I’m a teenager with raging hormones! I just want to have a little fun! It’s not like I’m going to sleep with the guy.”

“Yet,” I added. “You know what happened to Mom. You know what happens once you get a taste of it. It might start out as just kissing, but at some point, it won’t be enough. And don’t

you think Matt will suspect something if suddenly he feels like an extra on *The Walking Dead* after kissing you?”

Jade’s mouth pulled up into her infamous evil smirk. “The others haven’t…”

I was pretty sure I stopped breathing at that moment. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. Don’t make such a huge freakin’ deal out of it. They get their energy back within a couple of days.” Jade studied her nails. “They just assume they caught a bug. No biggie.”

“No biggie? Seriously? Didn’t you learn anything from Mom?”

She sauntered across the kitchen, opened the fridge, and grabbed a bottle of water. “Mom was weak. I’m not like her.” Her tone was calm yet firm. “I know when to stop. I don’t put myself in tempting situations.”

“Oh, you mean like lying on your bed with Matt while the house is empty?”

Jade rolled her eyes. “I am so over this.” She took a few steps toward the entryway but then pivoted on the ball of her foot. “You can think what you want to think. You can even scream and yell, but you won’t stop me from living my life the way I want to live it.” She hesitated for a moment as if waiting for a reaction. After realizing the only response she was going to get was my death glare, she turned and left. A few seconds later, her bedroom door slammed shut.

I stood in the kitchen, my mind racing. I was angry, sad, and hurt, but most of all, disappointed.

Growing up, Jade and I had always been different. She was outgoing, with this crazy magnetic personality. I was quiet and standoffish—well, except when being confrontational, apparently. When Mom pulled us out of school after fifth grade to homeschool us, I was thrilled, but Jade was a wreck. She had always been dependent on her popularity, thriving on attention like a flower in sunshine. She cried for weeks, begging Mom to reconsider, promising to “be good” and do whatever was asked of her.

Then Mom explained why she had to take us out of school. We would soon be going through puberty, and the cursed blood that flowed through our bodies would transform us into “beautiful women.” We would never go through an awkward stage, and men—both young and old—would find my sister and me irresistible. Untouched by our appeal, most females would

hate us because of that. She had to protect her daughters and the innocent men we would unwillingly attract.

After my mother told us about the curse, I was terrified, and if anything, the revelation made me shier than ever. I couldn't even make eye contact with a man, let alone get near one. Jade wasn't scared or shy, though. Her face lit up when our mom told her about the transformation of our bodies and our "death kiss," as she referred to it back then. From that moment on, Jade walked around with an air of confidence—even after learning she had the ability to not only weaken men but kill them. Didn't matter. Jade refused to see the blood that ran through her veins as a curse but rather as a powerful gift, one she couldn't wait to use.

I snatched some fish sticks from the freezer and slammed an old, stained cookie sheet down on the counter. I was ripping open the box when I heard the front door open.

"I'm home!" Aunt Sarah called from the living room, her sweet 'n' syrupy voice cutting through me like a hot knife through ice.

"I'm in here," I yelled back.

My aunt walked into the kitchen and set her purse down on the counter. While Jade and I were fraternal twins, my mom and aunt were identical, both remarkably beautiful, but in contrast to my mother's long, thick, dark locks, my aunt kept her hair in a pixie cut. Thank God for that. Having someone in the house who sounded like my mom was freaky enough; I didn't want her looking like her, too.

With her hands on her hips, my aunt stared at me with narrowed eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, except my sister is a reckless little whore."

My aunt gasped. "For Heaven's sake, Allison, why would you say something like that?" She mumbled something under her breath—probably a prayer for God to have mercy on my soul—and then kissed the small gold cross hanging from a chain around her neck. "And you know I don't like that kind of language."

In no mood for her sanctimonious bull, I rolled my eyes and didn't even try to hide it. "It's true. She is."

"Allison," my aunt warned as she took the box of frozen fish bits out of my hand. "Here, I'll finish up dinner while you fill me in on what's going on between you and Jade."

“I don’t get her.” I boosted myself onto the thirty-year-old Formica, hoping it wouldn’t buckle under my one hundred fifteen pounds. “I don’t know why she insists on doing the things she does. Nothing good is going to come from it.”

“Your sister is different from you. Yes, she likes to test boundaries at times, but she’s not going to do anything—”

“Stupid?”

“That’s not the word I would’ve chosen.”

“Whatever. Anyway, she’s already done something stupid.”

My aunt pulled open the ancient oven door, its hinges protesting, and slid the cookie sheet onto the rack. She slammed the door shut to ensure it stayed closed and wouldn’t fall open while the food cooked—which had happened before—then turned to me. “What do you mean?” Her tone was flat and low, but there was an undeniable edge to it.

*Should I say anything?* As much as Jade angered and frustrated me, she was still my sister, and I didn’t feel right betraying her.

“If you know something, you should tell me.”

I cleared my throat and fidgeted with the silver ring on my thumb, the same one my mom had given to my dad eighteen years earlier. Ugh. I’d never been good at making up lies on the spot. Even the rumors I concocted about myself took planning. “It’s just... I came home and found Matt Kerison in her bedroom. I mean, she explained that she was just helping him fill out a college application, but still, I thought it was way too risky, you know, to have a boy in her room. Especially when you weren’t home.”

That would be enough to appease my aunt. She would be furious with that story alone. I didn’t need to tell her anything more.

My aunt braced herself against the counter and closed her eyes, as if trying to either calm down or think of the right words. “I’ll talk to her,” she finally said. After a slight shake of her head, she opened her eyes in slow motion, revealing ten times more fatigue than they’d had just moments earlier. “She doesn’t understand the path she’s going down. Life energy is very addictive, and if she’s not careful, she’s going to wind up just like your—”

“I know, I know, I know,” I said. “You tell us this *all* the time. I know it’s addictive. I know what can happen if we’re ‘not careful.’ Trust me. It’s practically embroidered on my freakin’ underwear. Which no one sees, by the way.”

“I know you get it, but your sister...” My aunt lowered her head and rubbed her brow with her thumb and forefinger. “She needs to realize what can happen if she so much as kisses a boy. It’s like an alcoholic thinking she can have just one drink.”

For someone who had never even kissed a guy, my aunt seemed to know a lot about the curse. “Have you ever been tempted?”

My aunt chuckled without humor. “Of course I’ve been tempted, but that’s where God comes in. Your escape is the library, but when I was your age, mine was the church. Even with my devout faith, I still attracted men. Once, a priest even made a pass at me.”

“A priest?”

My aunt nodded. “Needless to say, I changed churches. Anyway, like that priest, some of the men were old enough to be my grandfather while others were typical high school boys. Those types were easy to ignore, but sometimes the men were nice. And charming. Like your father,” my aunt said with a slight grin.

Mom had told Jade and me years before about how my father had originally pursued my aunt. That story was the one that helped convince us the curse was real. He’d adored her, but she knew she couldn’t be with him without harming or even killing him. After months of being rejected time and time again by my aunt, my father turned his attention to her sister. My mom was just as beautiful, more receptive to his advances, and unfortunately, much more naive. She thought the curse was some horrible story made up by her mother to keep her chaste. My mom remembered my dad being sick a lot while they dated, but she thought it was mono or something. The idea that she was draining his life energy every time she kissed him never actually crossed her mind. Unfortunately, she realized all too late that the curse was real. My father died on their wedding night.

“So yes. I was tempted at times. I saw how happy your mother was, and I wanted that too—even though I knew it wasn’t love she felt for him. Still...”

I had heard the story at least a dozen times, but every time I heard that part, a tightness formed in my chest. I knew a succubus was incapable of romantic love, but I still liked the illusion that my mother loved my father.

“Even after your father’s death, I was jealous that at least she had gotten the chance to experience having someone by her side.” She swiped away a stray tear. “I got through it though, and as time went on, it became easier—but *only* because of God’s help. Without His strength, I

might not have been able to abstain. That's why it's so important for you and your sister to come to church with me. Neither of you will make it without God in your life."

"That's my cue." I hopped down from the counter.

"You need God on your side. He'll help you get through this!"

"I think I'll stick to dressing in black and hanging out with books."

"That's not going to be enough. Succubus blood runs through your veins."

Just a few steps, and I would've been out of the kitchen, but her words glued me to the floor. "Really? You don't say?" I said with faux surprise. "Listen, I don't care what kind of blood runs through my veins. I am not a succubus, nor will I ever become one. I will not be a killer like my mother. Not because of the strength of God or anyone else, but because of my *own* strength."

Not waiting for my aunt to respond, I stomped off down the hallway, past Jesus and his judgmental eyes, and into my room. I slammed the door, and a moment later, I heard one of the crucifixes fall off the wall in the hallway. *Good!* My aunt was so wrong. I wouldn't let a stupid family curse define me.