

Prologue

1975

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep (Genesis 1:2).

Two ominous figures sat in quiet contemplation. The larger one's head was gargantuan in nature, and foul droplets of acidic mucus fell from his protruding fangs.

The smaller one stood sixteen feet tall and his rapier tail was wrapped protectively around his middle. He sat as still as cold hard stone. His sinister eyes were yellow rimmed and telegraphed evil cunning. He was known as The Leader.

Their silhouettes cast eerie shadows against the backdrop of the smoke-filled flames that spewed from the lake of fire.

"Ummm, this is my favorite place. Listen to the melodic sound of souls screaming in agony—it is music to my ears. If you concentrate you can hear the desperate pleas for release. Yessss . . . It allows me to know that all is right in our world," The High Master said. The Leader shuddered as the menacing timbre of The High Master's voice snaked fear around his chest. For him, it was equal to the singe of demon skin from a thousand innocent prayers; he loathed it. His tail subconsciously tightened as he awaited his newest orders.

The High Master continued, "These human souls are pathetic with their self-serving natures. They frighten at the sound of our bumps in the dark but create havoc in their own lives. What idiots they are and not fit for company until they have totally crossed to our side. And even then they tire me soooo . . ."

The Leader didn't stir; his thoughts were of survival. He refused to speak. He knew a wrong word could cause such suffering and pain. The High Master's punishments are prompt and fierce. One seeks death, but yet, death will not come.

The High Master continued his tirade, his grimace displaying double rows of slime-covered fangs. His was a chilling profile. "Your charges are young. Both are being raised in good homes, and, as a result, they are overconfident creatures. Leader, do not underestimate their youth; innocence is a powerful weapon. In their kingdom, the weak become strong. But we must prey on that weakness and use it to our advantage. You must destroy them before they complete their purpose. I am giving you this head start; you must not fail."

After speaking, he stood his full twenty feet in height, his shoulders reared back as his frame vibrated with his frustrated bellowing. "In the beginning we owned their world. After the fall, we adjusted; the land we were given was dark and empty, but we were content with our lot. Then He whose name is not spoken, created man, and we were once again demoted. All we seek is our rightful power, our rightful place. Make haste, bold one, and steal, kill, and destroy all that stands in your way."

The Leader bowed his head in submission.

"And, Leader—this was a most productive conversation. You are learning."
The Leader's tail unwrapped from his torso as he swiftly rose and slithered toward his point of ascent into the Earth realm. He was determined not to fail.

Chapter One

The Detroit pollution and cold, foggy weather covered Esther Wiley's shivering body in crisp, arctic shades of blue gray, reminiscent of watercolors dancing in the jelly jar after her arts and crafts class. She shivered, but stubbornly refused to let her mother put a scarf around her small head. She was going to be Cinderella. Cinderella didn't wear an old ugly scarf. Well, maybe when she was cleaning, but she wasn't trying to be that kind of Cinderella. No ashes to ashes and dust to dust for her. She was all about glass slippers and diamond tiaras.

Esther's round cheeks were rosy from the wind, her hated freckles beet red glowing in contrast to the caramel cream of her skin. Her knobby knees were pressed together whenever she wasn't bouncing from foot to foot in the frigid air. She was on a mission. She wasn't allowing a hideous scarf to mess up her hair in exchange for a little warmth. She had endured two hours of "hold the grease jar lid on your ear pain" that produced silky pressed hair. There was torture in the quest for straight tresses. In her seven-year-old mind, her priorities were clear.

Esther's petulant voice screeched. "Mama, how much longer do we have to wait? I can't stand it. I want to try on the glass slipper—right now."

"Mind your manners. In a moment, I'm going to give you what your Grandma Vic used to call a private deliverance in a public place."

A curl of warm breath escaped when Esther sighed. She turned away, rolled her eyes, and then stared defiantly at her mother. The same hands that calmly cuddled her at night now moved restlessly after giving up trying to place a warm scarf on Esther's head. Esther didn't dare speak. She had badgered her mother to bring her and her two best friends to downtown Detroit for the Cinderella contest. When they arrived, the line to enter the historical skyscraper snaked around the building. Two hours later they still couldn't see the front entrance. As the wind bellowed, time stood still, but because of her mother's mood, she resisted the urge to tell her she was freezing.

She peeked at her friends' reaction to her mother's scolding. She could see Sheri and Deborah were indifferent to her embarrassment; their faces tense as they craned their necks to see the start of the line.

Esther puffed warm breath into her mittens. "Y'all shouldn't have come if you didn't want to wait."

Sheri's elfin face was etched in anxiety. Her shoulders sagging, she grimaced at the time on her watch. She leaned forward in a panicked whisper. "You know I had to sneak out of the house to come. If my mama finds out I'm here, I'm a get a whipping."

"You should have told her," Deborah smacked her sour grape gum, then twirled it around her finger.

Sheri's jaw tightened. "I tried." She pointed her finger in a mock role play of her mother. "'Ain't no such thing as Cinderella, and sho' ain't no Prince Charming. Get in them school books. There isn't anything worse than being ignorant.' Y'all know how my mama gets."

Laughing, Deborah slapped her hand against her thigh. "Uh, uh, uh," she stuck her gum back into her mouth and popped it. "Girl, you sounded just like your mama."

With hands on her small hips, Esther swung her head toward Deborah. "Well, what about you? You could have stayed home."

"Oh no, where you two go, I go. You can't leave me out. I can stand this girly stuff for one day." Deborah eyeballed her and popped her gum for emphasis.

Esther sighed in her trademark dramatic fashion. "Please stop playing with your gum. That's just nasty."

She wished her friends cared as much about the Cinderella contest as she did. Sheri was the smart one, but her whippings from her mama were the talk of the block. Deborah was the tomboy; she had seven brothers.

Esther's older sister Phyllis once said, "Deborah's mama better take that chile in hand quick 'cause if she don't, she gon' end up *funny*."

Esther tried to explain that's what she liked about Deborah—that she was funny. Phyllis just stared at her with small slit eyes, sucked her teeth, and told her to get out of her room.

She didn't know why Phyllis always said that because half the drawers and closet space were hers, and she slept on the bottom bunk bed. But before she got pinched . . . or worse, she'd leave the room.

Esther understood her friends' mood; it was her mother she couldn't figure out. Mrs. Wiley reminded her of herself when she had to go to the doctor and get a shot; frightened.

Esther swallowed, summoned her courage, and pulled on her mother's coat sleeve. "Mama, what's wrong? Why did you say we might have to leave before I try on the slipper?"

Her mother's eyes blinked in rapid succession. "I—well—I—girl, quit asking me questions."

In a huff, Esther folded her arms, and clamped her lips tight. In a snail-like increment, thirty minutes dragged by, and finally they entered the department store.

It was so beautiful; Hudson's department store had turned the tenth-floor lobby into a lighted winter wonderland. In the center of the room, a handsome prince with dark hair and sapphire eyes knelt before each little girl as she sat on the white, satin bench and tried on the glass slipper. To a young heart, it was breathtaking.

Esther was so excited that she peed—just a little—in her underwear. When it was her time to approach the bench and sit down, she closed her eyes, folded her hands, prayed, and waited for the miracle that her grandmother had assured her God could deliver.

“Yes. Yes . . . Yes!” she squealed. The glass slipper fit her small foot perfectly.

Her mother cried out, “Oh my goodness; you won, you won.”

Her friends danced around, and they all jumped up and down together. It took them a few minutes—the silence around them incredulous—to notice that they were the only ones celebrating.

Esther hugged her mother around the waist and peeked at the crowd. Somber pale faces reflected shock, anger, and disbelief; it was plain that their small entourage's happiness lacked the crowd's support.

The distressed prince rose, his back ramrod straight. He confidently looked over at the tall, austere man who seemed to be in charge.

“I am sorry, miss,” the man advanced on Esther's mother, his hawkish nose tilted in an imperious manner. “It isn't a proper fit. Please relinquish the slipper to the next person. You and your daughter are holding up the line.”

Esther wailed in protest. “But, Mama—” Her mother placed a finger over her mouth and used her other hand to wipe her burgeoning tears.

Mrs. Wiley's voice was soft and gentle, her hands tender in their ministrations of comfort. “Shush, baby, let's go.” Her face was strained, and her eyes inflamed with a century of unspoken words and kindled rage.

Esther discerned something unspeakable had happened, and she should not ask about it. She grabbed her mother's hand and placed her other hand in Sheri's, who then took hold of Deborah's. They were linked; one.

The friends were confused; somehow they had done something . . . wrong. The swirling abyss in their stomachs paid homage to their guilt. Shame hovered over them like the Detroit factory's smokestack stench. They huddled together, drawing comfort from each other. Stiff and silent, they exited the store into fresh falling snow. Esther felt the chill of the cold air all around her. She released Sheri's hand and with tears frozen on her face, spoke in a meek, trembling voice. “Mama, my face is cold.”

Her mother reached down and slowly tied the ugly floral printed scarf around her silky pressed hair.

As the small, dejected group hurried down the street, a shadow followed along the wall; its longform slithered between the cracks of worn buildings as it hissed along the way. It was oblivious to the noise of traffic and other people rushing to and fro. It was a single-minded creature, and they were not his problem. He was only concerned with his assignment.

Today had been a good start, and he was pleased but not satisfied. He was like The High Masterin that regard. Until the fruit from the vine was spoiled, his job wasn't complete. For each of his young assignments, he was just beginning. He knew from experience it was better to catch the fruit before it matured. He watched as they scrambled forward, seeking solace in each other's presence. As he followed, he wore a look of utter contempt for his charges. His yellow eyes gleamed eerily with a malignant delight against the growing darkness of the day. After all, it was a job well done.

Chapter Two

1988

The odor of musty bodies and stale beer could be smelled from anywhere in the gymnasium. The music blasted from the speakers, and the crowd of crushed college students swayed to the incessant beat. Bobby Brown was singing about things being his “Prerogative.” Young athletic bodies were sweating to the song as though it was the new black anthem.

Deborah was shaking her rump like her clothes were on fire. Her acid-washed designer jeans hugged her hips and her matching shirt rode up with each bounce of her curved body.

Esther cupped her hands around her mouth and called over to Deborah, chanting, “Work that body, work that body! Make sure you don’t hurt nobody!”

Deborah acknowledged Esther’s call out by throwing her hand over her head and rocking from side to side as she began to prance around Jay, her date for the evening. Her footwork was so flawless, that others dancing watched Deborah on the sly.

Esther laughed out loud and continued to rock the house with her own moves.

While navigating the dance floor, Esther continued to keep her eyes on the door for Sheri and Briggs. She bit her lip and thought about Sheri and the way she always studied so hard and how she constantly worried that she would disappoint her mother. Sheri was an A student. How could a person be better than perfect?

Esther smiled when her thoughts shifted to Briggs, and the butterflies started spinning in the pit of her stomach. He was the stuff her dreams were made of. His nose was Roman in appearance and his low cut, wavy, fade glistened like black gold. His cleft chin was a perfect fit for her index finger. He was tall, Hershey smooth milk chocolate and “smack yo’ mama” handsome. Esther liked his looks, but even more, she loved who he was.

Briggs was ambitious. He had set goals for himself, and he wasn’t stopping until they were met. He was a business major and knew he would have his own company one day. She wanted to help people with their problems and was majoring in social work. Many times they sat and talked and dreamed long into the night. It was those times that Esther knew they were meant for each other.

Their biggest issue was Briggs’s father. He was a world-renowned televangelist and Briggs thought he walked on water. Esther was glad he loved and respected the man, but she tried to tell him that nobody was perfect and that living up to perfection was an impossible task. He and Sheri always seemed to seek others’ satisfaction. Esther called it hoop jumping. And, in Briggs’s father’s case, the hoops had fire on them. There were times she sat and waited for Briggs, while he jumped hoops. It was a circus act with no safety net in sight.

Esther hoped this wasn’t the case tonight since next to homecoming, the new semester icebreaker was the biggest dance of the year.

The song ended, and Esther thanked her dance partner. She never noticed the disappointed look on his face as she walked away to get herself a drink. Esther smiled as she glided up to Deborah who was already in line.

“Girl, you were working the fool out on that floor.” She clowned on Deborah as she tried to imitate her style.

“Honey, you know you can’t do me,” Deborah made an intricate dance move.

Esther looked at the sweat pouring down the side of Deborah’s beautiful mocha coffee face with its delicate features. This was her girl, her ace in the hole. She handed her a tissue.

“No, you’re one of a kind.” Esther moved forward and paid her thirty-five cents for a cup of soda.

Deborah grabbed Esther from behind, “Hey, don’t look now, but your Romeo just showed up.”

Esther turned and watched Briggs as he strutted into the gymnasium; he was definitely looking good, and she loved his confident swagger. The brother made her molten hot.

“See ya, I hear love calling,” Esther said in a singsong voice as she touched and fingered her hair and swiped lip gloss across her lips.

“Awesome, I’m going to go check on Sheri. You know she can forget it’s okay to have fun and not just do schoolwork.”

Esther nodded, already distracted as she sashayed to Briggs with an exaggerated sway to her hips. It was time to play.

Colgate pearly whites advertised her glowing smile. At twenty years old, she was five foot five and stacked in all the right places. Her asymmetrical haircut was a sign of the times. Her hair was fluid and with a flip of her head, its sheen shimmered in the blinking disco lights. Her luminous, amber complexion was the canvas for her cute turned up nose and wide, generous lips. Over the years, her hated freckles had faded to a memory. She carried a determined air and her dark golden cat eyes broadcasted her every thought.

Briggs watched her approach with an appreciative gaze.

Esther leaned in, placing her hand on his chest. “Hey, I almost thought you weren’t going to make it.”

Briggs pressed her hand over his heart. “Me, stand you up and live to tell it? Do I look crazy? I would hear about it forever.” Robust laughter rumbled through his chest.

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