

Chapter 1

June 1983

“All right... all right... all right. Y’all don’t hafta go home, but you hafta get the hell outta here.” The old man shook his head. “Dammit... ya made me cuss in church! Y’all go on now. I got things to do. Can’t be in here foolin’ with y’all gals all night. I’m lockin’ that gate in five minutes. I mean it for real this time!”

The group of teenaged girls giggled as they gathered their Bibles and purses. They always laughed at Mr. Nick, the church custodian. Every Thursday night, without fail, he’d threaten to lock them in the church if they didn’t finish their Bible study by eight o’clock. Of course, they were always done with the Bible part by seven thirty, but the girl talk lasted until he kicked them out. They talked about all the things girls talked about. They talked about school and mean teachers and nice teachers and cute teachers. They talked about clear nail polish on their fingers and bright red on their toes—about soaps that smelled like perfume and perfume that smelled like candy and wearing real perfume only on their hands so they could wash it off before they got home. They talked about putting on makeup on the bus and using Wet-Naps to wash it off after school and about hiding shorts under their skirts and using tampons at school and leaving the top two buttons of their blouses undone.

And they talked about boys—the boys at school who they could never have and the boys at church they could never want. Gary Hayes, the cutest boy at church, was dumber than a box of rocks, and Johnny Turner was a mama’s boy who everybody pretended wasn’t gay. Willie Clayton always snuck out of service before collection, and Andre Bradley thought he could sing but really couldn’t. They talked about Kevin Flowers, the nicest boy in the church—he was

smart and funny and short and ugly—and Rick Parker, whose voice made them all tingle, except he was fat and smelled funny. Malcolm Porter, the preacher's son, was much too old to be called a boy and always spoke in Bible verses because he knew the Bible by heart, and JT Jackson, the devil's son, had gotten arrested and had a girlfriend with a baby and always wore gym shoes to church. They talked about hiding notes and holding hands and sneaking kisses that made them melt. They dreamed about running away to college and seeing the world and falling in love and never having kids and wearing pants and dancing and smoking and drinking wine... and... and... and...

Their whispers, giggles, and squeals continued through the maze of rooms in the giant storefront church, moving down the aisles and out the front door. A few of the girls stopped to hug the grumpy old man shooing them out into the hot summer night.

Glory Bishop said goodbye to the girls at the bus stop and turned to walk the three blocks to her job at Herschel's Salon, one of Chicago's late-night beauty parlors. Its last customers came in at nine p.m., and Glory's shift started whenever she arrived. Herschel, the owner, worked the late nights, and Thursday nights were always busy with his extra-special customers getting ready for the weekend. Thursday nights at Herschel's was the best *girly* party on the South Side. Glory's mother would definitely not approve... if she knew about it. Glory mostly just did the laundry, cleaned up, and tried to avoid the party.

Seventy-Fifth Street was alive as always. The old-time Chicago neighborhood was full of new people, and sixteen-year-old Glory loved it all—the blinking light bulbs and pulsing neon, the closed stores with black metal gates and huge padlocks, and the big green buses and checkered taxis crawling through double-parked cars. Loud, laughing men in front of the liquor stores called her Church Girl and offered her free beer. The women in front of the beauty shops

drank and laughed much louder than ladies should. Independent businessmen in fancy jogging suits discreetly hawked their wares. Independent businesswomen in fancy red dresses loudly hawked theirs. She loved the crowd inside and outside of Harold's Chicken, waiting as long as it took for the best food in town, the teenagers at the game room cheering and groaning as high scores were made and lost, and the taverns with the thumping music and smoke spilling out every time the door opened.

Glory loved the noise, the smoke, the music, the crowds—all of it. She dreamed of the day when she'd have her own apartment overlooking Seventy-Fifth Street. By day, she'd be a bright young college student, just like in the magazines. In the evenings, she'd work at the salon and then walk home to a third-floor apartment, spending nights up on the roof, looking down on the street lights or looking up at the stars.

Throbbing bass vibrated the doorknob Glory held as she waited to be buzzed into the salon. The music, flashing lights, and ribbon curtains covering the windows only hinted at the loud, colorful world inside.

“Good evening, Glory-Glory!” Herschel's deep voice boomed over the music. “Come on in! We're partying like it's 1999! Oo Oo!”

His heavy footsteps shook the floor as he danced among the occupied chairs, his clients in various stages of curling, waxing, plucking, and shaving, all cheering and bouncing along to the music. Glory laughed and clapped as the six-foot man in purple satin palazzo pants twirled around the room, his sheer, iridescent work smock glittering in the reflected light of the disco ball hanging from the shop ceiling. His great Jheri-curl wig, pinned up at the sides, created a giant shiny black mohawk cascading down his back. “We're Prince-ing, darling! It's just like drinking but with no hangovers! Oo Oo!”

“Hey, Glory-Glory!” the men in the chairs sang as Glory walked by them to the back rooms of the shop.

Past the purple beaded curtain and through the door marked Employees Only, Glory settled into her sanctuary. The first room—Herschel’s combined office, kitchen, and storage room—smelled of the exotic herbs and spices he used to create his special lotions, perfumes, and hair tonics. That day’s scent was vanilla, musk, and something woody. The second room—the lounge and laundry area—had deep, soft couches from the ’70s, artwork from the ’60s, tables from the ’50s, and carpet from who knew when.

The giant washer and two dryers let her finish all the real work in about an hour, and then she’d spend the rest of her time reading from the collection of books she would never tell anybody she’d read. While the girls at church giggled over the dirty parts in the Old Testament, Glory read *Forever* by Judy Blume and learned about *The Best Part of a Man* from Xaviera Hollander. Whenever Herschel caught her reading, he’d say, “Shame on you, Glory-Glory. Your dear mother would not approve of you reading such things. Put it right back where you found it... as soon as you finish reading.”

In the privacy of the stuffy lounge, Glory shrugged out of her long-sleeved blouse and peeled off her thick pantyhose. Then she twisted her skirt around and tightened the pins that held it up on the sides. Most of her clothes hung too loose on her slender five-foot-six-inch frame because her mother believed she’d grow into them. But Glory hadn’t grown in two years. The scratchy, hot outfits always left ashy gray spots on her light-brown skin. Though she’d never tell the girls at church, she didn’t hide shorts under her skirt, and her toenails weren’t polished. Pulling the three cloth bands that bound her thick brown hair into a long fat ponytail, she used her fingers to fluff her hair out so she looked like the poster picture of Diana Ross. She laid her blouse and

pantyhose over the back of a chair and grabbed an orange pop from the fridge. Twirling in her skirt and undershirt, Glory sang gospel songs and scrubbed and mopped to the beat of the worldly music, the ungodly words muffled by the closed door. The pounding rhythms and shouts from the party in the shop always made her laugh—they sounded exactly like church service.

Glory danced around the rooms, moving mounds of damp towels and greasy smocks that always managed to land too close to the clean towels. The day's lunch dishes were piled on the coffee and end tables. She'd never understand how people passing through the kitchen to get out to the shop didn't think to take their dishes with them. The trash overflowed with empty wine-cooler bottles, and the TV screen sizzled from a tape left playing in the VCR. Where most people would be irritated, Glory was elated. This was her time, her space, her peace.

She was standing at a softly rumbling dryer, folding "mountain fresh" scented towels, when she heard the door opening behind her.

"Hello, Miss Glory."

She continued folding, pretending not to hear.

"I said, *hello, Miss Glory.*"

She would not give that devil's son the satisfaction of responding.

The door closed, and she hoped he'd gone, but then he was behind her... his arms around her waist... his lips touching her shoulder. "Remember the first time you let me kiss you? You said you'd be my wife."

Glory shrugged off the kiss and tried to ignore him—tried not to notice his scent or relax in his arms. She tried not to respond to his voice... tried not to care.

His lips touched the back of her neck. "Remember the second time you let me kiss you? You said you'd be my girl."

Glory deliberately brushed his kiss from her neck and moved to the washing machine, careful to keep her back to him.

“Oh... so it’s like that now, huh? No problem. I’ll just sit down and watch you work. I’ve got all night. And you know, I always did appreciate you from behind, too.”

Glory growled under her breath, taking her annoyance out on the wet towels she pulled from the washer. She heard him sigh loudly as he settled down on the old couch. She whispered a prayer for patience and strength.

“Know what?” he asked. “I feel like singing.”

Glory continued her work and tried to ignore him as he flubbed his way through “Ribbon in the Sky” and “Isn’t She Lovely,” but when he started singing “Brick House,” she threw down the towel she was folding and gripped the edge of the table.

“Josiah Jackson, you leave me alone. Right now!”

“Oh... so you’re talking to me now, huh? I win big. I get to hear your pretty voice and look at your fine a—”

“No!” Glory turned to face him, arms folded, seething, channeling every bit of hurt and anger into a glare that she wished would burn him to cinders. “No. I’m not talking to *you*. I’m asking the devil to leave me alone! I’m asking Satan himself to leave me alone and never speak to me again.”

“Well,” he said, standing and moving toward her. “Your prayer is gonna be answered. I’m leaving for the navy tomorrow.”

He smiled. He actually smiled. That no-good lying two-timing devil smiled his smug smile—that *I’m the finest boy in the world, and I know you agree* smile. That *I win* smile.

Glory hated that smile. And she loved that smile. And all she could do was squeeze her eyes shut to keep the tears from spilling out.

“How could you do that to me, JT?” she whispered. “How?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Glory.” He tried to take her hand, but she pushed him away. “I’m leaving in the morning, and I need to make things right with you. Please, just listen to me. You don’t hafta talk to me. You don’t hafta forgive me. Just listen. Then if you still hate me, I swear I’ll never bother you again.”

Glory opened her eyes. The smug smile was gone—no mocking, no joking, only the slightest hint of a plea in his voice and in his eyes—the force of will that always made her trust him... or used to make her trust him.

Glory sat away from him on the couch, arms still folded, not looking at him. She listened to his tale of a weekend with his cousins and wine and reefa and the twenty-two-year-old next door and his not really remembering it until his aunt called his mother about a baby that looked like him. She tried to stay angry and to push him away when he knelt in front of her, begging forgiveness. She tried not to see the tears in his eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Glory asked. “Why didn’t you tell me when it happened? Why did I hafta hear it whispered in church... from those stupid gossips who think you’re the devil?”

“I was scared. I didn’t want to hurt you. I knew you’d be mad, and I couldn’t fix it. I didn’t have a do-over for this.” He dropped his head and laughed a little. “I was outta Barbie shoes.” JT laid his head on her lap, and despite herself, Glory began stroking his hair.

“Why haven’t you been back to church? It’s been months. Your mother brings the baby with her. Why don’t you come? Are you ashamed?”

“No,” JT said, a bit of anger in his voice. “I just don’t believe in their God no more. I made mistakes—I always make mistakes, but my God forgives me. That church don’t. You said it yourself: they think I’m the devil. They want me to stand up there and apologize for having a son. Not happening. The only people I need to apologize to are my mama, you, and maybe my son. Everything else is between me and God.”

“I hate when you talk like that. How can you question God, Josiah?” Glory stood up, pushing him away.

“I’m not questioning God. I think I’m actually understanding God.” He followed her to a dryer, helping move the warm towels to the folding table. “Think about it. God made this big, beautiful world, and that church tells you that loving the life God gave you, or anything God made, is evil. I think that’s dissin’ everything God does right now—”

“What’s her name?” She would pray for him, but she couldn’t stand there and listen to him blaspheme. “The mother. What’s her name?”

“Um... it’s Michelle.” His voice wavered slightly when he spoke the name of his baby’s mother. He was all confident, challenging God, but not when he talked about his own sin. *Good. He should be ashamed of himself.*

“You could marry her. Give your son a proper fam—”

“Girl, are you crazy? God, no! She already got three kids. She don’t want no part of this baby, and... well... just no.” Before Glory could pick up another towel, JT pulled her into his arms, mischief shining in his eyes. “And besides... I’m already married, remember, *Mrs. Glory?*”

“Well, actually,” Glory said to that self-satisfied smiling face she loved and hated, “my daddy said that since you didn’t ask him first, and you didn’t have a job, we’re not really married.”

“But you let me kiss you, so we are.” He kissed her lightly on the lips. She didn’t pull away.

“But you tricked me, and we were five. So, we’re not.”