

The Conquest of the Veil

(Book I)

By

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Prologue

The Empire of Meredith: One Thousand Years Ago

Tendrils of black smoke rose in the early morning air.

Huddled within a thicket of vegetation, Larson Crump watched, his heart pounding, while the manor house slowly burned to the ground. Greedy, licking flames consumed the once grand structure and with a groan of tortured wood, the southeastern corner of the manor collapsed in a shower of flame and sparks.

Above the noise and tumult of the raging fire, a scream rang out and Crump jammed a fist in his mouth to stifle a whimpering cry. With great trepidation, he managed to force his quaking hands to part the thick screen of leaves, and despite the need for caution, a moan escaped his lips at the sight. There, against the backdrop of the burning manor, Lady Sonja stood stripped naked and struggled in the grasp of...*creatures* straight from his worst nightmares! Beneath a set of small piggish eyes, the brutish beasts possessed wicked, yellow tusks jutting from their lower jaws. Waddles of pinkish-gray flesh framed their necks, the boar-like heads attached to a squat torso of powerful arms and legs.

Crump returned his attention to Lady Sonja, and groaned at the sight of the long, bloody slashes which marred her breasts, the streaks of crimson painting her ribs and abdomen. His eyes widened when Lady Sonja's husband, Lord Will, was brought forward and forced to stand beside his wife. Face battered and bruised, he fought with the nightmarish creatures to assist his wife.

Amused grunts and squeals erupted from the beasts, and they rained blow after blow until fresh blood ran down the lord's face and head.

There was a stir among the throng of manlike beasts, and they parted to provide passage for two figures. From his vantage point, Crump could see a couple, a man and woman, strut through the brutish creatures and up to the manor's veranda. Ink-black hair fell to the woman's waist, and even from a distance, he could see she possessed a terrible beauty. The man, slightly taller than the woman, wore sharp features and a cruel smile.

When the couple turned to face the grunting man-beasts, Crump saw their eyes for the first time. Black as a bottomless pit, they oozed a malevolency so potent, Crump's legs trembled and his hair stood on end.

Sorcery! The dark magic filled the air to such an extent Crump felt it assault his senses, like some ill breeze portending disaster.

From the veranda, the sorceress turned and held a small, round object high above her head for all the assembled creatures to see. Loud squeals and snorts boiled into the air until the enchantress held up her hand for silence.

“The Orb is ours! It is now *our* time and *our* destiny! We shall be the Masters and they,” she said, a slender finger pointed at Will and Sonja, “shall be the ones who serve us! We will kill all who oppose us!”

Lowering the Orb to cradle it in her hands, the sorceress turned to Sonja. “Before you die, I want you to know *your* Artifact, *your* creation made our ascension to power possible.” Lady Sonja flinched at the words as if struck by a hammer. Fresh despair spread across her tear-streaked face.

Laughing, the sorceress pointed and Lord Will was thrown into the mass of man-beasts. Raw screams tore from Lady Sonja's throat at the sight of her husband torn to bloody pieces.

The violent sight and sound overwhelmed Crump's senses. Gorge rose in his throat and what little remained in his stomach spewed out. Mercifully, the screams came to an abrupt end. Crump sank to the ground and wept, his thin shoulders shaking.

He wiped his eyes and tried to make sense of what happened. His friends, the Lord of the Manor...*all dead!* He alone survived and only because he spent half the night in the bushes with a belly flux. When the creatures attacked, there had been no outcry, no alarm raised—almost as if the entire staff was drugged or ensorcelled by some dark magic.

All but Crump.

Fresh shrieks bruised the air when Lady Sonja, in turn, was given to the creatures. Her desperate cries reverberated into the early morning and pierced Crump's soul like a dagger.

He turned and fled.

Chapter 1

East Texas – Present day

Brrrring!

Even before the last notes of the lunch bell faded, classroom doors flew open and students exploded into the hallways of Spring Hill High School. Mona Parker found herself carried along like a leaf in a river as she unsuccessfully tried to navigate a course to her locker. Finally, she reached the intersection of two hallways and found a quiet eddy while students rushed past her to the cafeteria. Once the flow abated somewhat, she backtracked to her locker. Opening it, she removed a brown paper bag containing her lunch along with a large, hardbound book. She stuffed her backpack into the cubbyhole, closed the door, and hurried to her favorite location to eat lunch.

Bursting out of the glass doors from the high school, Mona turned a corner leading to the student commons area. With a sigh of relief, she spied her coveted table still unoccupied. Her eyes darted left and right to see if anyone else might beat her to it. No other students were in sight, and Mona rushed to the table and breathlessly threw her book and bagged lunch down.

Success!

At first glance, the outdoor picnic table didn't seem to have any visible attributes that would lend itself as a desirable lunch location. Covered in a crisscross veneer of ugly blue polyurethane, it was uncomfortable to sit in, and depending on the season—fall, winter, or spring—it either never seemed to get enough sunlight or too much. However, this particular table possessed one thing Mona found valuable above all else.

A position with a perfect view.

On cue, a slender boy with a lunch tray in hand walked up to another of the picnic tables directly across the commons area from Mona. Setting his lunch down, several friends joined him moments later.

With a happy sigh, Mona arranged her book, a large illustrated edition on antique clocks, in front of her. She found the book in the nonfiction section of the school library, and while she had absolutely no interest in antique clocks, the book with its oversize, large-print format, propped up easily on the table. Moving the spine of the book like a gun sight to zero in on a target, Mona finally positioned it perfectly so when she looked up above the spine of the book, there he was.

Brock Stanton.

Brock's blue eyes flashed while he chatted with his friends, and Mona felt her heart beat faster when he smiled at some comment. She "met" him over a month ago when they accidentally bumped into each other. Coming from different directions in the always crowded hallways, Mona turned a corner and ran right into Brock. Mona dropped her books and he picked them up and apologized. Best of all, he displayed the same dazzling smile before he turned and left.

Mona had a crush on him ever since.

Quite by accident, she discovered later that Brock and his friends often frequented the same table and location at lunch. Since then, she and her trusty antique clock book were fixtures at the picnic table across from him. The last time she checked out her book (for the 3rd time), the librarian gave her an odd look and asked if she was doing a research paper. Mona mumbled something about liking the pictures, then stumbled out and made a mental note to start searching for another similar-sized book.

Although they had not spoken or even crossed paths again, Mona loved to peek at Brock over her book and fantasize about being his girlfriend. In her happy dreams, they traveled to exotic and romantic locations with breathtaking backdrops from which to kiss and hold each other.

Walking hand-in-hand on the dazzling white sand of a secluded Bermuda beach just as the sun is setting. Check!

A Colorado ski lodge with the gorgeous snowcapped Rocky Mountains in the background. With arms wrapped around each other, they watch their breath billow out to mingle in white clouds. Check!

An intimate Paris bistro sipping an espresso together while a white aproned maître d' hovers nearby smiling at the lovely couple. Check!

Sharing a delicious chilled shrimp cocktail, their—

“Well, well, what do we have here?” a voice intruded on Mona’s dreamy meanderings.

Startled, Mona looked up. Eyes shaded with her hand in the bright December sunlight, Mona’s pleasant fantasies came to an abrupt halt. Her heart sank and despite the unusually mild day, she felt a chill run down her spine.

Lady Anne Golightly stood beside her with hands on slim hips, a predatory smile on her face like that of a cat preparing to pounce on a mouse. Silky blonde hair cascaded past her shoulders, while glacial blue eyes regarded Mona with no small amount of contempt.

Mona gulped, a cold knot of fear growing in her stomach. As a freshman four years earlier, Mona had been in the snack bar line at lunch, a rare thing for her since she usually had no money for such things. As usual, a long, conga-like line of students had formed and moved at a snail's pace. When Lady Anne and a coterie of her friends breezed into the snack bar, they simply stepped in front of Mona. With laughs and snorts, they acted like Mona's place was theirs for the taking with her no more substantial than a ghost or a vapor. When Mona objected, loudly enough it seemed to attract one of the coaches on cafeteria duty, he made Lady Anne and her friends go to the end of the line. When she walked by Mona, Lady Anne fixed her with cold, hate-filled eyes.

It was the last day of "normal" high school life for Mona, and since then, Lady Anne had made Mona her special project.

Dead rats found in her locker.

Photo-shopped images of her face on a naked, grotesquely obese woman, which Lady Anne shared via all social media sites.

Humiliating text messages sent to Mona describing various parts of Mona's anatomy.

Opening her P.E. locker and discovering her P.E. clothes had been urinated on.

At first, Mona tried to fight back by going to the Principal, Mr. Garrett, but no proof could ever be found directly tying Lady Anne to the harassment. In fact, it served no purpose other than to make the acts worse and more frequent. Because Lady Anne's father was president of the largest bank in Longview and a member of some standing in the community, Mona

suspected Mr. Garrett was reluctant to pursue the matter vigorously. To her dismay, he soon quietly dropped the matter.

Mona finally turned to her foster parents, Bud and Elaine Baker (something she would only do if absolutely *desperate!*), and tearfully asked for help. With feet propped up on a scarred and stained coffee table, Bud looked at her for a moment before draining the last of his Coors Light, belched, and told her to stop being a pantywaist whiner and to suck it up. Elaine dismissed Mona's problems with a wave of her hand, and the Bakers promptly turned their attention back to the cage-fighting event on television.

Mona never mentioned it to them again.

Since then, Mona avoided Lady Anne and kept as low a profile as possible. It didn't stop the harassment, but Mona found it lessened somewhat. Now, Lady Anne's acts of cruelty came in ebbs and flows.

Today was a flow day.

Hand trailing over the top of Mona's propped up book, Lady Anne made a leisurely circuit of the table before coming to a stop behind Mona. She bent and peered over Mona's shoulder—which put her gaze directly on Brock.

“Something tells me you aren't reading your book, Mona,” Lady Anne breathed in her ear. “What's the matter? The pictures not big enough for you?”

Tittering erupted from several of Lady Anne's friends. Like sharks sensing blood in the water, they arrived suddenly and formed a semicircle around Lady Anne, their eyes aglow in eager anticipation.

Lady Anne straightened and made a show of tapping her forefinger on her lips as if deep in thought. She paced back and forth, then moved in front of Mona to block her vision of Brock.

With a sudden movement, Lady Anne whirled around, placed both hands on the table, and leaned in toward Mona.

“I think you are studying something other than your pathetic book.” With a glance over her shoulder, a twisted sneer appeared on Lady Anne’s face. “I think you are looking at those boys over there.” Mona’s breath froze in her throat.

No, no, no, oh please God, no! Please don’t—

“The problem is...which one are you *really* looking at,” Lady Anne purred interrupting Mona’s silent pleading.

Wearing skin-tight leggings and a short skirt, Lady Anne’s shapely posterior jutted directly at Brock and his friends while she spoke to Mona. It made quite an impression, and the boys’ attention riveted on Lady Anne.

“Eeny meeny miny moe,” Lady Anne intoned while she pointed her finger at each boy in turn. “I think it is...*you!*” With a dramatic sweep of her hand, she gestured at Brock.

All color drained from Mona’s face and she found it hard to breathe. This reaction sealed her fate, and Lady Anne gleefully skipped across the space between the tables and returned moments later, arm-in-arm with Brock.

Her head spinning at the sudden turn of events, Mona couldn’t believe the nightmare unfolding before her eyes.

Lady Anne pointed a slim, manicured finger at Mona. “Brock, I believe you have a secret admirer.” Hoots and snorts erupted from all sides as Brock’s friends joined the crowd surrounding Mona.

Seeing his friends laugh at him, Brock reacted like he’d been scalded. His face turned red and he took a step back from Mona.

“That’s a bunch of crap! I don’t even know who she is!” Brock’s protest served only to make the howls of laugh louder.

Hot tears ran down Mona’s cheeks at Brock’s reaction.

“Why, Brock, I think you are mistaken,” Lady Anne exclaimed with a puzzled look. “Why else would Mona spend the past month looking at you every day over this book?” She knocked the book over, the multicolored pictures of old clocks flapping in the breeze.

Inwardly, Mona groaned. Lady Anne knew...had *known* for at least a month she came here to secretly gaze at Brock. Then she waited to spring her trap until the perfect moment arrived.

Mona dug fingernails into her hands and desperately tried to stem the tears threatening to erupt at any moment.

How could I have been so stupid, stupid, stupid not to notice!

“I think the *only* proper thing to do would be to ask Mona out right here and right now, Brock!”

Lady Anne leaped on top of the table and waved her arms like a carnival barker, crying out to the dozen or so students around the table, “Don’t you agree? Brock needs to ask Mona out!”

Turning to face Mona and Brock, Lady Anne chanted, “*Ask Mona out! Ask Mona out!*” Within seconds, the assembled students picked up the chant and soon it echoed throughout the commons area.

Brock’s face turned purple with embarrassment and rage. He whirled on Mona and spat, “Look, you dirty little bitch! Stop spying on me and leave me alone!”

Spinning, he pushed his way through the knot of students and stalked off. The show over, students began to drift away in ones and twos while they giggled and pointed at Mona. Soon, only Lady Anne remained. Like a devastated area in the aftermath of the storm, a ragged silence filled the air. Mona stared dully at the pages of her book fluttering in the light breeze.

She felt nothing.

She felt empty.

She felt *dead*.

Lady Anne moved and seated herself next to Mona. She whispered in her ear, “You *are* a dirty little bitch, but I would add an *ugly* little bitch as well”.

Numb, Lady Anne’s words barely registered with Mona. Finally, she mumbled, “Please leave me alone. Why won’t you leave me alone?” This elicited a derisive snort from Lady Anne.

“Oh, Mona. Leave you alone? Of course not. What would be the fun in that?”

“Why? Why not?” Mona pleaded. “You have everything and I’m...I’m a nobody. Why can’t you ignore me and act like I don’t exist? Everyone else does.”

Lady Anne stood and smoothed her skirt. She picked at a piece of lint on her blouse then looked down at Mona, her expression hard.

“Because people like *me* are supposed to pick on people like *you*. You’re the garbage in the garbage disposal, Mona. All you’re good for is to be ground up and flushed down the drain. That’s all your miserable life means to me.”

With a smirk, Lady Anne added, “Well, I’d love to stay and chat some more with you *girlfriend*, but speaking of life, I have to get back to mine. *Ta!*” Blowing her a kiss, Lady Anne skipped off.

Moments passed before Mona finally stirred. The tears which earlier threatened to gush from her eyes were gone. Instead, she felt nothing but helpless futility. Cornered like a rabbit, she had no way to escape, no way to stop Lady Anne's predacious bullying.

She stood and picked up her lunch and book. Her mouth tasted like ashes, and she dropped her lunch in the nearest trash. Moving like a robot on autopilot, Mona walked to the media center, turned in her library book, and after a few minutes of aimless wandering, found herself alone in the girl's bathroom.

Running water in the sink, Mona cupped some of it into her hands and splashed it on her face. The shock of the cold water brought her mind back into focus, and she looked at herself in the mirror above the lavatory.

Frizzy brown hair spread out like foam around a narrow face. Her cheekbones were shallow, angular planes, giving her a pinched expression like she wore shoes too small for her feet. Her raptor-shaped nose, long and slightly hooked, had a pair of black-frame glasses perched on it. Brown eyes, puffy and red, stared back at Mona from behind the glasses. Mona's complexion, pasty-white, resembled a minefield littered with angry red spots indicative of recent acne flare-ups. Mona stepped a few paces back, and as she did so, the rest of her body came into view.

She wore blue jeans and a long-sleeved blouse and sweater, which covered skinny, birdlike arms and legs. Her bra size, 32A, hadn't changed since her 7th grade year, and even now, at almost 18 years of age, Mona more closely resembled an adolescent girl than a woman.

She was unremarkable.

She was plain and colorless as water.

She was a nobody.

“I hate my life,” Mona whispered to the image in the mirror.

“Do you hear me? I HATE MY LIFE!” she screeched.

The tears she earlier successfully banished, now came back with a vengeance. Mona stumbled into a stall and shut and bolted the door. Hugging herself, she leaned against the wall and sobbed.

Mona’s misery so completely consumed her, she lost all sense of time. When at last she stopped crying and looked at her phone, she realized lunch was over—she was already fifteen minutes late to her next class!

She unlocked the door and staggered out of the stall. Unable to bear seeing herself again in the mirror, Mona averted her gaze to the gray, concrete floor while she splashed water for a second time on her face. Patting her face dry with paper towels, she couldn’t help recalling how happy she had been when enmeshed in her daydreams of Brock...and how quickly Lady Anne turned her happiness into humiliation. There was a lesson to be learned here.

Dreams were a dangerous thing.