

## An excerpt from

### The Baptism

by **Rachelle Reese and John E. Miller**

Toledo knew the fairies would be angry if she followed them into their realm, but she would take their anger over sitting here worrying about Hanover. He had no business being alone in the fairy realm. He was too...vulnerable....no, not vulnerable exactly. Naive. He would see only their beauty, not their treachery. And Toledo knew about their treachery first hand. The worst thing about the fairies is that they didn't admit their own duplicity. They weren't as bad as the goblins, but it was really just a matter of degree. The ones who called themselves goblins took pride in their trickery. The ones who called themselves fairies denied it. In their twisted way, the goblins were actually more honest. Not that the distinction mattered. Hanover was in their realm and she was not.

Toledo climbed the rocks at the back of her garden searching for the patch of heather she had tended so carefully as a child. Keeping heather alive in soggy New Orleans was not an easy task. She had built the rock garden for the fairies when she was five or six, shortly after she'd met Basil. Hanover had been away that spring, visiting Swampy. Toledo had been bored with her toys and Mama was busy concocting some love potion for a pale debutante. Toledo had gone into the garden to play with her dolls. She'd sat under the magnolia tree, rocking her baby, singing it a lullaby. She'd thought he was a butterfly at first when he landed on the limb of the magnolia tree. "I like your voice," he'd said. "Sing to me some more."

She'd looked more closely at the tiny winged creature and seen his perfectly shaped legs, arms, and torso. A red bang fell across his forehead, nearly covering his right eye. "Who are you?" she'd asked.

"Basil," he'd said. "Who are you?"

"Toledo," she'd reached out toward him, but he'd flittered away. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I don't like to be touched," he'd said. "Not here where you're bigger than I am."

"Sorry."

"Will you sing again?" he'd asked, coming a little closer. "Your voice is like a gentle rainfall on a hot afternoon."

Toledo had giggled. "You say funny things."

"Sing, please."

"Alright." And she had sung, that afternoon and on many others. She'd sat alone in the garden and sung to her dolls. At first Basil would come alone. But as days passed, others came with him. Sometimes they would sit and listen, but usually they would dance, soaring into the sky, jumping on the limbs of the magnolia tree. She was careful not to sing when Hanover was around. Basil was her secret. Hanover would just ruin it. Besides, Hanover didn't understand music and he couldn't dance at all. It was the first secret she'd ever kept from him.

Now Toledo peered into the gathering dusk, looking for the small purple blooms. What if they're not in bloom? she wondered. She'd never find the heather if it wasn't blooming. "Ouch," she cried as sharp claws dug into her legs. "Not now, Voodoo. I have to go after Hanover. The fairies..."

"Meow!" Voodoo tried to climb Toledo's leg. "Meeeeeeow!"

"Of course, you can show me." Toledo reached down to scratch the mangy black cat's head. "You pass back and forth often enough."

Voodoo unhinged her claws from Toledo's skirt and pranced proudly up the rock, then disappeared. Toledo followed Voodoo, humming the tune she knew would open the portal to a realm she'd hoped never to visit again.