

## CHAPTER ONE

Brrrrrrrrring.

Daniel, without looking, pushed the mute button on the cell phone in his coat pocket. He stared at his reflection in the restroom mirror and ran a well-manicured hand through his curly salt and pepper hair. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and said a silent prayer.

One of his bodyguards appeared in the doorway, "Sir, are you ready?"

"Yes."

Flanked by his two guards, he began the long walk down the narrow corridor that led to the front of the building. They passed through the double doors that led to the sanctuary and paused a moment. The place was more like a stadium built for sporting events or rock concerts than a church and the size of the place never ceased to amaze him. He took a deep breath and with an air of authority that only comes with doing a thing hundreds of times, Daniel entered the massive auditorium, took

his place behind the pulpit and scanned the faces of the thousands of people gathered before him. The choir, which consisted of over a hundred members, had just finished its last hymn of the set. They sat down in silent anticipation.

Daniel smiled as he looked over the audience. They were expecting him to give them a show, fill them with good feelings, and send them home with a little something to think about the following week. He never disappointed.

His church was running 40,000 souls a week, not including his syndicated television audience. He knew just how to tell a joke to get them to laugh, how to play on their emotions to get them to cry, how to quote a Bible verse to make a point and to remind them that they were still in church. He was good. He was very good. Today would be no exception.

"Please, let's have a round of applause for one of the best choirs in the country. You guys make me prouder every week. Thank you so much for all of your hard work," Daniel said. He waited for his flock to quiet to the last hand and began his sermon.



Across town, a well-dressed beautiful, blonde woman in her early twenties snapped her phone shut. "That's my answer," she said to herself as she climbed out of the Mazda.

Jessica shivered in the icy drizzling rain and pulled up the collar of her trench coat. She swallowed hard, "I can do this." She hesitated, took one step forward then stopped.

A woman in her mid-thirties with a Planned Parenthood pin prominently displayed on her black wool sweater watched the scene in the parking lot from the clinic's entranceway. Seeing Jessica hesitate, she grabbed an umbrella, barreled through the plate glass front door and rushed over to her. "Do you have an appointment? Can I have your name to see if you are on our appointment list? Do you need any help?" She raised the pale grey umbrella to shield the young woman from the rain.

"No, no, please I'm fine and yes I have an appointment," Jessica said.

Jessie willed herself to put one foot in front of the other, cross the parking lot, and climb the four concrete steps that led into the plain red brick building. She opened the front door and stepped into the cramped, chair-lined waiting room.

An African American woman, with corn-rowed hair sat behind a glass partition and argued with someone on the phone, apparently her ex-husband. The woman glanced ever so briefly at Jessica, pushed her glasses up further on her nose, and nodded toward the clip board with attached pen lying on the counter. She covered the mouth piece of the phone, said "Sign in," then continued her conversation.

Jessica chewed her lower lip, and did as she was told. To distract herself, she contemplated the austere, unfriendly atmosphere of the waiting room. There were a few outdated, torn magazines strewn over battered end tables. The place was painted a drab schoolroom green and between the paint color and the archaic furnishings, the waiting room had the feel of a 60's era cheap motel. The checkered black and white tile floor was not exactly filthy, but it hadn't been cleaned in a long time.

Glancing around the room, Jessica was surprised to see an African American woman in her late forties sitting in the corner. The woman kept her head down, avoiding eye contact and pretending to read one of the outdated Reader's Digest's. She stared at the page. Her eyes were not moving.

"Mrs. Brown, follow me. The doctor will speak to you now."

The woman placed the magazine on the table beside her chair, rose slowly, painfully, and followed the petite, pretty, blond lady dressed in a nurse's uniform. The uniform was colorfully printed with yellow and white kittens and had a large brown stain that looked like dried blood on the lower left hand shirt pocket. A tattoo on the nurse's breast picturing an angry faced, horned, fire breathing dragon could be seen peeking out of her V-necked shirt. Jessica turned her head away, shivered, and tried to shrink back into the straight backed metal chair.



Daniel began his sermon.

"Everyone here, each and every one of you, is someone special to God. As we celebrate this week before Christmas, I want you all to remember this: God has a plan for you. He has a reason for you to be here. You have a purpose and a destiny to fulfill. You may not know what it is; you may get up every morning and think, "What am I doing here? Nothing special is happening in my life. I get up. I go to work. I come home, feed the dog, spend some time with my family, and then start all over again. Why am I here? What am I doing all of this for? What is my purpose?"

"There is not a one of us here who hasn't wondered about these things. Believe me, I have many times myself. When we find ourselves thinking along these lines, and it seems that it happens a lot during the holiday season, I want you to remember something. Jesus, the Son of God, thinks you're important. He has a job only you can do. People only you can reach, lives only you can touch. He gives us a reason..."



"Jessica Fennelli? Follow me."

Jessica stood up, suddenly shaking and struck by mind numbing panic. She wanted to run, to be anywhere but here and doing anything but this. For the hundredth time she went over her options and came to the same conclusion... there weren't any.

She stared at the floor, took deep quick breaths and tried not to hyperventilate. Then she put one foot in front of the other and followed the nurse to an examining room in the rear of the clinic.

"Get completely undressed and put on this gown. The doctor will be here in a minute."

Jessica took off her clothes and slipped into the flimsy paper gown that barely covered her. Her hands were shaking. She shivered and realized that she had never been so terrified in her life, or so cold. She was freezing.

Fifteen minutes long minutes later the nurse returned and asked her to sit on the examining table. Without saying a word she took her blood pressure, listened to her heart and checked a few items on her notepad. Jessica noticed the name tag pinned on her stained top: 'Pamela Life'. How ironic that someone in this profession would have the last name 'Life' she thought as she endured the brief procedure.

"Lean back and put your feet in the stirrups. Scoot down. Yes, that's about right," Nurse Life instructed. "The doctor will be here shortly."

She left.

Jessica lay supine on the table facing the half shut door, totally exposed. She closed her eyes and tried to time travel through this. It was a trick she had learned as a child. She would pretend that the awful thing that she was going through at

the moment was over and then see herself in the future doing something more pleasant. This time it wasn't working. She waited for thirty minutes. Her legs were numb by the time the doctor appeared.

"Ms. Fennelli?"

Doctor Jackson walked into the room. He never looked into her eyes, but mechanically proceeded with his routine, just as he had done on hundreds of women before.

"I'm going to do a brief examination of your pelvic area to try to determine the size of your uterus and the gestation period of the fetus," Dr. Jackson said, showing no emotion. He proceeded with the exam.

"From the size of the uterus, I am assuming you are close to twenty weeks pregnant. Does that sound about right to you?"

Jessica nodded. She smelled the faint odor of alcohol and wondered if he had been drinking.

"We are going to give you an anesthetic to deaden the pain then we will proceed with the surgery. Nurse, could you help me?"

~

Daniel paused and searched the eyes of the crowd so that each person there imagined he was looking directly at them.

"I want you to think about what I've said here today. Remember that your life is a gift from God and it's important to Him, you're important to Him. What you do and who you are matters. Each of us has the opportunity to use our lives to touch those around us, to change things for the better. Be God's gift to someone. Help others. Always remember that God loves you and that He works through each and every one of us, if we let Him. Have a wonderful Christmas everybody and thank you for coming."

The audience gave a round of applause.

"Noel, noel, noel, noel, born is the King of Israel!" The choir sang as Daniel walked from the stage. He greeted a few of the church members who had pressed close to the front.



It took only a few minutes. The anesthetic wasn't given enough time to work. The hot searing pain that engulfed her abdomen was like nothing she had ever experienced before.

Through blurry eyes she leaned forward and saw the nurse holding a small plastic container. She lifted herself on one elbow to peer into it. Her baby boy was in it. He was covered with blood.

Jessica screamed.

Through blurry eyes she saw Dr. Jackson scowl at the nurse then nod in the direction of the door. Nurse Life rushed the container with Jessica's lifeless son in it out of the room. The doctor then handed her a form detailing post-surgery instructions and left without saying another word.

Jessica grabbed the paper and with shaking hands stuffed it into her purse. She dressed, and almost ran through the waiting room and out of the clinic. She heard someone shouting at her, telling her to wait, but paid no attention.

Outside, she brushed past the Planned Parenthood lady and stumbled down the steps to her car clutching her stomach.

She tried not to vomit from the intense pain. Tears ran down her cheeks as, hands still shaking, she fumbled in her purse for her car keys. It began to sleet. Bits of ice stuck to the windshield of the metallic blue sports car as she pulled out of the parking lot.



"Daniel, that sermon was one of your best."

"Thank you. Thank you, Merry Christmas!" Daniel said. He tarried another minute or two, enjoying the accolades. People were trying to get near him, to congratulate him. He managed to shake a few more hands before being whisked off and led away by his two bodyguards.



Jessica pulled her car into a nearby drive-through and ordered a Coke and a cheeseburger. She had fasted before the surgery and felt dizzy and dehydrated. She maneuvered the sport coupe into the parking lot, took a sip of the sugary soft drink and brushed the tears from her cheeks. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably.

She took a small bite of the hamburger, then flung open the car door and began retching violently. A woman, talking on her cell phone, drove by and looked at her with disgust. Jessica was too sick to be embarrassed, she emptied out what little was in

her stomach, closed the car door, leaned her head back on the headrest and quietly blacked out.



"Pastor, want some lunch?" said Sam Wilson, a member of the church board, as he poked his head into Daniel's office.

"Hey Sam. No thanks. I think I'll stay here and work on tonight's sermon. You go on without me."

"All right Pastor I'll see you later."

"Later Sam," Daniel smiled at his old friend and continued with his work.



Jessica came to herself and felt another awful wave of nausea. She heard a tap on the window and saw a police uniform through the ice streaked windshield. She wondered if she was in

trouble for vomiting in the parking lot. She really didn't care. All she could think about was trying not to do it again.

The policeman tapped on the glass again.

"Yes sir," Jessica said as she rolled down the window.

"Are you all right?" he inquired. The policeman's stern look told her his inquiry was not one of compassion.

"Yes sir. I'm fine, thank you."

"Do you need help? Can you drive?" the officer replied obviously not believing her.

"No sir I don't need any help. I can drive. Uh, I feel much better now. Thank you. It must be a touch of the flu."

Jessica could feel sweat dripping down her face and running down her neck. The whole lower half of her body felt as if it was on fire. Something warm and wet was trickling between her legs and soaking her clothes. She had to get home.

"Are you sure you're all right?" the officer asked again.

"Yes sir. I'll be going now."

The policeman shook his head and walked away from the car. Jessica rolled the window back up, put the car in reverse, and

pulled out of the parking lot. The icy rain began pouring down again and hit the windshield with loud thunderous splatters.

"I have to get home," she whispered to herself. "I have to."