

CHAPTER 1

“WATCH OUT!” SHOUTED Nick. He was stunned and confused for a moment, but then knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was hearing the sound of gunshots. Afraid and disoriented, he saw the feminine shape in front of him fall to her knees. His instincts took over. Judging the direction the gunshots were coming from the best he could, he created a shield over her with his body, forgetting his own danger. He heard her terrified crying as his heart played a strong drumbeat in his chest, resounding loudly in his ears.

The gunshots echoed through the dimly-lit university student parking lot. Screeching tires followed, then silence. The danger was past for the moment. Nick helped the young lady up. “I believe the worst is over now,” he said tentatively. “This must have to do with the police station across the street, maybe a police chase.” Then he gasped as he saw that her leg was injured. “Your leg is hurt. Were you shot?”

“No, no,” her voice trembled. “I must have hurt my knee when I fell.”

“Well, at least we can be thankful for that.” He noticed that she was blonde and blue-eyed, wishing he had responded more appropriately. He certainly wasn’t glad that she had hurt her knee,

KAY HALL

but the damage could have been much worse. Both of them could have been killed when the rounds found their resting places around them.

Sensing his dilemma, she made an effort to ease his embarrassment. “They say at church that we should be thankful in all things, maybe even for a hurt knee.” They both laughed then, in relief that the danger was over. Nick saw for the first time the brilliant, engaging smile that was such a special part of this girl’s beauty.

“I have told school administrators for years that we need more lights in this area around the university—I fought that battle while I was a student here, but I didn’t get very far with my arguments. Maybe now they will listen to me,” Nick said.

“Oh, so you went to school here too? I’m a piano major in the music department. That’s why I’m here so late. We have piano exams next week and I wanted to practice my Bach pieces a few more times. Making high scores on those piano exams sure doesn’t seem as important now.”

“My office is across the street and down the block, so I often park here. I guess I should introduce myself. I’m Nicholas Danner. I was a journalism major here, and now I work for the *Atlanta Herald*.”

“That must be so interesting, Nick. I’m glad to know my hero’s name. I’m Patricia Noland. Not Pat for short, though. It’s Trish. I’m very pleased to meet you, especially under these circumstances! That was a close call! I’m glad I wasn’t alone.”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t feel much like a hero. I was scared myself! That was an experience I’ve never encountered before, and hope I never do again. As far as my work at the newspaper, I enjoy it. Right now I’m starting at the bottom of the pile, new guy on the block, waiting to get some real chances at my future Pulitzer Prize winning article. It would be a lot more interesting if the editor would give me an assignment that was exciting. Come to think of it, I will be checking out the story behind this with the

THE BLESSED FRAGMENT

police department! Who would believe that instead of covering exciting stories for the Herald, I almost become a front page story right here in the school parking lot!”

“I’m sure grateful that didn’t happen. I’ll bet you’ll get your chance for a great assignment before too long. We all have to put in our dues. Remember, practice makes perfect,” Trish said with a twinkle in her eyes, and they both laughed again. Trish was surprised how comfortable and safe she felt in the company of this striking young man. It was as if the harrowing experience they shared had created a bond between them.

Nick walked her to her car, hating to leave her, feeling as if he needed to continue to be there to protect her. Soon they reached her car in the parking lot, and they bid their goodbyes.

CHAPTER 2

THE RED CONVERTIBLE with its impeccable detailing, obviously meticulously cared for, stood out auspiciously in the front valet area of the five-star hotel. The owner and driver, Hammond James, closed the door to his second floor room and walked briskly down the marble atrium stairs. He walked with an air of confidence that attracted the attention of those around him. His errand for the moment was to make sure the proper arrangements had been made for the evening's tent meeting. Chairs, flowers, offering receptacles, his podium, and the flawlessly performing light, video and sound systems all had to be in place and ready before the first person arrived for the much publicized Hammond James Good News Revival.

His name wasn't really Hammond James. That just suited his purposes better than the name with which he was born. Ralph Jones. He snickered to himself as he thought of the discarded name, which he despised. Yes, Hammond James was a much better name for a famous revival preacher and evangelist.

He was a figure that turned heads as he ceremoniously opened the car door and climbed into the driver's seat of the BMW convertible. He was blessed with a shock of natural blonde hair that was appealing when all combed and ready for the revival

THE BLESSED FRAGMENT

meetings. He found it was equally inviting to those of the female gender when it was mussed. He was tall and muscular and did what it took to keep himself in excellent physical shape. He instinctively knew that was an asset in his chosen vocation. His hypnotic blue eyes that saw right into women's hearts made it difficult for anyone, male or female, to turn away from him. His teeth were perfectly capped pearls.

He wore his favorite white suit and tie. He had several sets of this ensemble. People liked this look, as it gave him somewhat of the appearance of an angel. But Hammond was anything but an angel--unless perhaps an angel of light thrown out of heaven as had been written about long ago. With platitudes and warmth that mesmerized his audiences at his nightly tent revivals, he would exclaim, "Give, give to the Lord!" and dear old ladies would empty out their savings accounts to fill his coffers. Hammond looked into the rearview mirror, put his foot on the accelerator, and sped out of the hotel.

A few days earlier, student Kathleen Evans had been hurrying across the campus to her professor's office. On a high hill in the small town of Lorelei was nestled a small college with buildings of red brick and white Georgian columns. For many years it had been a school for women only. But in 1958, the administration felt it was time to make the college coeducational. It boasted an excellent pre-med program and music training that surpassed many of Georgia's larger colleges and universities.

Kathy, as she was known to her friends, was a perfectly proportioned young lady who knew she was at the prime of her life and made the most of it. Her long, naturally-curly auburn hair flowed down her back and was envied by her friends. She was enjoying her sophomore year at Georgia Eastern University as a psychology major. She liked trying to understand what made people tick, and she was more mature and introspective than most college students.

Her freshman year had been tough for her. She had grown up

KAY HALL

in a loving home with a close-knit family of five, and she missed her mother's support and love. Kathy was one of a small group of young ladies at the college with strong values who were determined not to succumb to the lack of morals evident on the campus, about which her mother often spoke with disdain. Kathy was waiting for the future, to give herself to the man who would sweep her off her feet, as her mom would say. A petite five feet, four inches tall, she was an intelligent, attractive package of curiosity who seemed to delight in the whole world. She drank in the sky, the flowers, and the splendor of humankind, living her life in awe of the continuing revelations of a master creator. Behind her back, others at the school called her Pollyanna, but she didn't judge others, so she had many friends and acquaintances.

Kathleen loved to learn. She greatly admired her psychology professor, Dr. Bruce Louis. It was time to choose a fall project for his class, and she wanted to please him with her work. She gave much thought to what her subject should be. She did have one idea that appealed to her. She had made an appointment with Dr. Louis to talk about the project, and now on the appointed afternoon she hurried across the grounds and down the walkway so she would not be late. After exchanging pleasantries with her young professor, she took a seat in front of his desk in the neat, orderly office, and began to speak of her idea.

"Dr. Louis," Kathleen said tentatively, hoping he would be in favor of her plan, "I have an idea for a project that I want to discuss with you." The kind professor nodded his head in encouragement. He listened quietly and attentively as she shared her thoughts with him. "I have learned that a tent revival is coming to our town. I hear it is the largest one we have had here in many years or maybe ever." Kathleen paused thoughtfully before she continued. "I would like to interview the preacher headlining the revival and write about him. I'd like to find out what it is that leads a person to become an evangelist, and in particular an itinerant preacher going around from place to place, pitching a tent to draw in crowds

CHAPTER 23

TONY GIOVANELLI HELD his sobbing wife in his arms. He could do nothing to console her; nothing but hold her in the circle of his arms. Those arms were strong and muscular and his six foot, two inch frame dwarfed the lovely raven-haired lady with the sad eyes. The wealthy leader of the Giovanelli mob had also shed bitter, angry tears. He tried hard to keep his weeping for his little son out of sight of his beloved Maria.

“How can this be?” she cried aloud between her sobbing as her chest heaved and lurched and she felt she would stop breathing. “Our little caro bambino, our only son, so sick, so sick. I can’t bear it, I can’t, I can’t. Oh Tony, do something, do something. You are so powerful—so many people follow you. So much money, so many grand things you have provided for us. And now we can do nothing for our son?”

He held her gently as he told her again as he had many times, “My Maria, you know that we have had the very best doctors available. They have tried. I offered everything, I would give up everything, to save our little one. At least we had two precious years with him. We saw Marco take his first steps, we heard him say Mama and Papa. We saw him so happy before he fell ill. We must be thankful for the time we had with him.”

CHAPTER 24

NICK SAT AT the kitchen table in the small north Georgia cabin that had been his home for a few months now, at the suggestion and generosity of Mr. D, who had promised to keep his job open for him. Lonely as he was, he feared going back to the busy unintended celebrity that had drained all his energy. He was even afraid for his life, so many people were clawing their way to him because of the gift that had come upon him. He didn't understand. He just knew that he had to stay in hiding as long as his money held out. Then what? A new identity? A new country?

"It isn't fair. I didn't ask for this," he cried aloud into the mountain air. He knew he had helped so many people, and he was glad. But not satisfied. He longed to see Trish, but to keep her safe, he felt it was best not to even let her know where he was.

Nick's lonely reverie was suddenly disturbed by lights outside, the headlights of a long, black car. He knocked over his kitchen chair as he jumped up from the table, startled and wary. "Oh, no," he said aloud as he saw the black-clothed figures climb from the car, carrying guns.

Suddenly the door burst open and several burly men entered the small cabin. He gasped as he saw each one had drawn a gun.