

BODY OF CHRIST,

Chapter One

by Mark Matthews

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After his first Holy Communion, a boy secretly builds his own Jesus out of communion wafers and the flesh of his dead father.

On Halloween night, his Jesus shall rise.

After a tragic death, a girl tends to the Cemetery of the Innocents, a memorial to the holocaust of abortion and children killed before their time.

On Halloween night, the children shall live, and they need to be fed.

CHAPTER ONE: Faith

The plastic mask over Mom's nose made Faith think of her as a fighter pilot, ready to fly to the heavens and do battle.

Not as a patient lying in a hospital bed.

"She isn't in there anymore," her dad said, squeezing Faith's fingers with each syllable as if trying to pump out a response.

Faith didn't want to reply. Mom wasn't a *brain*—she was a heart, and that was still beating; she was a spirit, and that was still living. Didn't matter she was in a "hopelessly vegetative state" underneath those snow-white bedsheets.

Faith kept watch by the hospital bed and waited for mom's eyelids to flutter. Any minute now the pupil underneath would show itself like a golden sunrise on a sandy beach.

Mom loves the beach.

"The doctors feel it's best to say our goodbyes," her dad said. "Your mom is being kept alive by machines. The doctors can't fix what happened. She'll never be the same."

Tears welled inside Faith's head, hot lava in a volcano, her brain felt ready to blow. She'd been holding it in ever since her mom had gone missing overnight. After the call came saying Mom's Toyota was found crashed in the ravine, everything was supposed to be okay. They rushed to the hospital to find Mom unconscious. Broken bones were wrapped in casts, and her face was cut and bruised. One side of her head had to be shaven in order for them to stitch it back together.

Three straight days they came to watch over her, waiting for her to wake. Her dad made calls, wrote down numbers, gave hugs to guests, and each day had private talks with doctors.

The private talks ended after her dad made his decision and the doctor's recommendation was set into motion.

"It takes a while to break the equipment down," said the doctor. "Families find it best to leave the room for a moment while we take care of things. Just a few minutes."

Pulling the plug wasn't so easy after all.

The machines weren't keeping her alive, it was her spirit. They'd soon find out.

They left room 364 to a well-lit hall. Faith walked by the nurses' station, and her favorite nurse winked.

See, they know the secret. Mom's not going to die.

They walked to the sitting room where chairs lined the walls and a woman sat nervously, purse on her lap, head swiveling to each side as if afraid to miss something. On the ground her son was pushing a plastic toy car along carpet, passing time in his own way.

This is where people come waiting for others to die.

Her dad paced back and forth as Faith watched, sure that he was coming up with a plan to make things better. This was all a terrible mistake, a fixable error they'd laugh about in years to come. Dad was thinking, and each step he took he got him closer to the answer.

But before he could find the solution, a nurse came and whispered in his ear.

They went back to room 364 and there her mom was, lying without the pilot mask over her face. The tubes had been removed, hanging from the equipment like dead tentacles. It was just Mom, sleeping, without medical equipment to weigh her down.

She was ready to rise.

Faith knew secrets that the men in white suits didn't understand. They never witnessed the golden halo that surrounded Mom when she prayed at church. Never heard her spirit hum, or how her singing chimed like the church bells. Mom took communion with such grace you could feel her spirit vibrate, and with each praise of *hallelujah* everyone was a little less cold and a lot less broken. Hers was a spirit they could not put down.

Faith crouched beside the bed, watching her mom fight to get back to life. Her chest was rising, falling, rising, falling, rising, failing.

"She's still breathing. She's breathing harder," Faith told the doctor, ready to add *I told you so*.

"She's struggling for air," said the doctor. "Her heart is slowing. Her lungs will soon stop. She will go peacefully and not suffer one bit, but we can't be certain how long it will take. Best that you two be left alone. Please come get me if you have questions."

It may take a while, Faith agreed silently, because she's not dying. Not today. Soon her eyes would open and she'd rise from the bed after enduring her three days of hospital hell. Medical staff would gather. Happy tears would flow. Mom often surprised her with a glass of orange juice on the bed stand to wake her up—today she would surprise everyone, and be reborn.

Faith put her hand over her mom's knuckle. It was warm in the palm of her hand.

Mom, if you can hear me, let them know you're in there. That you're alive. That you're coming home. Open your eyes. Open your eyes.

Faith waited for the response, and soon enough, she could feel a shift. Something stirred underneath, a slight twitch of her lips, brain waves beneath the purple bruises.

Please God, I need your help. Open her eyes. You can't let her die like this. Lord, hear my prayer.

Faith studied her mom's face. One side was deformed with puffy purple bruises bulging from her skin. The other side was soft and fair, only slightly weathered with wrinkles. Locks of hair, stringy from salt water swims, covered half her head. She was an ocean goddess.

Mom. Please. Make a noise. Open your eyes.

Then the noise came. So soft that her lips didn't move, but a noise nonetheless. Faith took a deep breath. Her muscles tensed, her ears straining, trying to hear it again.

More sounds came, faint, but growing louder, building, until they became a desperate cry for help. A siren's wail on a dark night.

Faith winced. The noise cut into her ears like slivers of glass slashing at her ear drums. She wanted to cover her head and block the noise but needed to hear her mom's screams.

Because then they changed to words. The piercing scream for help turned to something Faith could understand.

Don't let me die. My life is precious. Save me, Faith. I am here.

"Hook her back up, Dad. Bring her back," Faith pleaded.

Her dad stepped forward and tried to hug Faith but she pushed him away.

Faith. I am here. Inside here.

"Get the doctor, we need to save her. She's still alive."

"Yes, Faith, she is still alive," her dad said. "You'll want to hug her...one last time."

Faith did hug her. She laid her body across her mom's, burrowing into her, waiting to feel her mother's embrace. The spirit below longed to hold Faith but could not. The doctor had turned the body off, the spirit had to leave.

FAITH. I AM HERE. INSIDE HERE.

The words climbed to a pitch so frantic they were no longer understood but just one long cry of agony. The shriek of a banshee, a dying soul being buried alive, wondering why her family was standing there, letting her die, as if they were the ones who'd run her off the road, over the guard rail, and into the rock-filled ravine below.

***WHY
HAVE
YOU
ABANDONED
ME?***

These words echoed through her mom's body and slowly faded as if she were falling down a well. Her heartbeat stopped. The chest that had been rising and falling went completely still. Faith stared at her mom's face, waiting for a miracle, for the eyelids to rise, but instead the jaw had gone slack. The color of life was gone. Only pale, cold colors were left. Faith's own cries came next, but like the voice of her dying mother, the pitch too high for her dad to hear. Her pain remained hidden.

* * *

Visiting the funeral parlor and seeing her Mom's body lying in the casket gave Faith an aching pain in her gut. Bile rose up her throat and she swallowed back down the bitter taste. She made tiny prayers to Jesus to take away her grief and embrace her mom's soul. She prayed so hard she expected Jesus to answer.

But nothing came.

Life was like a limb gone numb and Faith dragged along for the weeks that followed. She'd stare out the front window of her house, watching the boy across the street, Keagan, and his father, walk to the church that butted up to the end of their street to play baseball. She envied the boy and longed for time with one of her own parents, but her dad was so distant, his spirit so dim. His emotions were in a vegetative state and unhooked from machines that kept them alive.

Colors in the house started to fade. Dust in the air seemed to rise up in clouds, more and more with each passing day, suspended in

streaks of sunlight. Her sheets were never as clean as before; she missed the scent of lilacs on her pillowcase—sweet, but heavy with vanilla—and feeling like she was like Eve sleeping in the garden.

The orange juice was full of thick pulp that stuck in her teeth. Church felt lonely no matter who was standing next to her. The flowers on her dress wilted.

The day that Faith had her first period there was not a woman to be found in her house. There were only memories of her mom that hung in Faith's mind and had to be dusted off or else they'd be forgotten. The memory of Mom describing her first period would forever remain a vivid one:

I was lying in the surf, tasting salt water on my tongue and watching the whitecaps roll up my belly, bubble under my chin, and then roll back down, leaving me there to sparkle under the sun. I clutched on to handfuls of sand, once in a while watching a tiny shell creature burrowing for cover. I noticed a thin twirl of red between my legs. I wasn't scared or shocked, just curious, a fortunate witness to something miraculous. I laid there for as long as I could, watching the blood swirl from my bathing suit, and after a while I could hear the heartbeat of the egg: boop-boop, boop-boop, ever so faint, and I knew it was ridiculous, but I could hear it nonetheless. I could sense it when the tiny egg swam away, fueled by the ocean waves pulling it back to sea. The egg was off to join the rest of the living, as if the nutrients of the ocean would care for it and help it grow. This is what happens. As a woman, we give birth to life every month. Our blood is like the ocean water that fuels living things.

Faith wished she were somewhere majestic like her mom was when she got her first period, instead of being locked in the bathroom, standing on cold tiles, looking into the sink where her dad's used razor was still frothy with cream. Dead bits of his stubble dotted the sink.

Her menses just started, but her underwear was more than just spotted. It was wet with sticky-red blood. The bathroom mirror

mocked her, reflecting back the lost look on her face, reminding her that she was all alone with nobody to count on.

She folded up her bloody underwear, wrapped it thick with toilet paper, and placed it in the garbage. She opened the flowery pastel wrapper and inserted the pad into a clean pair of underwear, same way she'd practiced many times over during false alarms. She wondered if her dad would notice what was in the bathroom garbage and come wake her up, the way her mom most certainly would have done, rather than just stay in his room doing his secret things.

She decided to tell him. He needed to know she was changed.

The door to his room was cracked, and she pushed it all the way open. She missed the way the scent of her mom's hairspray and perfume would greet her.

"Daddy?" she asked. It seemed right to call him *daddy* at that moment, but there was no answer. He was in the corner on his computer desk, headphones wrapped around his ears.

"Daddy. I need to tell you something. It happened."

Nothing

"It happened," she said louder, expecting him to ask, *what was IT?* since a dad wouldn't know what *IT* was, like a mom would.

Dad didn't respond. He didn't hear. She felt like a ghost, invisible, watching him. She waited for him to sense her presence, but nothing. She thought about tapping him on the back and explaining what happened, but he wouldn't know what to do or what to say, so she slipped back out, still unnoticed, and went to bed.

The night was restless. Cramps in her gut came and went, then came back stronger. The Stayfree pad seemed to grow in size and she couldn't forget it was there. She would turn on the light to check, changed the pad more than once, and became worried maybe this wasn't how it was supposed to happen. *I'm going to bleed out forever; and nobody will know, not a mom to help me.* Fears pinballed inside her head; zip-zapping neurons, zooming fast and then popping. Blood seeped from the cracks. Every new moment a new wound bleeding. She was open to the world now, ready to

create life, and life started to roll in. Dark waves from a cold ocean, each one more frigid, rushing over her head so that she had to gasp for breath. She was sure she was going to drown in her sleep until the ocean shattered like ice and she heard a cry for help.

***Why
have
you
abandoned
me?***

The same scream as her mom's, but not her mom's voice. It was someone else, mocking her.

She forced her eyes open so that the dream would stop, but the real world was just as cold and dark, and the scream remained, just as strong.

Why have you abandoned me?

The sound wasn't coming from her dream, it was coming from inside the house. Somewhere outside her bedroom the noise was gaining power. Each pitch climbed higher with the urgency of a smoke alarm. With hands over ears and a hazy brain she got up from her bed and dashed from her bedroom, heading right into the eye of the hurricane, the center of the noise that threatened to shatter her skull.

***Why
Have
You
Abandoned me?***

It was loudest in the bathroom and she went inside, her ears trying to detect the source of the strongest signal.

The cry was erupting from the garbage. She reached inside, fished the wrapped-up remnants of her menses and held it to her ear. The blast of noise made her cheeks wilt.

WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME?

It was the voice of her own egg.

Wrapped in a pile of toilet paper and stuffed in the garbage, the bloody egg was alive and crying out, as if it were an infant, left in a dumpster by a cold, cruel mother.

She rolled the pad in more toilet paper, brought it into her bedroom, and placed it in her pajama drawer. When she changed her next pad, she did the same.

Her dad was sleeping quietly, unaware of the death, the abandonment, the lost life. He couldn't hear the perpetual scream that lived in Faith's brain. Nobody could.

The scream faded a touch over the coming weeks, but came back with rage and vengeance when her next cycle came. She was creating life each month, but then pulling the plug, and letting it die.

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