

Chapter One

Doctor, doctor, can you tell
What will make poor Maggie well?
She is sick and about to die.
That will make poor Johnny cry.

John Hamilton dropped the patient record folder into the slot outside the examining room and went into his personal office two doors down the hall. This was the second cancer case he had seen today, and yet he felt an almost inhuman distance from the patient and her family. Instead of the medical data that he should be analyzing, he kept echoing that foolish rhyme he and his classmates used to chant at the country school when he was a kid. He wasn't even thinking about Maggie, although he had chanted that rhyme in his dreams often enough when Maggie was ill, his jumbled thoughts eddying around her face in frightening collages of bandages and operating rooms punctuated with church spires and open Bibles. Often enough he had thought he heard the voice of God pronouncing doom against her for taking him away from Him, and against him for going with her.

Automatically John locked the office door behind him, not that he expected a nurse to come in without knocking or a patient to inadvertently open the wrong door, but because he needed to place even greater distance between himself and the woman he had just seen. He sat down behind his desk and reached for the pitcher of ice water and the glass. Obedient to his professional instincts, he charted the glass of water-3:21-after he drank it. That made twelve glasses since 9:30 a.m. when he had come in.

"And I'm still thirsty," he said aloud, laying the pen beside the sheet on which he kept the record.

For the hundredth time he considered a urine test and rejected the thought.

Strange. Only a few months ago he could have come to the office overwhelmed with personal problems and yet thrown himself into the day's work, completely forgetting everything but his patients until the workday ended. He had survived every other personal crisis that way. Now he found himself unable to think professionally about a simple malignancy he would have to arrest. Now when Maggie was probably past danger. When Lora was sorting out her life again.

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Even the urine test and what it might suggest was not the core problem. He knew that as certainly as he knew that slipped discs and gynecological complications were not at the center of Maggie's dilemma.

"Doctor, doctor, can you tell...?"

"I could probably tell if I made myself face the issues," he muttered.

Enough now to admit that for all of them the problem was spiritual.

He started to pour himself another glass of water.

"I don't need more water," he said, putting the glass down again, considering his abnormal thirst-what it meant. "Not me, Lord," he prayed. "Not yet."

Unlocking the door, he stepped into the hall. So Mrs. Cavanaugh needed immediate surgery-though even that would probably be too late to save her. So? That was what his own life was all about-trying. A nurse was just emerging from the adjoining examination room, Mrs. Cavanaugh behind her. John answered the nurse's eye signals.

"Please come in and sit down, Mrs. Cavanaugh," he said, indicating the open door. He gestured to the empty chair, then walked around his desk and sat down himself.

Maggie was in the parking lot when he left the clinic an hour later.

"Tired?" she asked. "Too tired to stop at the dry cleaners on the way home?"

"No, not that tired." He set his briefcase behind the seat and got into the car, adjusting the backrest so he could recline. Fastening his seatbelt, he closed his eyes.

Even with them closed, John saw Maggie driving-much too fast through rush hour traffic, intent as she switched lanes, her crisp black pageboy framing the thinness of her face, her deep blue eyes darting from rearview mirror to side mirror to traffic lights and brake lights ahead. His wife drove aggressively, the way she lived, never waiting to see what opportunity might open up, always wedging into life's gaps...

John told himself to relax, but sleeping while Maggie was driving was out of the question. Still, if she drove, they would reach home a half hour sooner than if he did. He abhorred driving and hated the city.

"There are times I hate it too," Maggie often said when he talked about retiring early. "But you're used to the income. Besides, we'd be bored in a small town."

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Whenever the pace became frenetic, John reminded himself about the financial advantages of city practice. It was true he enjoyed the security, but that wasn't what kept him from moving back to Blakeville the way he often dreamed of doing.

When John heard the turn signal ticking, he realized that Maggie was pulling in at the cleaners. He braced himself for the swing and the jolt over the curb.

"Five minutes," Maggie promised.

"Ummhumm," he murmured without opening his eyes. The trouble was that there would be another Mrs. Cavanaugh tomorrow and the day after that. "At least I don't know the woman," he told himself. In Blakeville he would be facing Mrs. Remington or Leonard Adams with news like this. Infinitely worse, he thought. Comforting thought!

Maggie opened the car door. The smell of dry-cleaning fluid swamped his senses-worse than anesthetics-as he clicked the seat to an upright position.

"Feel better?" she asked, flipping the key in the ignition and letting out the clutch abruptly so that the car bolted from the parking space into the stream of traffic.

"Any word from Lora?"

Approaching a red light, Maggie downshifted. "Rodnel is suing for primary custody. Lora phoned during her lunch break. She'll call again this evening after she talks with her lawyer."

Two hours later when Lora phoned, John had finished reading his AMA Journal and had flipped on the TV. Picking up the remote control, he turned down the volume when Maggie answered the phone, at first trying to overhear enough to follow the conversation, then deciding he would rather not guess but get the information all at once when they finished talking. As he reached for his Bible and Sabbath School Quarterly from the lamp table beside the chair, he remembered he'd missed yesterday's study. Today was Tuesday-not Monday, April 22.

As he had for the past 33 years, he methodically read the assigned Scriptures and the accompanying notes from the quarterly. Jotting the answers in the blanks, he briefly thought about the implications of the day's lesson. Then he placed the Bible on top of the quarterly that he had opened to the next day's assignment. As methodically as he had read the lesson, he reflected on his day at work and the problems facing his family. Still seated in his chair, his eyes closed, his head resting back

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as if he were taking a nap, he prayed. For 33 years this had been his one statement of who he insisted on being in opposition to Maggie's definition. Almost since the beginning of their marriage he had found it easier to be what she wanted him to be than to keep his connections with the church. He loved Maggie.

Sometimes in the night when she was asleep, when his own mind refused to let go of the day's events, he wondered if his love amounted to worship. Ever since they had been teens living next door on the graveled road at the edge of Blakeville, she had stood between him and every other consideration of life. He had never regretted what Maggie had cost him, yet at times he was aware of what life might have been if he had loved someone else instead. More often, though, he reminded himself that even the most ideal relationships were complicated, and even his friends who had stayed with the church had been through grief with their children. And he, of all people, knew that while those who lived right suffered less, illness and death still wiped out even deacon and elder, Pathfinder leader and Sabbath School teacher. Doctors, too, he thought now. Not me. Not yet.

Maggie was crying. He heard her blow her nose time after time. Her voice was unnaturally low when she replied to Lora's long explanation of her situation.

John pulled himself forward in the chair and got up. For a moment he hesitated in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen where Maggie sat, aching for her as she wept. Finally he went to her, sat down beside her, and put his arm around her. She shuddered involuntarily, then settled into the crook of his arm.

"Your Daddy wants to talk to you," she told their daughter.

He took the phone. "I can't understand the problem. You're the child's mother."

"It's not a foregone conclusion," Lora said, her voice controlled, tense. "Not any more. Even if we hadn't been married, a father can win custody-in cases where..."

"Where the mother is unfit?" he finished.

"Or where the father can provide a more stable home situation. Rodnel can, you know, Daddy. He's keeping the house, and Shelly is moving in as soon as the divorce is final and they can get married. She doesn't plan to work, and they will have a live-in housekeeper."

"Nice show of respectability!" John felt like laughing at the irony of the situation.

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“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Lora protested, and then her voice broke.

“Baby. Oh, Baby!” John said huskily. “Can’t we come? Let us come.”

“No.”

Maggie took the phone from him. “We’ll be there by noon Saturday,” she said with a firmness that seemed to admit to no argument. She murmured a few more words, then hung up.

Arriving at her office at 10:00 a.m., a half hour earlier than usual, Maggie glanced through the faxed materials on her desk and rang for the secretary she shared with the two young accountants who worked for her. As usual, she found the challenges of her financial consultation business absorbing, almost relaxing. She worked until 2:00 p.m. when she left for a late lunch with her friend Corrine.

How many years had it been now that she and Corrine had routinely had lunch together on Thursdays? Since Corrine’s husband Leighton had joined John’s clinic in 1962. They had taken turns making lunch and staying home with the three children-Lora and Rick and Corrine’s baby girl-while the others shopped all morning. Maggie smiled at how important saving the baby-sitting money had been for both of them then. When the kids started school, they had continued shopping and having lunch together, maybe taking in a matinee afterward.

My work’s a blessing from any angle, Maggie thought as she parked at the restaurant. Corrine would be bored and lonely. Maggie felt guilty wishing she knew how to break away from this Thursday lunch ritual. I don’t need her today. I need two new clients on the verge of bankruptcy. That I could handle. I’d know all the right things to do, all the alternatives.

Corrine would be melancholy-she saw it as part of her duty as a widow. She would sigh and remember romantic tunes, sidewalk cafes in Madrid or Torino, and golf scores.

“Madge, you look marvelous in green,” Corrine said as Maggie took off her black linen coat.

Maggie laid the coat over a chair back and set her handbag on the chair. She liked the green dress herself.

“Christmas tree green in December, forest green in January, Kelly green in April. What’s the matter, Madge? You look tired.”

Sitting opposite her friend, Maggie reached for the menu.

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“I’ve already ordered. Lunch is on me today. Is crab salad all right?”

“Fine.”

“I always think of Charleston in April,” Corrine said, looking out the window. “When Leighton was in residency at Bon Socours, I worked in a little dress shop on Glass Street. Greens were in fashion that spring. You remember 1958, Madge. Paris designers brought out the most fabulous silks in daffodil yellow and greens of every shade all the way into the blues - silks hanging in dramatic swags from the shoulders. Do you remember how those dresses moved? I used to love dancing in those dresses.”

In 1958, Maggie thought, we were still in New Orleans. John and I were fighting about dances. Yes, I remember those dresses. One in particular with a sheath skirt and the bodice fitted in the front, ballooned in back. John said if I wanted to dance, I’d have to go without him. And once I did just to prove I would.

Corrine babbled about the love songs Perry Como sang and Fats Domino and piano music through open windows in Charleston’s azalea-corridorred spring. Maggie drifted through a dozen Aprils of her own - through a dozen pear-blossomed streets cordoned off for art shows - through a dozen art galleries that John loved. Her mind came to rest on a painting John had bought last month, brilliant with white and black and shafts of green and red.

I should ask Lora if Baldwin would ever make a green grand piano, she thought. To go with that painting, to stand on the white carpet at the foot of the stairs, its brass feet and gleaming ivories crying out to my brass collections in their cases under the skylight.

The waiter brought the crab salad and small triangular sandwiches. “I feel so much better about everything,” Corrine said. “I wish you’d come with me. I’ve been trying to convince Lydia. It would do her good.” Maggie realized she had lost the thread of what Corrine was saying somewhere after Charleston.

“Oh? Why should I go?”

“I know it’s not the same for you because you still have John, but you may not always have him. I wish I had been better prepared for death and separation. It’s wonderful to realize that Leighton isn’t really gone after all.”

I’m eating too fast, Maggie thought, deliberately holding her fork poised over the salad and chewing more slowly, trying to guess the drift of Corrine’s remarks.

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“Oh?” she repeated.

Corrine grasped her napkin with both hands almost as if she were praying. She gazed again out the window. “It’s so comforting, Madge. I heard his voice for the first time last evening. At all the other meetings I just had this feeling that he was there, but last night I heard his voice as clearly as yours. ‘I haven’t gone away, darling,’ he told me. ‘I’m right here. I want you to go on being happy.’”

Maggie was getting the picture.

“It was wonderful.” Corrine tended toward superlatives.

“I know Leighton would want you to be happy. Of course, he would,” Maggie said. “Would you like dessert? Let me buy the dessert.”

“No. Oh, no, I shouldn’t,” Corrine objected.

Maggie laughed outright. “Why shouldn’t you? Didn’t Leighton mean you should stop doing penance for outliving him?”

“Oh, Madge!” Corrine became serious, but finally smiled. “OK. Something frivolous. Something fattening.” She studied Maggie a moment. “You’re thinner, honey. Extra stress? At work? At home? How’s Lora?”

Maggie resisted Corrine’s invitation to confide. “I need another client. Cheesecake with fresh strawberries? I have too much time on my hands. I get bored.”

Later as she drove to pick up John, Maggie replayed the conversation along with the plans she used to make for her husband every time she faced surgery.

If I died he’d have to marry someone right away to keep his life in order. John can’t function without me. It’s a basic fact. I would want him to be happy.

Would she like Leighton never go away but always be there, a spirit detached from back pain and migraines, wishing for nothing but John’s happiness, sometimes influencing him for his own good-still managing for him? Or possibly more powerful as a spirit able to control the flow of influences around him-to shield him from all things threatening? With a shudder she remembered the red tie across the front of the white shirt in the shop window-red like a dagger, already guilty, its price discretely inconspicuous - but expensive, of course.

If I were a spirit, she thought, I could stand between everything threatening and John. Again she shuddered. Or if he remarried, between him and happiness.

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She imagined herself a ghost, a fog of herself less substantial than tears or rain, almost like an incense odor or smoke-trying to demand his attention.

“Look, John, I’m still here. Everything will be all right.”

“But he couldn’t hold me,” she said aloud. “And my ghostly hands-I could touch but not grasp.”

Had Corrine really heard Leighton’s voice? Or was her boredom its source? Was it her imagination-her memory?

Maggie knew what John would say. “The living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything.”

He had once told her he was quoting Solomon. Maggie wondered if possibly even Solomon had been wrong about some things.

It was their fifth rest room stop on Saturday when Maggie realized what made her uneasy. At first she had thought that John was compulsively drinking Coke after Coke because of anxiety. Then she remembered the pattern. He was driving today, something he rarely did even on long trips.

John doesn’t want to ask me to stop this often, she thought. He remembers trips with his dad and the amputation. As always, she was direct.

“Have you had a blood sugar test?” she asked when her husband returned to the car, another soft drink in his hand.

“No.”

“Why not?”

He looked at the seatbelt latch, the ignition switch, the air conditioner controls, but not at her.

“Why not?” she repeated.

“I’ve been preoccupied.”

Maggie reached to take the soft drink from him, then noticed it was sugar-free.

“You realize...” she began.

“Yes, I know.”

“How long?”

“Maybe a year. I’ve adjusted my diet. I’ve been careful.”

Maggie felt her breath entering her body cold, and freezing to the bottom of her lungs. “John, if this were me, evading an issue like this, you’d...”

“I know.”

“You’ve had a urinalysis test done, of course.”

“No.”

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“I’m calling from Lora’s. Don’t argue. You’ll see Dr. Howell on Monday. I’ll tell Sue to make the arrangements and cancel appointments with your patients. What are you thinking of, John? It’s your life.” She leaned toward him, placing her hand on his knee as he started the engine. “John?”

“Yes, I know.”

Lora closed the dishwasher and leaned against its front, allowing its hum, the vibrations it made, and the warmth of water splashing against its door to soak into her body. It was comforting in an odd way, almost like a human hand touching her.

I guess I’m not totally numb after all, she thought. She wiped the already spotless countertop with a damp cloth and prepared to mop the spotless floor.

I’m like Mom, she told herself. Finishing the floor, she then turned toward the bathroom where she continued her ritual, scouring an already gleaming tub and sink, using bowl cleaner, and finally mopping the floor.

Daddy used to smile about it-the way Mom went through all these motions every morning, even when we came back after being gone for the whole weekend. I think I know at least something of what compelled her.

After drying her hands, Lora applied a generous palmful of lotion, rubbing it in carefully around her knuckles and nails. Bob always said that if I was anything, I was thorough. Thorough.

“Nobody will ever be able to find fault with you, Lora,” he used to repeat. “Whatever you set about doing, you abandon yourself to it with utter thoroughness.” Those were his exact final words. And with that he had left her.

She looked at her hands. Still shapely, delicate, small, bare now of the several carefully chosen rings she usually wore. The sets of engagement and wedding bands she had abandoned now to her safety deposit box at the bank. Now she wore tasteful rings that nonetheless drew attention to her hands and the work she was doing with textiles and wallpapers, glassware and ceramics. Beautiful things that gave her such pleasure to touch. An almost human sensation of surrounding, enveloping, enhancing-creating an environment in which beautiful people could live and love each other. Lora leaned against the window casement and gave way to the feelings that had been building since she woke up at 4:00.

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So here I am, she thought, in an efficiency apartment with generic drapes and furniture, no glassware, no china, no books or memorabilia. No husband. No child. Mom and Daddy will be here by 11:00 a.m. No need to fix anything for lunch. Mom will bring everything ready to stick in the microwave.

She had nothing left to clean, nothing to read, nothing to think about but what she had been trying to avoid. Lora went to the baby's room and sat down in the rocker facing the crib, staring at the quilt folded at the end and the Snoopy dog that Evyn hugged when she went to sleep. Slowly Lora began rocking, one toe tapping the floor, the other heel resting and rocking with her movements. When she had been a child she had sat on Daddy's lap, rocking with her cheek against his shirt, her arms reaching halfway around his body, listening while he hummed to her or kissed her hair. For all Rodnel's assertions, Evyn would not have memories like that. In spite of what he said, there would be day-cares and baby-sitters and hurried hugs between business deals. A stepmother who would get tired of being mother to a child left over from her husband's first love.

"Please, God," Lora prayed. But her prayer, as always, ended there. What else was there to say? What kind of questions could she ask a God she had walked away from? What kind of requests could she make? What kind of bargains?

So I'm beautiful and ambitious and thorough? Husbandless and childless. Great!

She remembered how she had felt at the age of 19 when she married Bob. Then she had believed that she was embarking on a wonderful romance a little like the one between her parents, full of delightful sharing and tenderness, complete commitment. Even though Bob was 20 and a college senior ready to return home to the family business in a few months, he hadn't been ready for that kind of a relationship. He was committed to fun on the weekends anywhere but at home, partying anywhere but at home. Dinner on weeknights anywhere but at home. Study until 1:00 in the morning at the university library.

"How can you be so single-minded, Lora?" he said one night when she asked him about a Saturday by themselves in the apartment and a quiet Saturday night with candles and soft music.

"Candles?" he had asked. "I'll get to smell a layer of bayberry over window spray and fabric softener?"

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She remembered being with Carl. From the beginning everything had been different. Although he was not yet 30 when they married, he was stable and settled in his legal career. Sober-minded, dedicated to his religion. She had converted to the Catholic Church for him. It seemed the reasonable thing to do, seemed so comfortable. They would build their marriage on solid values, raise children, contribute to the community, grow middle-aged and then old together. Except after four years there were still no children.

“Lora, I can’t settle for a life without a child,” Carl told her at last. “I want a divorce. I want a wife who can give me a family.”

“But how do you know that I’m the one... ?” She had never finished the question. Suddenly she knew by the look in his eyes that somewhere, before they had met, he had reason to believe in his own fertility.

Carl’s financial settlement had provided for her professional education. And she found wry comfort in remaining a devout Catholic while Carl abandoned his church for another divorcee who, friends reported, was noticeably pregnant at their wedding. He was taking no chances this time.

And she had married Rodnel because she was lonely and he was in love with her. Then unbelievable miracle! She was pregnant when they returned from their honeymoon.

“I’m delirious,” she had cried into the phone, calling her mother with the news.

Now Evyn was 14 months old and Rodnel was in love with someone else. Someone not quite so beautiful, not quite so successful, not quite so -thorough.

Lora stopped rocking and got up. She went to the kitchen, where she began a major Sunday dinner with roast beef, chocolate pie with a raspberry glaze and shaved chocolate over the whipped cream, potatoes to mash, two vegetables, a salad, and cloverleaf rolls that she planned to take from the oven at the stroke of 12:00 noon. Her mother’s dinner would have to go into the refrigerator to be eaten as leftovers for the rest of the week. She was washing the last residue of radish tops and bell pepper seeds down the disposal when she heard her parents at the door.