

*FOR richer,
FOR poorer*

BOOK THREE IN
THE PASTOR MAGGIE SERIES

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Prologue

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A wave of hot air hit Maggie the moment she stood at the opened airplane door. Her nose was overwhelmed with the scents of steaming tarmac, burned and unburned refuse, and heavy wafts of jet fuel. The sun bore down on the top of her head as she made her way carefully down the rickety airline stairs. Maggie slung her carry-on bag over her shoulder and was knocked a little off balance by its weight. She gingerly walked down each metal step to the waiting bus ready to bring the passengers to the customs terminal.

The warm air of Accra, Ghana, had begun to melt the Detroit iciness out of Maggie. The brand-new year had begun with a trip to a brand-new continent and country.

When she reached the tarmac, Maggie reached up to the small gold cross around her neck and absently held it. She stopped for a moment, closed her eyes, and breathed in deeply. She didn't want to miss any sensation of being in that beautiful, mystical country. She had dreamt about it for months. She had heard God's many whispers about it. Maggie believed in God's whispers and listened for them constantly. Now the whisper was a roar of affirmation as the mighty winds blew through Accra from the powerful Atlantic Ocean. She felt the heat from the tarmac rise through her flip-flops. Once again, a poor choice of shoes. Maggie never seemed to wear the appropriate footwear. She tripped, fell, and stumbled her way through life with tiny pieces of floppy rubber on her feet.

With only two weeks to learn too many things about the land and its people, Maggie also had the added responsibility to lead a group of her own parishioners on the adventure. Fortunately, her brother, Bryan, would be in charge of the work on the trip. Maggie would be in charge of the human and spiritual cares.

Maggie let God's warm breath blow through her hair, her clothes, and her soul.

"Who will go for us?" God had asked in his holy court, way back when God was searching for a prophet, a messenger. Isaiah answered that time.

What Maggie didn't understand was that, if she acquiesced to God's bidding, the whispers could become startling shouts. Her simple assumptions of faith, life, right, wrong, good, bad, rich, and poor would certainly bring anguish, resistance, brokenness, loss, renewal, hope, and piercing joy.

But Maggie only heard the whisper. God's request.

"Who will go for us?"

"Here I am," Maggie whispered back Isaiah's words.

She was excited to meet God in Ghana.

"Send me."

October 6, 2015
Cherish, Michigan

Jennifer Becker buttoned up her coat and tied her scarf around her long, thin neck. Everything about Jennifer was tall, thin, and angular. At the age of fifty-four, she had the height and metabolism of her mother. Jennifer's younger sister, Beth, had inherited their father's shorter, rounder physique. Now, with both parents gone, they could see their mother and father in one another. It was comforting.

Jennifer's coat and scarf were worn habitually now, even though the month of October was acting like October. Warmth and cold playfully wrangled for a foothold each day, which kept the month unpredictable. Actually, almost one week into the month, it was a sunny seventy degrees. That didn't matter, of course, because as soon as September twenty-third had rolled around, indicating the first day of autumn, both Jennifer and Beth unpacked their sweaters and other winter clothing from their cedar chests. Their summer clothes were carefully packed away between sheets of tissue paper until spring (perhaps May or June in Michigan). Although that particular day was warm, the nights had slowly dropped in temperature. It was how autumn began its creation of crimson, gold, and orange leaves on the treelined streets of Cherish.

Jennifer shook with excitement because she had just received a shipment of novels at The Page Turner Book Shop less than an hour before. Jennifer and Beth had owned and operated The Page Turner

for the past twenty-five years. Visitors and townspeople alike enjoyed browsing in the book shop, mainly because it smelled of books, a rarity in the new days of Kindles, Nooks, and other e-readers. The shop also smelled like cinnamon, apple, and nutmeg. Beth made her own potpourri each season. Autumn smelled delicious.

The new shipment of the morning had thrilled Jennifer because she had a very special delivery to make to a very special someone. Jennifer carefully wrapped *The Haunted Season* by G.M. Malliet in brown paper and tied it with a pink string. Then she set off on her journey by foot and left Beth to keep an eye on things at the shop.

Jennifer walked north on Main Street, past Skylar Breese's Pretty, Pretty Petals Flower Shop, then Lacey Campbell's We Work Miracles hair salon, O' Leary's Pub, and the newest Cherish business, Arly Spink's Cherished Works of Art Gallery. Jennifer made a right turn on Middle Street, then went straight up the old steps of Loving the Lord Community Church.

Opening one of the huge oak doors, Jennifer entered the sanctuary. She caught her breath as she saw the large plastic sheet covering what once was a beautiful stained-glass rose window. It was still a shock to everyone at Loving the Lord Community Church, that one of their own members had purposefully destroyed the original window in the sanctuary.

Redford Johnson, the perpetrator of the violence, was now awaiting trial—and most likely a long prison sentence—for the break-ins and physical damage he had wreaked upon the church in the past few weeks. Not only had he destroyed the historic rose window, he had also stolen money from the church, evaded child support for a child no one knew he had, and cheated many people out of their own retirement money through his financial planning business. Worst of all, he had violently assaulted the church janitor, Doris Walters. In short, Redford had broken not only the law but the hearts and trusts of the people in his church.

Redford had moved to Cherish five years earlier. He was young, single, and a financial wizard. He was also a predator. No one knew

he had a previous life with a wife and child who had left him. No one knew that he looked at the people of Loving the Lord Church and saw a group of “suckers.” His thievery and abuse began almost immediately. Fortunately for Loving the Lord, Redford’s finances were frozen at the time of his arrest. Reassurance had been given to all of his victims that restitution would be made. The rose window was being repaired knowing the money would be provided following Redford’s conviction.

Jennifer took a moment to remember the window and say a thankful prayer for its reparation. Then she quietly walked past Irena Dalca, who was perched on her organ bench, pounding out the somber notes of “If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee.” Irena’s hair was still the fluorescent blonde it had been for the recent wedding at Loving the Lord. She was so involved in her music, she didn’t see the slim frame of Jennifer slip past toward the church assistant’s office. Jennifer was relieved. Irena scared her. Jennifer was much too timid a person to know how to deal with the lightning bolt that was Irena.

Irena Dalca was a tiny powerhouse who was in charge of everything musical at Loving the Lord. Irena was four foot eight, eighty pounds, and frightened everyone who got in her way. With her Romanian heritage, she was direct, opinionated, and did not suffer fools. Her definition of “fool” was quite fluid.

Hank Arthur, Loving the Lord’s happy administrative assistant, smiled broadly as Jennifer made her way into his office. She returned the smile then quietly asked, “Good morning, Hank. Is Pastor Maggie in?”

“Yessireebob, she sure is, Miss Becker. Go right on in!” Hank said, almost sparkling.

“It sure was a celebrative weekend, wasn’t it, Hank?” Jennifer said in her soft voice.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it in my life. Nosireebob, never. Pastor Maggie got married good and proper, right here in her very own church with all the people who love her. And she never saw it coming!” Hank said with a double burst of pride and laughter.

Ever since Pastor Maggie Elzinga and Dr. Jack Elliot had tied the great big marriage knot just days before, Hank had been unable to stop smiling. The congregation had pulled off an undercover plot to give Dr. Jack and Pastor Maggie a dream wedding. The couple's original plan had been to marry quietly in the living room of Maggie's best friends from seminary, Nora and Dan Wellman. But Nora would have none of it. She understood Maggie and the church had been under siege with several break-ins and a young family in terrible crisis. But Nora insisted she would see her best friend married surrounded by her congregation. So Nora, Maggie's mother, Mimi, and Hank began the secret conspiracy.

Because a quiet elopement had been planned, Jack and Maggie never knew what hit them the morning of their wedding day. It was perfect. The congregation of Loving the Lord Church did what they did best. They gathered together, each using their own gifts and talents, and made a wedding day so special that Jack and Maggie were convinced they couldn't have planned anything better themselves. Flowers, music, decorations on pews and altar, and a delicious wedding meal. The best surprise was being married in their very own church.

Sitting at her desk, now a happily married lady, Maggie heard a soft knock on her office door. Jennifer entered, holding the brown package. Maggie had been sipping a cup of Lady Grey tea while working on something that had nothing at all to do with her church to-do list.

"Good morning, Jennifer."

Maggie smiled as she quietly slipped a large book under her desk, along with a stack of cards. Then she got up, thankful she could stand on her own two feet without crutches or cane. Thanks to Redford's first of several church break-ins, Maggie had slipped through a folding chair as she fell through a basement window a few weeks prior. A badly sprained ankle kept her on crutches then a cane for far too long, in her opinion. Now she moved around her desk and met Jennifer as they each took a seat in the two cream-colored visitor chairs.

"Good morning, Pastor Elliot," Jennifer said, blushing slightly. Jennifer had never been married, but imagined it was quite a satisfactory existence for most people.

Maggie laughed. She loved her new last name. It was so close to her maiden name, Elzinga, but was by far easier to pronounce. Parishioners normally just called her Pastor Maggie, but they had taken to dropping “Pastor Elliot” as well to honor her newly married status.

“I love the sound of that, Jennifer. Please say it again!”

“Pastor Elliot. Pastor Elliot. Pastor Elliot,” Jennifer obliged.

“Thank you,” Maggie said, giving a small nod of her head. “I may just turn into a high school girl and write *Pastor Maggie Elliot* over and over again on my blotter. It’s kind of sickening, isn’t it?”

“Of course not,” Jennifer said, blushing. “But just in case you need a diversion from your new name, I have brought you a little gift that should take you out of Cherish and drop you right into G.M. Malliet’s Nether Monkslip.” Jennifer handed the brown package with pink string to Maggie.

“Oh! I completely forgot about her new book. Jennifer, thank you. I have missed Max Tudor.”

Maggie unwrapped the brown paper and held the book in her hands. Maggie *loved* books she could hold in her hands. She thumbed through the pages and then sniffed. Since she was a child, Maggie loved opening new books and smelling the fresh pages. Actually, she enjoyed the smell of old books, as well. The mustier the better.

“Jennifer, thank you for remembering. I will begin this tonight. I may have to read it to Jack. He’s a new Malliet convert.” Maggie grinned.

Of course, that bit of intimacy immediately embarrassed Jennifer, who looked down at her hands, then stood to leave. Along with Jennifer, her sister, Beth, had never been married. Now in their fifties, it didn’t appear marriage would be part of either of their lives. That was just fine with them. Maybe.

“I hope you, uh, both enjoy it,” Jennifer said, still looking down.

Maggie stood and impulsively gave Jennifer a hug, the book sandwiched between them.

“I really mean it, Jennifer. Thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

“Pastor Maggie,” Jennifer said, after stepping back slightly and smoothing her coat, “your wedding was just beautiful. Beth and I both

agreed we have never seen a more lovely ceremony. We are very happy for you and Dr. Elliot.”

“We could feel the love and good wishes from everyone on Saturday,” Maggie said quietly. “We’ll never forget a moment of that day.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Jennifer surprised herself. “Beth and I have fifty brand-new books, picture books appropriate for infants all the way up to chapter books for adolescents. We want to donate them to the Ghana mission trip. We figure, if the children are learning English in school, these books will be just the thing to help them keep reading.”

“Excellent!” Maggie said. “We want to fill up the library in the new school. Your variety of books will serve them all. Thank you for such a generous donation.”

“We’ll bring the box to the parsonage this week. We’re happy to be part of the mission.”

Jennifer was pleased to see Maggie’s enthusiasm, lacking that altruistic piece of genetics herself.

Maggie was preparing to take a group from the congregation to Bawjiase, Ghana, where her brother, Bryan, was working to build a new school for United Hearts Children’s Center, an orphanage near the village. Loving the Lord was all-in for the exciting new project. The people who weren’t actually going to do the on-site physical work were contributing from home any way they could.

Maggie’s office door flew open. Irena click-clacked in on her high heels. She carried a pile of music in her skinny little arms, clutching the stack with her black painted fingernails. They looked like talons.

Hank’s voice followed her from his desk, “Irena! I told you she had someone in her office right now!”

Irena stopped and stared at Maggie and Jennifer, giving them a full view of her newest makeup creation. Since the latest kitchen sink disaster of her dyed blonde hair, Irena had also taken the pains to adjust her makeup to “complement” the hair color. The bright-blue sparkly eye shadow looked like something straight out of the 1960s. As usual, Irena’s face was a horror show of vivid colors.

“Shut it, Hunk!” Irena shouted over her shoulder.

Hank did so. Irena was Pastor Maggie's problem now.

"Good morning, Irena," Maggie said quickly. "Jennifer and I are just finishing a chat."

"Gooot. Ve neet to talk ov Chrristmas."

Irena plunked her small rigid self right down in the chair where Jennifer had been sitting, similar to the way a tomcat might pee on his territory where an infidel cat has set an unwanted paw.

Jennifer took the opportunity to move to the door. It was time to get back to The Page Turner and unpack the rest of the Malliet books—in blessed peace and quiet.

"Good morning, Irena. Your music on Saturday was beautiful," Jennifer said kindly.

"Vat about Sunday?" Irena asked, her eyes narrowing.

Jennifer coughed nervously. "Of course. Every Sunday you play beautifully for us. The wedding was extra special, wasn't it?"

At that, Irena's easily ruffled feathers quickly unruffled. She gave Jennifer a queenly nod.

"Have a good day, Pastor Elliot." Jennifer winked at Maggie.

"And you, Jennifer. Thank you again for the book."

Maggie walked Jennifer the few steps to the door, then closed it behind her. She turned to face Irena, who was pawing through her music.

"Irena, you must stop barging in here when I am with someone," Maggie said, annoyed.

"Vy? Dees ees my verkplace. I am de prriorrty. Now, Chrristmas," Irena said, still digging.

Maggie remembered how last year Irena had wanted to do Handel's *Messiah* for a Christmas cantata. The problem was, Loving the Lord had a choir of only five people at the time, and no orchestra. That didn't seem to be a roadblock for Irena. Maggie had slyly talked Irena out of her grand plan through (somewhat) false praise and new promises of Irena playing extra pieces for Advent services. Thankfully, Irena had agreed. Maggie hoped to avoid a reprise of the same battle.

"I tink, I tink ve vill . . ." Irena was still ferociously clawing through the music when Maggie's door opened. There were no words from Hank's desk that time.

The faithful—albeit slightly cranky—church janitor, Doris, pushed her large rolling trash can into Maggie's office, her yellow apron wrapped around her sufficient waist, stuffed with cleansers and paper towels. A feather duster was in her hand.

Irena looked up and glared at Doris.

"Git out! Git out! Git out!" she screeched.

Maggie hid a smile. She knew Doris had arrived on purpose, probably with Hank's help, to give Irena a taste of her own selfish medicine.

"I work here too, Irena," Doris said calmly. "After the wedding, there is more than usual to clean up around here." Doris began to dust Maggie's windowsill. "Not that I mind cleaning up after the wedding," she said quickly, looking at Maggie.

"Thank you, Doris," Maggie said. "We certainly had no intention of dirtying up the church with a wedding. I'm afraid you will have to blame Pastor Nora, my mother, and Hank, of course."

Doris and Maggie both laughed. Irena glowered.

"Well, I guess I can come back and finish your office later, Pastor Maggie," Doris said, pushing her rolling trash can toward the door. "I'll go dust the organ now."

"Don't you touch dat orrgan!" Irena barked. "You vill mess up my stops!"

Maggie could hear Doris and Hank trying to stifle laughs in his office.

Irena went back to the music on her lap. But not before, oddly, she dropped her head to her right shoulder. Maggie wondered if Irena was all right. For the first time, Maggie noticed Irena's blouse was wrinkled and not tucked tightly into her miniskirt, as usual. Irena took a deep breath, popped her head back up, and dove into her purpose for being there.

"I tink ve vill do dees." Irena flourished several pages of something with musical notes sprinkled on them.

Maggie couldn't read music and was usually happy when Irena took care of all things musical. Usually.

"What is it?" Maggie asked, looking for some kind of title.

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“Eet’s called *Mangerr Baby*. I wrrote eet myself.”

Irena sat back in her cream-colored chair, waiting for Maggie to bow down and worship in awe.

Maggie was stunned into silence. *Manger Baby? Oh, good grief!*

“Tell me about it,” Maggie said once she was able to find her vocal chords.

Irena was still waiting to be fawned over but switched gears and dove right in to share her brilliance with Pastor Maggie.

“Vell, eet ees, ov courrse, about de tiny poor baby Jesus. I write eet frum de view of de cow in de stable. Poor animal watch de poor baby come into de worrld in de strraw. But den dis baby gets de prresents frrom de rich mens on dere rich camels. Dere ees a beeyootiful duet between cow and camel.” Irena sat back in her chair again, quite self-satisfied.

Maggie kept a look of interest frozen on her face, but she had no idea what to say. Saying no to Handel was one thing. Saying no to Irena as the author of this Christmas nightmare could mean bodily harm.

“How long is it?” Maggie asked carefully.

“Eet’s tree hours. I shorrtened eet. Ees perfect,” Irena said, looking as though she was prepared to win the Best Musical Score award at the Oscars.

Three hours?

Suddenly, Maggie had a thought she assumed came straight from heaven.

“Irena, this sounds wonderful! But a church service isn’t time enough to enjoy it in its entirety. What if we choose a Saturday afternoon, and it can be a complete concert? You will have the entire afternoon to shine and share your incredible music.” Maggie didn’t feel guilty anymore when she slipped little lies into conversations with Irena. It simply had to be done.

Irena’s head lolled to the right again. Was she having a seizure?

“Irena, are you all right?” Maggie asked.

Irena’s head popped back up and her eyes glowed.

“Ov courrse.”

Irena could see it all. Her brilliant afternoon sharing her dazzling artistic talent with these musically challenged people.

Once Irena was satisfied that her composition would be celebrated appropriately, she left Maggie's office as quickly as she had arrived. The thought of Doris being anywhere near "her organ" had Irena irate. She brushed past Hank without a word, then click-clacked toward her corner of the sanctuary. She was relieved to find no sign of Doris's rolling trash can. One less righteous crusade to fight.

For now.

Irena climbed onto the organ bench. Normally, she would begin playing next Sunday's hymns without hesitation, but she closed her glittered eyelids for a moment. She let her nose drop to her right shoulder and took a whiff. The musky smell gave her a little shiver. Someone special had held her closely the night before as they watched television in Irena's small apartment. His cologne remained on her blouse. After he left, she went to bed in that blouse. She woke up in that blouse. She went to work in that blouse. She couldn't help it if her nose dropped over every few minutes to smell the scent. Irena had never experienced that kind of sensory excitement before. It was delicious and made her head spin just a little.

Then she heard her mother's ghostly voice in her head. "Irena! Vy you sit dere? Stop vasting de time! Prractice!"

Would her mother's voice ever leave her alone? But then Irena realized how much she hoped not. She missed her mother's commands and demands. She missed her mother.

She sniffed her shoulder one more time, then skipped Sunday's hymns and began playing the overture to *Manger Baby*.