

# *TO have & TO hold*

BOOK TWO IN THE PASTOR MAGGIE SERIES

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## Prologue

The whispers continued. They had begun years before on a foreign hillside and now were a common occurrence in her everyday life. Sometimes they happened when she was out running down the dirt road, a gust of wind coming from nowhere. Sometimes it was the sun blazing through the branches of a tree. Occasionally, she heard a whisper right in the middle of a sermon on a Sunday morning. She would stop, catch her breath, and find her sermon going a different direction than previously planned.

Sometimes the whispers came while sitting on the lakeshore. God showed up in nature, probably because he created it all. One time in particular, she'd heard him as she was holding a baby boy, baptizing him with drops of Lake Michigan water. A shiver went through her when God got too close and blew in her ear.

Sometimes the whispers came as she argued over hymns with Irena or tussled with Marvin, who pretended to dislike her, or when she took a bite of a particularly delicious donut. She was learning to be attuned to God's whispers and direction.

Once, the whisper came through the exhaust of a dirty old car.

God seemed to show up everywhere. Even gas stations.

Maggie heard the click of the gas pump. She topped off her tank, replaced the gas cap, and that's when she saw him.

He came out from under a car parked at the opposite pump and walked toward her. He was small and appeared to be completely gray, looking up at her with huge green eyes rimmed in black.

Maggie looked down at the kitten and gasped with a rush of pity and jaw-clenching anger. *How did this little creature end up at a gas station, near a highway, under a car?* In the midst of her mental assault on these injustices, she heard a tiny mew.

"Hi, little guy," she said softly as she knelt down and gave him a pet.

A mix of dirt and oil was matted into his fur. He mewed again and pushed into her hand.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Maggie said. "I can't do this again. I'm sorry, little one."

The car engine at the opposite pump roared to life, and the kitten leapt onto Maggie's bent knee and clung to her with all his little claws. Maggie held a protective hand over his head as the car pulled away.

*Oh, good grief!*

Maggie left the Lansing, Michigan, gas station with the little gray bag of bones and whiskers in her lap. He smelled of oil, dirt, and gas fumes. As she was driving, she noticed the kitten had curled into a ball and fallen asleep. She sent a curse out into the world against all those

who would hurt or abandon an animal. Her most vehement curse was meant for anyone who would ever hurt, neglect, or abandon a child.

Pastor Maggie had no patience for any form or variation of those evils. She would be quite un-pastor-like if she ever met an abuser face-to-face. But for now, what was she going to do with the little waif? She already had two cats in the parsonage. How could she add another? One year ago, she had been given permission to bring her cat, Marmalade, a large orange tomcat, to the parsonage. That was when she had accepted the call to be pastor of Loving the Lord Community Church in Cherish, Michigan. But shortly after her arrival, she'd adopted an orphaned female kitten, Cheerio. There had been quite a fight in the church council over the new addition. Maggie had won. She'd then found homes—possibly by force—for Cheerio's two siblings.

With her current rescue in her lap, she took the off-ramp to Cherish, drove down Main Street, and turned right onto Middle Street. When she pulled into the parsonage driveway and turned off the engine, the gray ball remained asleep. *Now what?* She sat for a moment, thinking of how her impulsiveness almost always got her into trouble. *Drat.* She finally opened the door and carried her little bundle into the parsonage.

First things first. He must be bathed. He was probably full of fleas. She filled the kitchen sink with warm water and ran upstairs for her shampoo. Then she ran back downstairs to the kitchen, carrying the kitten the whole way. Finally, she carefully placed him in the water. He was so weak, he didn't have enough energy to fight being drenched and bubbled. Maggie carefully washed him and slowly discovered four white-not-gray paws and a white-not-gray tummy. He had gray, tan, and black Tabby markings on his head, back, and tail. She tried to get the gray splotch off his nose with the shampoo but discovered it actually belonged there.

After wrapping him in a towel and drying him off, she put him by the food bowl. He jumped right in and ate with gusto. It was at that particular moment Marmalade and Cheerio smelled something new

in their house. When they got to the kitchen, they both fluffed out like angry chickens. What was in their food bowl? Howls and yowls began, with much hissing thrown in for good measure. The new kitten paid no attention. He had been in worse spots than that before. He ate until he fell asleep on top of the remaining food, all four limbs spread out over the bowl.

That was how Maggie Elzinga's second summer of ministry at Loving the Lord Community Church was winding down. For the past fifteen months, Maggie had been pastor of the small church just west of Ann Arbor. She had earned her place as pastor by trial, error, and occasional success. Being a woman, and a small woman at that—five foot three and one hundred fifteen pounds—did not make her an overpowering presence. She looked up to everyone. Except the elementary Sunday school class.

Maggie's first year of ministry had been what it should have: full of surprises and a lot of firsts. First funeral, first baptism, first wedding. And each one had been unpredictable in every way. She discovered ministry was like life. The difference was, in ministry the pastor was part of everyone else's life, which meant being part of everyone else's surprises as well as her own. Maggie's impetuous and emotional personality had drawn her completely into the lives of her parishioners. She had also sustained a personal loss on Valentine's Day that could still bring her to tears at the drop of a hat or someone's kind word.

Now, watching the new kitten sleep, Maggie was suddenly invaded by a horrific thought. *How will I tell the church council about it?* The church owned her house and made the rules. She envisioned the obvious reason why she would not be allowed to keep the little orphan in the church parsonage: supposedly, no pets, though they had already allowed her two. At times like that, she could see the advantage of having her own home. She looked once more at the kitten lying on the bowl, as if guarding the food with his pathetic little life, and knew she would keep him. She was in love.

"Come on, little one," Maggie whispered as she gently picked up the Tabby. He showed no resistance. "It's to the doctor with you."

She got into her car, put the kitten on her lap again, and drove to Cherish Your Pets Animal Hospital, just north of town past the beautiful old clock tower.

Maggie opened the door into the lobby of the animal hospital, and immediately the smell of antiseptic overlaying the unmistakable smell of animal urine wafted through the air and up her nose. Maggie thought of all the poor pups that had lost control of their bladders once being walked, or dragged, into the veterinarian's office.

Dr. Dana Drake ran a lively business caring for all of the pets in Cherish. Maggie liked Dana a lot and had been hoping she might join Loving the Lord as a new member. Dana was a tall, thin, African-American woman. She had been number one in her class at the Michigan State University veterinary school. Her hair was always pulled back in a tight ponytail, and her cocoa eyes and black lashes gave her the gift of never having to wear makeup, which she wouldn't have done anyway. Dana was as comfortable in a field caring for large farm animals as she was in her bright-yellow office caring for the smallest of God's animal kingdom. Although Dana was a few years older than Maggie, they had forged a fast bond due to their mutual love of cats.

Dana was at the front desk with one of her assistants when Maggie walked through the door. She glanced up at Maggie, but her eyes immediately went to the little bundle in Maggie's arms.

"Oh, Pastor Maggie. Now who do you have there?"

Dana carefully took the kitten from Maggie.

"I found him about an hour and a half ago at a gas station in Lansing. Can you believe someone just dumped him there with all those cars? And so near the highway?" Maggie's voice rose in tandem with her anger.

"I can believe it," Dana said quietly. "People can be so cruel. Animals, especially baby animals, don't have a chance when they are abandoned like this. Let's take him back and see what we see."

Maggie obediently followed Dana to one of the examination rooms. Dana listened to the kitten's heart and lungs with her stethoscope.

Then she took his temperature. Although it was embarrassing, the kitten didn't complain.

"I would say he's just about two months old," she said, looking at his teeth.

Then she took him to the back of the medical area and did a little blood test, and after about twenty minutes, Dana finally returned with the kitten.

"Pastor Maggie, you have quite a sick little guy here. His blood count is so low that I'm surprised he can even stand. I can let you take him home with some medicine, or I can keep him here for a couple of days. If you take him home, along with the medicine, I suggest giving him one small slice of raw beef liver every day with his regular cat food. That will help get his blood count up."

Maggie thought and then said, "I'll take him home, if you really think that's okay with the other cats there."

"You should keep them separated until this one gets stronger," Dana said. "How are Marmalade and Cheerio?"

"Hilarious. And perturbed about this new infidel." Maggie smiled.

"I'll get the pills for him. I gave him an antibiotic injection, but we'll wait on the other shots until he's stronger. By the way, what's his name?"

Maggie looked quizzically at Dana. "I don't know. I hadn't thought about it. I guess, with Marmalade and Cheerio, I'll call this one . . . mmm . . . Fruit Loop."

Dana laughed. "Hi, Fruit Loop. We're going to have to get you healthy and fattened up, my little friend."

Dana went to get the medicine while Maggie cuddled Fruit Loop. He was still able to purr, even though he was so close to losing one of his nine lives. Maggie felt a rush of relief that one more little life was spared.

When Dana returned, Maggie said, "You have done your job, now I'll do mine. I would love you to join the new members class at church. Any chance you would be interested? We meet this Sunday right after church for a chat about Loving the Lord. The classes are each of the next four Sundays."

“I was already planning on it, Pastor Maggie, ma’am,” Dana said with a serious nod of her head. “When I heard you did an animal blessing service last fall, I knew you would be the kind of pastor I could get along with. Most of your type bore me to tears. I was raised Baptist, and it sort of messed me up.”

“Great!” Maggie said too excitedly, making Fruit Loop jump. “I promise, no Baptist guilt at Loving the Lord, but someday I want to know how it messed you up. I like hearing stories about what doesn’t work in churches so that I won’t do those things at ours.”

“Fine. Someday over lunch. Now, as far as little Fruit Loop is concerned, here are his pills. They will get rid of his worms. If you want, you can smash them into the cow’s liver. He won’t notice. Bring him back here in one week. Okay?”

“We’ll be here,” Maggie said as she took the pills.

She brought Fruit Loop home and fixed up a space for him in her parsonage study. She put down a small bed, food and water dishes, and a litter box—nice and close so he would be sure to see it. She also left a few toys for when he was feeling stronger. Then she headed off to buy a very disgusting piece of cow’s liver and silently apologized to the cow as she did so.