

To love & to cherish

BOOK ONE IN THE PASTOR MAGGIE SERIES

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Prologue

One warm day in a faraway land, God whispered in her ear. Being only twenty-two, she didn't exactly hear the first whisper; she just felt a tickle. She pulled her hair up into a messy bun, believing flyaway hair was the culprit, and kept walking the rough terrain. So God laughed and kept whispering. After six months of being far away from all she knew as normal life, Maggie was quiet one day and heard the ticklish words: "Tell the story."

After the fifteen-hour flight home, she finally landed in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her parents, brother, and even Ed and Jo, were there to meet her. Her mother quietly surveyed Maggie to see if she had lost too much weight, but Maggie looked healthy enough—tan and lean and full of stories. The family and friends began unpacking six months of life. But one story mattered the most to Maggie. That ticklish whisper, that gentle command.

She sat down with Ed at her backyard picnic table. They each had a plate of all-American food: hamburgers, potato salad, baked beans, watermelon, and of course, apple pie made by Jo. Secretly, Maggie just wanted a falafel.

Ed watched Maggie pick at her food for a few minutes, then leaned his gray head closer to her blonde one.

"What happened, Maggie? Something has changed." Then his blue eyes smiled into hers.

“I think I know what I need to do with my life,” she said dreamily. “I tried not to listen, but God doesn’t shut up.” Her voice became less dreamy and more focused. “I think I’ll be joining you this fall. I don’t want to do anything else with my life but tell the story.”

Next came four years of theological training under Ed’s mentorship, friendship, and good care. Then Maggie graduated. At the age of twenty-six, she packed up her diploma and her idealism, along with a little naiveté and a whole suitcase full of optimism. She loaded these things, along with her cat, Marmalade, into her Dodge Caliber and drove across the state of Michigan.

Reverend Maggie Elzinga was ready to tell the story.

Whether or not people wanted to listen was a completely different matter.

Maggie, wearing her black lace funeral dress, stomped up the front steps of the parsonage. She opened the door and controlled herself just barely enough to keep from slamming it once inside. She picked up one of the pillows on the once-white-now-gray couch, put it over her face, and screamed as loudly as she could. She screamed one more time for good measure. When she put the pillow back on the couch, she looked up to see Marmalade looking directly at her from his perch on the blue chintz chair. His eyes were unblinking as he seemed to ask, "Now what happened today to cause such dramatics? I'm in the middle of my eight-hour nap here."

Maggie looked at her orange tomcat with his bright golden eyes and smiled.

"Marms, I don't know why we are here. I thought we came here for me to take care of people, preach remarkable and uplifting sermons, visit the sick and the shut-ins, and be a good shepherdess for these people over all. Why is it I want to strangle so many of the people I profess to love?"

Marmalade blinked.

Maggie went on. "I'm pretty sure my first funeral was a disaster. How do you eulogize a man who apparently despised his family, was a mean neighbor, and left his children in debt due to his careless and selfish way of living? You know how he died? Guess!"

Marmalade blinked twice.

“He sat down and ate a whole chicken. Yep. He ate a whole, entire chicken, bones and all. It was the bones that got him. Do you know which one?”

Marmalade yawned.

“The wishbone! Ha! Can you believe it? Unfortunately, too many people made jokes about that, especially his three children. ‘Wishes do come true.’ I had no idea where to start with this one. And it’s my first! What nice things can you possibly say about such a mean person unless you tell lies? Well, I wasn’t going to do that. At least not blatantly. So, I read Psalm 23. But when I got to the part about ‘You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,’ I could hardly finish the reading. All I could imagine was how large that table would have to be, and how many roasted chickens would have to be on it to accommodate all the enemies Rupert Solomon made throughout his lifetime.”

Marmalade decided this would be a good time to wash his face since a nap seemed out of the question.

Maggie thought back to how the day had begun. She awoke at five a.m. and pulled on her shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes. She drank one cup of coffee as she put Marmalade’s breakfast in his food dish. With caffeine on board, she took off out the front door of the parsonage and turned left down Middle Street. She ran down Middle to the cemetery and ran past the gravestones until she got to Freer Road. She turned right, ran down Freer, sprinted up the hill, and before she got to the high school, turned left on a dirt road called Meadowview. This was her favorite part of the run. She felt as if she could run faster, breathe the cool dawn air more deeply, and catch glimpses of the many deer and other creatures living in the woods. She enjoyed the sound of the dirt under her running shoes and watched the sun peek at her through the trees. She made a U-turn after two miles on the dirt road, then made her way home. This is how Maggie began each day, five miles of running solitude.

She cleaned up when she got back and had two more cups of coffee and her favorite oatmeal with sliced banana and pure maple syrup

drizzled on top. After spending some time looking over her funeral notes and the eulogy, she put on her black funeral dress for the very first time and got chills. *My first funeral.* She realized she had never had an actual class at seminary about funerals. Weddings either, for that matter. A few details about how to officiate a marriage or a death were tucked into a practical theology class. There wasn't a lot of time devoted to either of these ceremonies, yet they were so significant in the life of a pastor and congregation. She had a small jolt of panic. Maybe she was more nervous than she thought.

She had been to funerals but had never buried anyone before. What if she messed it up? She should have called Ed about this. He would have encouraged her, given her some practical advice, and then cracked a joke to make her laugh. Why hadn't she called him? Did she have to prove she could do this ministry thing all on her own? She looked in the mirror.

"You little idiot!"

Marmalade was curled up like a big orange cinnamon roll on her pillow. She removed her black nylons from under his girth, shook off the cat hair, and shimmied into them. She jumped when the phone rang. She reached for it and tried to get her breathing under control.

"Good morning, Pastor Maggie speaking."

"Pastor Maggie, Hank here. It seems we have a little ruckus going on, and I wonder if you could come over and straighten things out."

Hank was Maggie's assistant. He was tall, with a medium build, and at fifty-five years old, he'd just begun to gray at the temples. He had a little paunch around his middle due to daily runs across the street to The Sugarplum Bakery. Hank loved his sweets and what his wife, Pamela, didn't know (although, how could she not?) didn't hurt her (apparently).

"What is it, Hank? We have Mr. Solomon's funeral in two hours. We don't have time for a ruckus."

"I agree, Pastor Maggie, yessireebob I do. But Mr. Porter is here from the funeral home, and Mrs. Abernathy is here from wherever it is she comes from, and there is a catfight to beat the band going on over

the flower arrangements. I thought you should get here before members of the Solomon family arrive.”

“Thanks, Hank. I’ll be right there.”

She hung up the phone, ran into the closet to get her shoes, grabbed her lipstick from the bathroom counter and dashed it across her lips, then was out the door.

Marmalade tucked his orange head under one white paw, thankful for peace and quiet at last.

Maggie was in the narthex of the church within seconds of Hank’s call, one of the perks of living in the parsonage right next door. She immediately assessed the situation.

Mrs. Abernathy, the resident know-it-all, bossy boots, and self-appointed Queen of the World, was clutching five large vases filled with various colored zinnias. She was trying to place them on the stands that the funeral director, Cole Porter (yes, that’s his real name), was using for other flowers sent by family and friends. As one arrangement was set down by Cole, it was immediately taken up by Mrs. Abernathy and replaced with her zinnias. Round and round they went. Hank was standing in the doorway to the church office, shaking his head. This was not in his job description.

Maggie thought back to the day she had interviewed Hank. It was her first day at Loving the Lord Community Church. She had enthusiastically skipped from the parsonage to the church and then subdued herself just enough to sedately walk through the sanctuary doors. Several people had gathered to greet her on her first day as “Pastor Maggie.” She had done her best to dress herself for this momentous occasion. But Maggie was challenged in this area. Although her mother was absolute elegance and class, the genetics of style had completely bypassed Maggie. If she had any kind of style at all, it could be called something like “Bohemian Flower Child.” She liked long flowing skirts and pastel peasant blouses. Ballet slippers did nothing to elevate her five-foot-three-inch frame. Her long blonde hair fell down past her shoulders, and that’s where she left it. All she needed was a wreath of daisies in her

hair and she would be the ultimate poster child for the 1960s free love campaign. The truth was, Maggie looked like a walking ragbag.

Her mother had gently tried to reform Maggie's dressing debacles without much success. The only thing she demanded was that Maggie own a proper black dress for funerals and a well-tailored, cream-colored suit to officiate weddings. Maggie reluctantly agreed. Her mother also bought her two different pairs of three-inch sandals and two pairs of pumps: one taupe and one black. Then she sat back and prayed that Maggie would actually wear them.

Maggie had been informed the week before she arrived at Loving the Lord that the part-time volunteer secretary was "retiring" to help take care of her grandchildren. The church had decided it was time to hire the first paid secretary in its history. It was all very exciting. Maggie had four interviews set up the first afternoon in her new church office. Hank was the last of the four.

He entered Maggie's office precisely at the prearranged time. He wore pressed khaki slacks, brown leather loafers, and a bright-blue button-down shirt. This was a nice change from the first three interviews.

"You must be Hank Arthur," Maggie said with a smile.

"Yessireebob, Reverend . . . uhh . . . I'm sorry, how do you pronounce your last name? *Elzinga*?" Hank looked embarrassed.

Maggie laughed. "It's *Elzinga*, with the emphasis on the first syllable. It's Dutch, and no one has ever been able to pronounce it, so no worries. Besides, I would much prefer it if you would call me Maggie. Why don't you have a seat?"

Hank smiled. "Well, I'm here to apply for the secretarial position, although I would prefer being called 'assistant' if I get the job."

"Hank, I'm curious as to why you want this job? I've never known of a male secretary . . . uhh . . . *assistant* in a church before. What made you apply?"

"Pastor Maggie, I have worked all my life in the hand lotion business. I have bought, sold, marketed, photographed, and even tested on my very own skin the Skin-So-Tight lotion line. Have you ever tried it?"

Maggie shook her head, "I'm sorry, I haven't."

"Pity," Hank continued, "When they asked me last year if I would like to take an early retirement due to cutbacks, it didn't take me long to say, 'Yessireebob!' I packed up my desk and said bye-bye to Skin-So-Tight. I thought retirement was what I had been waiting for my whole life, and it was. For about two and a half weeks. Then I realized I was bored silly. My wife, Pamela, seemed to be a little on edge too, if you know what I mean."

Maggie thought she did.

"Anyway, one day she said to me, 'Hank, either you have to get another job, or I'm moving to Australia. Alone.' Just like that! So, I saw your ad in the *Cherish Life and Times*, and here I am. You will find me more than adequate on the computer. I can organize, file, answer the phone, run any office machinery, and I make a great cup of coffee."

Maggie said, "You understand it's only a part-time job, don't you? Is that enough time away to . . . hmm . . . keep your wife from moving to Australia?"

Hank quickly replied, "It will be just the thing. She's taking a macramé class in the afternoons, and she volunteers at the hospital regularly, so I won't see her until dinnertime."

Maggie hesitated. "Working in a church usually means no two days are ever alike. Confidentiality is key. What you see and hear within these walls can never be repeated."

Not that Maggie had an inkling of what would be seen or heard within "these walls." She was trying hard to sound like a pastor, but she felt like a little girl playing dress-up.

She continued, "Crises come up, people show up unannounced, and there are still the regular weekly things that have to get done. I guess what I'm saying is that you will have to be discreet, flexible, and polite under sometimes strenuous circumstances. Does that make sense?"

Hank seemed to bounce slightly. "Yessireebob, Pastor Maggie! I am the soul of discretion. Nothing that happens in this sacred place will ever leave my lips." He made a cross over his mouth. "Would you like me to promise on the Bible?"

Maggie giggled. “No, that won’t be necessary, Hank. I think you will be just right. Shall we give it a try?”

Hank bounced right out of his chair, quite sprightly for a fifty-five-year-old, and he enthusiastically shook Maggie’s hand.

“Thank you, Pastor Maggie. You will not be disappointed!”

And she hadn’t been. Hank had turned out to be her confidant, her cheerleader, and her protector from Mrs. Abernathy and others of that ilk. He was prompt, efficient, and he worked forty hours a week for twenty hours of pay. Pamela had stopped all threats of moving to Australia, and they both joined the church, much to Maggie’s delight. When she said her prayers, thanking God for Hank was always at the top of her list.

Now, watching Mrs. Abernathy and Cole Porter fight over flowers, Maggie realized that this situation was beyond Hank’s control. She moved into the flower fray and said a little too loudly, “Good morning, Cole. Good morning, Mrs. Abernathy. How are we doing this morning?”

Mrs. Abernathy, who always seemed to look as if she had just had a violent encounter with a lemon, pursed her lips and said, “Pastor Margaret, first of all, it is not a ‘good’ morning. We are preparing to bury the dead. Second, *we* are not doing well at all. I have worked painstakingly to have these zinnias arranged in order to bring the most comfort to the family of . . . of . . . the deceased . . . man. Mr. Porter is disrupting the setup for this sad, sad occasion.”

Cole Porter and his beautiful wife, Lynn, ran the local funeral home. Cole had heard every joke under the sun about being named after the famous jazz composer. Lynn was expecting their third child. She secretly hoped for a little boy to join their two girls. The Porter Funeral Home had been in the Porter family for three generations.

Cole and Lynn seemed to have one of those marriages other couples envy. They didn’t waste time arguing or picking at each other. Instead, they shared kindnesses that often wore out after fifteen years of marriage. They supported each other in their mutual work of burying the dead and caring for the grieving families who came through their

door. That didn't mean every funeral was easy or that every family was a delight to work with. Cole had discovered at a young age that funerals brought out the best and the worst in a family. He had learned how to handle both. This was the first funeral he and Maggie would do together, but he and Lynn were both impressed with her pastoring skills so far, even though she dressed a little strangely.

Maggie rolled her eyes, not that Mrs. Abernathy noticed. She was too busy glaring at Cole in Christian love. Ever since Maggie had arrived in Cherish two months earlier, she'd had regular entanglements with Mrs. Abernathy. Mrs. Abernathy was called "Mrs. Abernathy" by everyone in the town of Cherish. No one really remembered anymore what her first name was (it was Verna). She was a widow of ten years. She was a tall, thin woman with thick gray hair, which she strong-armed into a large bun on the back of her head. Jesus, Loving the Lord Community Church, and her garden were her three passions. When at church for worship services, Mrs. Abernathy wore *polyester* flower print dresses belted at the waist (she considered these proper church clothes) and practical rubber-wedged, beige shoes. The rest of the week she could be seen in *cotton* flower print dresses belted at the waist (her work clothes) and Wellington boots, with a kerchief tented over her gray bun.

Zinnias were Mrs. Abernathy's favorite flower because they were sturdy, practical, and suitable for any and every situation of life, death, and all days in between. Or so Mrs. Abernathy thought. But there was another reason she loved zinnias, a very private reason.

Mrs. Abernathy was the chairperson of the search committee that had interviewed Maggie in March. Mrs. Abernathy asked the questions, checked Maggie's references, and arranged a neutral pulpit so the search committee could hear Maggie preach without letting the rest of the congregation know what they were up to. Due to the lack of viable candidates, Mrs. Abernathy agreed with the rest of the committee that Maggie preached the best sermon and gave the strongest interview. But her mind was changing as the weeks went on. It unnerved her

to see a “little girl” in the pulpit each Sunday. Where were the good, sturdy men?

Mrs. Abernathy had assigned herself Flower Coordinator for Sunday services and other church events. No one had the energy to stop her.

Maggie had the energy.

“Mrs. Abernathy, I realize this is our first funeral together. Thank you for your promptness and your help. But I do believe that Mr. Porter has some flower arrangements from the friends and family of Mr. Solomon, and they must be displayed.” (Cole nodded emphatically.) “It’s courtesy to the bereaved, Mrs. Abernathy.” (Cole looked like a bobblehead.) “So how about we put your lovely (first lie of the day) zinnias on the dining tables in the basement. They will bring cheer (second lie) to those who share in the luncheon following the service. Then Mr. Porter can display the purchased arrangements on these stands for the mourners to see and be comforted by.”

Maggie felt as if she had handled this beautifully. She looked over at Hank, still in the doorway. He had his hand against his forehead and his eyes closed. He knew what was coming.

Mrs. Abernathy’s mouth was so puckered, Maggie could only marvel at the amount of wrinkles gathered around her lips. Would she actually be able to speak? Oh, yes, she would. Lack of verbiage was never a problem for Mrs. Abernathy.