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ZONDERVAN

Shadow of Doubt

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Chapter One

The thing about upset stomachs was that, eventually, they got better, but Stan Shepherd's stomach was proving that theory wrong. He hadn't slept a wink all night. First he'd had stomach cramps, and then it had turned to nausea, so he'd spent half the night in the bathroom standing over the toilet, but that brought no relief. His T-shirt and boxer shorts were soaked with sweat, but he was too weak to change clothes. A cold shower might help—except that the prospect of walking those few feet to the bathroom again was more than he could bear. He was tired, and his head ached. Still, there had to be something he could do. He grabbed the corner post on the bed for support and tried to pull up. His heart raced, and his breathing accelerated as if he'd just climbed ten flights of stairs. Warily, he fell back onto the bed with a bounce.

Celia woke up and squinted at him in the darkness. “Stan, what’s wrong, honey?”

“I’m sick.” The words came with great effort between short raspy breaths.

He knew his retching in the bathroom had already awakened her twice, and both times she had scurried around getting cold compresses and glasses of water. Each time he had convinced her he felt better, and she had managed to go back to sleep. Now it was evident that he had lied.

She crawled across the bed and slipped her bare feet to the floor. The lamp came on, and she bent over him, touching his head, looking into his eyes, feeling for his pulse. “You’re worse.

Stan, this isn't just a little nausea. I'm taking you to the emergency room!" She tried to pull him up, but he resisted.

"No, I'll be okay. I must've eaten something . . ."

"What?" she asked urgently. "I ate everything you ate tonight, and I'm not sick."

"There must've been something. Just . . . find me some Pepto Bismol. Baking soda. Something. And more water. My throat's on fire. Help me get in the shower first."

She slipped her arm under his and tried to help him pull up, but she was only five-three, and his six-foot, two-inch frame was too big for her. He managed to sit, but then dizziness assaulted him again. She struggled to pull him into a standing position. Instead, he collapsed onto the floor, worrying even as he fell that he would pull her down with him.

"Stan, I'm calling 911!" She was crying now. He hated making her cry. He tried to tell her just to help him back into bed, that he didn't want her to get all nervous and upset. Tomorrow was her birthday, and he'd made so many plans. She needed her rest.

He heard her talking to the dispatcher, Newpointe's busy-body who would have the word of his illness all over town before the sun even came up. He wished Celia would just go for the Pepto. If she'd just get him some Pepto . . .

"Stan, can you hear me? Stan? Stan?"

He couldn't seem to respond, nor could he breathe, and the pain in his throat and gut felt like a knife probing around, but he was too weak to double up with the pain. She was pulling on him, trying to revive him, trying to make him sit up, and he kept wishing for the pink stuff . . .

He wanted to throw up again, but it wouldn't come, and he prayed for a breath, just a breath that could go all the way into his lungs, and for the room to stop spinning, and for something to stop the nausea.

And then he stopped praying as he felt her pulling him up. He fell forward again, this time into a deep hole, where it was

dark and he couldn't find the end, and there was nothing to reach out for that would stop his fall, and he didn't know where the darkness would take him . . .

• • •

Mark Branning's fire truck was the first one on the scene. Although Celia's panicked call had been for a rescue unit, all of the emergency services of Newpointe responded to the call. That was policy, so even when there wasn't a fire, the fire truck headed out. Because they'd been two blocks over at a call for Mrs. Higgins, a lonely old lady who managed to set a grease fire at least once a month, they'd arrived at Stan's house before anyone else.

As he ran up Stan's driveway and banged on the locked door, Mark wondered what could have happened to the town's only detective to make his wife call with such urgency. Stan was in perfect health, or so it seemed. He wasn't much over thirty, and he lacked the "spare tire" that seemed to be a by-product of a happy marriage. Wasn't Stan too young for a heart attack?

He could hear Celia inside screaming, and he glanced back at the firemen behind him, George Broussard, his shift captain, and Dan Nichols, his best friend. George jabbed the doorbell and shouted, "Celia, open up! Fire department!"

In seconds she was flinging the door open, and she fell into Mark's arms. "Mark, help him! He's dying! Hurry! Please hurry!"

They bolted in as the sirens of the rescue unit and police squad cars grew closer.

"Celia, what happened?"

"I don't know!" She was sobbing too hard to get the words out clearly. "Do CPR, Mark! George, do something! Somebody has to help him!"

They got to the bedroom and saw Stan lying on the floor on his back.

George and Dan stooped beside him, but Mark stayed with Celia, knowing either of them could administer CPR if it was needed. “Celia, tell us what happened so we can help him.”

She nodded. “I woke up and he was sick, and I tried to get him to the bathroom, but he was too weak, and he just passed out . . .”

The paramedics raced in with a gurney, and Issie Mattreaux dropped to Stan’s side and began checking his vital signs. “What symptoms was he having before he passed out, Celia?” she asked as Steve Winder, her partner, began recording Stan’s vitals.

“He mentioned stomach cramps, and he was breathing real fast and he was dizzy . . . He thought it was something he ate.”

“How long since he ate?”

“Um . . . what time is it?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

“Six hours, then. Nothing since dinner, but we ate the same things. But he didn’t eat much because he wasn’t feeling very well before dinner. Said his stomach had been upset all afternoon. Please, can’t you help him breathe?”

Sid Ford, dressed in his police uniform, came running in, and stopped cold when he saw his friend lying unconscious on the floor. Two other cops, R.J. Albright and Chad Avery, filed in, and Mark wondered how long it would be before every cop in town was here. Even the off-duty ones. The emergency personnel in Newpointe were a close-knit group, and they all worried when one of their own was in trouble.

“What’s goin’ on?” Sid demanded loudly, as if Stan’s collapse had offended him personally.

“Sid,” Issie barked out quickly. “Go get samples of whatever you can find that he may have eaten tonight. Celia, is he on any medication?”

“No. None.”

“Any allergies?”

“No.”

“Has he been drinking tonight? Wine, beer, anything?”

“No, he doesn’t drink!”

“The truth, Celia,” Issie demanded. “I know some of these guys are your church friends, but it won’t leave this room. We have to know what he ingested.”

“I *am* telling the truth! Stan doesn’t drink!”

“Has he vomited at all?”

“Yes. Several times.”

“Chad, go get some samples from the bathroom.”

Chad hesitated. “Samples of *what?*”

“Anything you can find,” she said. “I’ll get graphic if you want. We need something we can examine for whatever’s made him sick. Hurry!”

Chad dashed into the bathroom. Mark set his arm around Celia’s shoulder, offering her feeble reassurance.

“I’m gonna be sick,” she said.

He dropped his arm as her hand came to her mouth. Her face had drained of its color, and she shot out for the bathroom.

“Not in the same bathroom, Celia!” Issie shouted. “You’ll contaminate the samples. Guys, help her. She must have the same thing he has.”

Mark followed her through the small house, and she barely made it to the tiny bathroom off the kitchen. He stood at the door, embarrassed and slightly repulsed, as she retched into the commode. She grabbed the hand towel next to the sink and turned the water on.

“You’ve got it, too,” Mark said.

“What *is* it?” she cried.

“My guess is food poisoning, but it could be some kind of virus.”

She splashed water on her face and washed her mouth out, then hurried back into the bedroom. They were feeding a tube down his throat, but he still wasn’t conscious.

“When is he gonna come to?” Celia asked.

"I don't know." They put an oxygen mask over his face.

"Why do you have the oxygen mask on him? Is he breathing at all?"

"There's evidence of cyanosis," Issie said as she worked rapidly to stabilize him.

"Cyanosis," Celia repeated, taking a step back. Mark watched her pale face change. "Blue skin. I hadn't noticed in this light." It was as if the word had triggered something frightening, something that horrified her. Mark started to ask her what it was, but the paramedics' rapid-fire exchange overrode him.

"Set up an IV of LR, TKO rate," Issie told Steve. "He's dehydrated."

"Blood pressure's dropping," Steve said. "I'll set up the IV in transport. We don't have time to waste."

They lifted him onto the gurney. Quickly, Issie checked his blood pressure again. "Dropping fast!" she said. "Call for the medi-copter to Slidell and I'll set up the IV. There isn't time to drive."

"Guys, whatever this is, Celia must have it, too," Mark yelled over the voices. "She just threw up in the other bathroom."

"Go get a sample, Mark, and make sure you mark it."

"But shouldn't that be taken by an evidence technician, instead of a fireman?"

"They're not investigating a crime, Mark," she said impatiently. "We just have to get to the bottom of this. The other guys are busy, so you do it. Celia, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, now," she said almost absently as she stared down at Stan. "Nothing like Stan was."

"Well, if his condition is any indication, you'll be getting worse. You might want to get dressed."

But Celia stood still as that look on her face grew more pronounced, that look that said something was cooking in her mind, something triggered by the word *cyanosis*. Finally, she

flung open a drawer and pulled out some clothes. As she disappeared into the bathroom, Steve radioed for the medi-copter and Mark ran from the room to get the sample.

Issie shouted, "Have you got those samples, guys?"

"A bag of all the prescription bottles I could find," R.J. yelled across the house. "And the samples from the bathroom. Sid's still workin' on the food in the fridge."

"Even at the hospital they won't know what to do if they don't know what's made him sick," Issie said as they wheeled Stan toward the front door.

Celia was running out behind them. "Issie, you said he's showing signs of cyanosis. That's . . . that's a symptom of poisoning. I've heard of it in connection with . . . with arsenic poisoning. Tell them to test him for that."

"Arsenic?" asked Sid Ford, who had just come back into the room with a grocery sack full of jars and bottles. "That's Hollywood stuff. Why would you think that?"

"Because . . . I've seen these symptoms before. Real similar. I didn't think of it until you mentioned the cyanosis."

"I'll tell them to test him for it at the hospital," Issie said.

"Copter's on its way," someone shouted from the front door. "They're landing in the street."

Issie rolled the gurney out as Steve ran beside it, holding the IV bottle up.

A boisterous wind whipped up as the helicopter landed, and lights in other houses blinked on as neighbors began to spill out of their homes. They got Stan into the helicopter and gave orders to the medics on board, then Issie turned back to Celia. "Celia, I'll take you in the rescue unit," she yelled over the noise. "There isn't room in the copter."

"No, I have to go with him!" she shouted, trying to climb in. "Please! Please, I can't leave him." Steve and Mark wrestled her back. "What if he dies on the way?" she screamed. "You've got to let me go!"

But even as she struggled to get past them, the helicopter pulled back into the night sky, its wind whipping her hair wildly into her face. She doubled over with misery and wailed, but the sound was lost in the wake of the helicopter.

“Come on, Celia,” Issie shouted over the noise. “We’ll get you to Slidell as fast as we can.”

As she got into the ambulance, Mark saw her staring up at the helicopter lights as they faded from sight.