



## SHADOW OF DOUBT

By Terri Blackstock

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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 felt 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 . . .

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