

FAMILY MATTERS

By Deborah Bedford

Chapter 1

"Dr. Stratton." The desk clerk flagged Michael down as he strode past the nurses station. "Your sitter phoned. She said she couldn't get you on your cell. She needs you to call home right away."

Michael reached for the phone she set on the counter for him and punched in his number. When the babysitter answered, he wasted no time greeting her. "What's wrong, Heather?"

"Cody has a fever of 104 degrees. I think he's really sick. What should I do?"

Michael frowned. Cody hadn't even had a cold for months.. He must have been exposed to something at school. But what kind of flu bug would cause a fever that high? He'd have to phone Jennie and find out if his friends had been sick. "Just keep him comfortable until I get home. There's a bottle of children's acetaminophen in the medicine cabinet; give him four of those. If his fever doesn't start dropping after that, call me back." He handed the phone to the clerk.

"Dr. Stratton. Your patient in 208 is totally dilated," an O.B. nurse informed him as she passed. "The baby's head is at plus one."

"Tell them I'm on my way." He washed up quickly and donned his scrubs. When he hurried into room 208, Julie Miller was just beginning to push. She strained, her hair plastered against her forehead with sweat. At last she fell back against the pillow. "I can't do this!" she told anyone who would listen. "I never intended to do this without drugs," she said, half teasing, and completely serious. "Drugs, Dr. Stratton. Anesthesia. Pain relief."

"The baby's coming too fast, Julie. What you've got here is a nice natural childbirth. Something a lot of people are going to envy you for."

"But I...can't..."

"Oh, yes. You can." He moved to the foot of the birthing bed, pulled up the stool and sat down. "Let's have a baby here. I can see the head."

"Can you?" she asked breathlessly, raising her head slightly as tears of exertion streamed down her cheeks.

"It's right here. I see dark hair, lots of it. Another few pushes and this will be over. Come on, Julie"

Michael had seen hundreds of women through labor and delivery. But he still couldn't do it without feeling a little twinge of pride and sadness, thinking of his own son's birth eight years ago. Jennie had been so brave. And Cody had been such a gift to both of them. There had been a time when they both thought that loving their son might be enough to save their marriage. But it hadn't happened that way.

"I feel the contraction coming. It's coming. I don't..."

"You can do it, Julie," her husband said, encouraging her.

"Focus all your energy on this push," Michael urged. "Let your body do this for you. Keep your knees wide. Hold on. Hold on."

"Good," his nurse joined in, cheering her on. "Perfect."

In spite of the fast, easy birth, this patient would need an episiotomy. He performed it quickly as Julie Miller began to strain again.

The baby's head emerged. A shoulder came next and then the rest of the newborn slipped out, a fine, healthy boy, already bleating for his mother. Michael handed her the baby as the nurse wrapped Julie in warm blankets. "Thanks," she whispered.

After Michael showed the father how to cut the cord and allowed the proud new parents to count fingers and toes, he examined the infant himself and gave him a high Apgar score. "Congratulations!" He shook the father's hand before he tucked his charts beneath his arm. Then he touched Julie's arm. "Good work, Mom."

With that, he swung briskly out of room 208 and headed for the fourth, floor and his next patient. He looked forward to his visits with Bill Josephs. "Well, Bill," he said, leaning back against the wall and studying his elderly client from a distance. "You look good enough to run a marathon."

"I am *looking* good," the old man bellowed at him. "I am *feeling* good. When're you gonna send me home, Doc?"

"Well—" Michael appeared to consider as he winked at Bill's wife, adjusting his bedside manner to fit comfortable country folks and friends "—how about tomorrow?"

"Yes!" Bill lifted a fist in victory. "Dr. Michael, it's about time you let me out of this confounded place."

"You don't follow my orders, you'll be right back here." Michael scribbled a prescription and handed the little paper to Bill's wife, Marge. "You take that three times a day and you'll be good as new."

"What is this stuff?" Bill chortled. "Viagra?"

Michael had known the Josephs since he'd graduated from med school. Bill's jokes didn't faze him at all anymore. "You rest every afternoon. The minute the farm news report is over and you've eaten lunch, I want you flat on your back for thirty minutes."

"I'll make him do it," Marge promised.

"No smoking. And when you're drinking coffee with your buddies down at the Ferris Dairy Queen, make sure it's decaf."

"You gonna make me drink unleaded for the rest of my life?" Bill asked.

"Yeah." Michael slapped the man's chart shut. "I am. I'll see you in my office in two weeks."

"We'll be there," Marge promised again. "I know how to boss this old coot around."

Michael hugged her. He didn't hug many of his patients, but the Josephs were practically family. "Take good care of him. You're going to have him around for a long time."

"Marge shook her head and grinned. "That's what I was afraid

Michael hurried upstairs to sign Bill's release papers. As he scrawled his signature, his BlackBerry sprang to life. When he went to answer it, he lost the call. Michael shook his head. The concrete walls of the hospital wreaked havoc on his cell-phone signal. He checked the screen

to see if it had been his office trying to reach him. But it wasn't. His home number had been calling. Cody's babysitter again.

The hospital pager on his belt went off. He headed to the nearest house phone and picked it up. "Heather Rogers is on the line, the operator told him. "She says it's an emergency."

"Put her through," he said.

The minute he heard the girl's voice, "I gave Cody the medicine," he could tell how distraught she was. "His fever won't go down. And he isn't crying anymore. He's just lying there like a big blob in the bed."

"Is he asleep, Heather?"

"I don't know."

Michael frowned and raked a hand through his hair. He glanced at his watch. Cody's fever should have come down by now way down. Michael calculated. He could be at the house in twenty minutes.

"Wake Cody and give him a sponge bath. Can you do it? If it frightens you, maybe your mother could come to the house and help." Fear gripped Michael like a vise. Surely, Cody had the flu. But what if this was something else, something much worse? This was one of the downfalls of his profession. For years, he'd been studying worst-case scenarios.

I'm a doctor, he reminded himself. I've just delivered a baby and prolonged a heart-attack victim's life. Cody won't have any problems I can't deal with.

He notified them at the nurse's station and headed toward his parking space. Even though it was past 8:00 p.m., it took several minutes for Michael to find a break in the Dallas traffic so he could enter Central Expressway after he'd gotten to his car. He didn't have to change lanes or pass to exceed the speed limit. He sped toward Plano with everyone else, cruising along at over seventy. When he wheeled his car into the driveway, he recognized Heather's mother's car there, too. Inside, he found them both holding Cody in the bathtub, squeezing washcloths of water down his little chest and arms.

"Cody, kiddo, what's wrong?" He stroked his son's hair while his fear escalated. The boy's face was ashen. "Can you tell me if anything hurts?"

"My eyes," Cody whimpered. "And my neck and everything." "Your head? Does your head hurt?"

Cody tried to nod but he winced instead.

"Mostly your neck, though. Huh?"

"Yeah"

Michael bent beside the tub and gathered his son into his arms. He soaked his shirt but he didn't care. Cody tried to smile but he was too weak to move. His eyes lolled backward.

Michael succumbed to his panic. He was no longer the capable physician; he was a frightened father, too afraid to know what to do. "We've got to call an ambulance," he said to Heather's mother. And then he started barking orders at them. "Dial 911 for me. Then give me the receiver." He wasn't going to let Cody out of his arms.

Heather dialed the emergency number and then leaned the phone against Michael's shoulder. He gripped it with his chin. He ordered an ambulance in clipped tones, answered as many of the EMT's question as he could.

"Dr. Stratton, I'm so sorry," Heather cried when she took the phone from him again. "I don't know what I did wrong."

"You've done a fine job, Heather." He forced himself to reassure the girl. Her round face mirrored the fear he felt himself. "You got your mother here. You got me home to him. And I wasn't so easy to convince, was I?" He moved around the room with his son in his arms, hoping that the air stirring against Cody's wet skin would cool him. The boy felt hot enough to go into convulsions.

Think, he commanded himself. *You've got to examine this child as if he wasn't your own.*

Carefully he propped Cody up on the bathroom counter and studied his face. "Say 'all,' Cody. Dad needs to see inside your throat."

"Ah-h-h," Cody obliged listlessly. Michael could hardly see anything without his light. What he could see looked slightly red but not inflamed. Gently, he bent Cody's neck forward, testing whether he could touch the child's chin to his chest.

Cody cried out. Michael didn't hesitate when the paramedics arrived. "You'll need a spinal tap and a culture on him," he said. "Have someone from the lab standing by," as they looked askance at him and he realized they didn't know he was a doctor. "I'm a general practitioner," he said. "Where are you taking us?"

"Plano General is closest."

"Just get us there."

As they sped through the traffic it felt like a snail's pace to Michael. It seemed an eternity before they arrived. After that, things got even worse. He watched helplessly as the paramedics wheeled Cody in on the gurney. An ER nurse tried to direct him. "The waiting room is in here, Mr.—"

"It's Dr. Stratton," he said. "I want to stay with him." "I'm sorry," she said. "You'll have to wait here. You don't have jurisdiction at his hospital."

He didn't answer her. He couldn't. She was right and he knew it. He walked into the waiting room and turned his back to her.

Only then did he realize the mistake he'd made. Let his son's condition terrify him, and he relied on his own wisdom instead of his new found faith. *Oh Father*, he thought. *I should be praying, shouldn't I?*

Even so, this was the hardest thing he'd had to do in his life, on of the worst things, standing in this waiting room, relying on other to take care of his son. But, just then, he jammed his hands in his pockets, found his Blackberry, and knew he was wrong. *This* was the hardest thing. He had to phone Jennie.

Jennie Stratton flipped her long mane of blond hair over her shoulder. "So what have we got on Johnson?" She sat atop the stool, her elbow resting on the lighted drawing table, sketching pen in hand, looking down at all of them with a wry grin on her face.

"We've got the fiasco with his neighbor's poodles at his campaign picnic," somebody volunteered. "We've got his granddaughter arrested for shoplifting earrings from K mart. And we've got the fact that he told the press it was none of their business when Taylor asked him if he'd ever been treated for alcoholism."

"Has he been treated for alcoholism?" Jennie asked, toying with the idea.

"No. But he still didn't think it was any of our business to ask the question."

This was a dirt-digging session, just like every other, just like every Tuesday night in the press room at the *Dallas Times-Sentinel*. Jennie Stratton was the paper's most infamous political cartoonist. This week the paper would poke fun at three of Texas's most colorful gubernatorial candidates. Jennie plopped both elbows on the drawing table and examined her sketches.

"We'll go with the campaign picnic and the poodles." "Good choice," someone agreed.

Her cell phone sprang to life on the light table. It almost vibrated itself off the edge. She grabbed it quickly so it wouldn't interrupt the meeting. Why would Michael be calling?

"Hey."

Cody must have forgotten something. He always did. It was so hard for him, living in two houses, two homes, with divorced parents. "What is it? I know it can't be his sneakers. They're in the suitcase underneath his underwear."

"I'm at the hospital," he told her. "I think maybe you should come."

She forgot the editorial staff seated around her. "Michael, what's wrong?"

"Cody's sick. Very sick, Jen. They're running tests." "What do you think it is?"

"They don't know yet. And I could be wrong."

"Michael?"

He didn't want to say until he was sure. But he knew he owed her this much.

"I suspect meningitis."

For a moment, she didn't speak. Then, "But, Michael, that's something awful, isn't it?"

He didn't mince words. "Yes."

Here came the blame, the same as it had been in their marriage. The suspicion. The hint that he could have done better.

"Has he been feeling badly before today? Has he been complaining about anything you could have treated him for?" "I would have caught it. I would have seen something, I promise you."

"But he was at your house when it happened."

"He could have been at yours."

"I'm on my way," she said. "Where are you?"

He gave her directions.

"Is there anything you need? Or anything I can bring from Cody's room to make him feel better? Maybe Mason?"

"I don't need anything," he told her. Then, "Bring Mason. Maybe if he has Mason."

"I will." She snapped the phone shut turned to her colleagues. "My son is sick. I have to leave."

Then she was out the door and driving like a NASCAR driver toward her house. She ran inside and grabbed a handful of things from Cody's room. Then, for one moment, she stood still, trying to get a grip on reality,

When he'd left yesterday morning, he'd been fine.

Cody had two fully furnished rooms, one at each of their houses, so he didn't have to lug things back and forth when he changed homes every week. He had a set of clothes at each house

and a group of his favorite stuffed animals and a Playstation and Legos and almost identical desks where he could do his homework.

Even so, he sometimes forgot important things at one house or the other, his vocabulary workbook or his math problems or his favorite sneakers, and Jennie would drive over and pick them up, or Michael would do likewise. It made Jennie angry sometimes, even while she scolded Cody for being forgetful, thinking of an eight year-old child living his life being shuffled between two places, between two people who loved him but not each other.

By the time she arrived at the hospital and found Michael, the doctors in ER had done the lab work. Michael took her hand. "I was right, Jen. They've diagnosed meningitis."

His ex-wife stood clutching Mason, the big corduroy brown bunny with a turquoise jacket and neon pink buttons Cody always slept with at her house, hanging on to him as if she were holding on to a lifeline, for herself and for her son.

"Jen. I'm sorry." Michael took her in his arms and hugged her against him. She looked so small and desolate and so much like Cody, with her long blond hair and bangs and her huge, dark frightened eyes. "They're pouring antibiotics into him through an IV."

She was clutching at him, too, with Mason the bunny between them. "Wasn't there something you could have done?"

She's always asking me that, Lord.

Michael shook his head.

"Can I see him?"

He's in ICU. We get ten minutes every two hours."

"I want him to know Mason's here."

"I want him to know you're here," Michael said.

"Tell me about spinal meningitis," she said, pulling away.

So he did, using a mixture of layman's and doctor's terms, to help her understand it, to do his best to soften the blow. But the details were gruesome. He spoke to Jennie the same way he would inform the mother of any patient who came to him. But Jennie had been his wife once.

He could list a page full of reasons their marriage had broken up. His hours as an intern at Parkland Hospital. The incredible debt he'd wracked up completing med school. Jennie's constant trips to the state capitol to search for material for her work. Her low journalist's pay and their arguments about money.

Together, they'd decided to end their marriage four years ago. Neither of them could live a life based on blame. And now, the only thing they shared was Cody.

"Oh, Michael." He could tell she was fighting tears. It seemed a lifetime since he had seen her cry. He didn't think she had even wept during the divorce. Every time he'd seen her in the lawyer's office, her expression had been firm and unyielding, etched as hard as stone. He cleared his throat before he said, "This'll be rough, Jen." His voice sounded to him like it was coming out of someone else's throat. "Possible blindness. Possible brain damage. We have to wait to see him through it and then count the losses." She sat down hard in the waiting-room chair. "And, if we're lucky, the losses won't include his life."

Just then, the nurse appeared in the doorway. "Are you Cody's mother?"

"Yes."

"You can see him. He's been asking for you."

That was how they spent the next few hours, the two of them taking turns visiting Cody for ten minutes each time a nurse would let them in. It was 3:00 a.m. when Michael went in and Cody clutched his arm. "I'm here, son," Michael whispered over and over again. "I'll always be here for you. Remember that."

"I know, Dad," the little boy whispered. He looked so pale and so small in the starched white bed. Michael felt as if his heart would break, just watching his son, with his eyes, so wide, so innocent, trusting him. Michael's helplessness engulfed him, swallowed him, drowned him. He could do nothing except wait while the deadly bacteria assaulted his son. Oh Father, he whispered after Cody had slipped back into unconsciousness. He sank into the chair beside his son's bed and raked both hands through his hair, buried his face in his palms. Help me to trust you the way my son trusts me.

Outside, traffic roared past on the highway.

Please, God. I may not have the right to ask for anything. But Cody's so young_ he's got his whole life ahead of him.

The monitor beside Cody's bed kept up its steady pace, the peaks and troughs measuring his vital signs.

When he returned to the waiting area, he found Jen waiting for him, sitting in the center of the couch, the tears sparkling like jewels in her eyes.

He touched her arm. "You're exhausted," he told her. "You should sleep."

"I couldn't sleep." She raised her head. Then she shifted on the edge of the sofa, one delicate hand planted on each knee, looking at him. Even though they kept up the facade of friendship for Cody's sake, he knew she was always uncomfortable with him.

"You should try." There were plenty of places to stretch out and rest. But Michael knew Jen well, knew how keyed-up and frantic she could get. "I think you should lie down," he commanded in the same voice he always used. "You're going to need your strength for tomorrow."

At that moment it didn't matter to Michael that they had once caused each other pain...didn't matter that they had loved a lifetime ago and that now it was over. What mattered was that she was woven into the fabric of his life tonight...Jennie...the mother of his son, the son who might not live through the next hours.

During the divorce, they had done everything they knew to make it easier for Cody. But there was nothing they could do to ease what he was facing now.