

LAST CALL

BRADLEY BOOTH



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The dawn had come once again, and with it, the annoying twitter of birds just outside the bedroom window. Jacob couldn't sleep; not that it mattered much. It was Monday of a Memorial Day weekend, so he didn't have to go to school, where he taught history at Oakville Prep, a local junior high. School would be out in a few days anyway.

He stretched his six-foot frame and smoothed down his dark hair as he got up to get a drink of water. The sun hadn't yet peeked its way over the eastern horizon, but the pink fingers of the new day were already pulling aside the curtain of night. Already the temperatures were climbing, and the humidity of early summer could be felt in the morning air.

Jacob's wife, Alexandra, had already gone to work, a nurse in the med-surg ward at a community hospital. At this unearthly hour, the petite brunette with dark, sassy eyes would already be prepping for surgery, but she loved her work—loved helping others.

Jacob set his cup down on the bathroom vanity and went to sit at his computer desk in one corner of the bedroom. If he couldn't sleep, he might as well check the news. He clicked on a news network in the web browser and began scrolling through the headlines. "Turkish Tensions Mount Near Syrian Border," screamed one heading. "Taiwan Talks With China Fail." "Iranian Nuclear Reactor Sabotaged." Jacob scrolled down a few screens, but the news wasn't getting better. "Russian Military Advances on Ukraine." "NATO Summit Faces Crisis." "Saudi Arabia Considers Oil Trade War With Russia."

He shook his head to clear the cobwebs of early morning, but he knew the time of day had nothing to do with the fog washing over his mind.

It was like this every day now—bad news and more bad news: rebel terrorists working to overthrow the West. Dictator despots conducting wars of genocide. Financial institutions on the verge of collapse, threatening the stability of economies on every continent.

Would it never end? Every day, the headlines were looming larger and larger, screaming for attention, sending their toxic reports to a world gone crazy with fear.

He scrolled down the screen for one last try, and then something caught his eye: "The United Nations has proposed a referendum on a new one-world government with headquarters in Europe. The proposed measure has come in the wake of rising

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concerns that Europe will not be able to bridge the gaps in its talks with the Kremlin.”

That was an eye-ful. Talk of such a thing had been tried before. Devising a central government hub that could deal with world chaos was nothing new. The League of Nations. The United Nations. Even the European Union had taken a stab at it. All had failed to reach their objective of bringing world peace. One world government sounded like a utopian ideal, but Jacob guessed it was doomed to fail. With politicians in charge, how could it possibly succeed?

Jacob finally turned off the computer. What was the use of reading any further? Trouble everywhere, and no one had any answers. It was as if the nations were heading toward an abysmal catastrophe of some kind. Was the whole world oblivious to the fact? Were governments everywhere powerless to stop it, tuning out the mounting rush of pressure building across the globe?

Or was it just him? He didn't know anymore. Most people Jacob knew hadn't a clue about what was coming, and he felt like he was being swept along with the juggernaut of bad news building to a head-pounding crescendo.

He glanced at a small bookshelf beside his bed, his blue eyes settling on a Bible on the shelf, collecting dust, and he regretted that. Time seemed to be slipping away like the shadows of dawn and, with it, his sense of a need for God. There had been a time he lived in that Bible. Every day, in fact, like the air he breathed, the Bible had been his spark for life.

Somehow, he had let the things of the world creep in untended. Much like the thorns and thistles in Alexandra's backyard flower garden, he had let work take center stage in his life. It was intrusive at first, then demanding, and finally overwhelming. If he wasn't careful, his work as a history teacher never stopped from early morning until late at night: lesson plans, grading papers, writing notes to parents, posting grade reports on the school web, reviewing the latest videos prescribed by the curriculum coordinator. And, of course, there was the Assemblies Committee he chaired, the parent-teacher conferences he must conduct, peer assessments, and after-school sports games he was supposed to attend.

For Jacob Moore, it seemed there was no time now for leisure: No time for real exercise. No time to bond with Alexandra. They were newlyweds of only two years, but that was enough already to know they weren't ready for kids. They had no time for kids—at least not yet. How could they afford it? They owned a house, had leases on two new cars, and of course, their college loans. How could they squeeze kids in with all this debt, to say nothing of their packed schedule?

But Jacob knew this rat race had to end somehow. Life was a madhouse for sure. It seemed ludicrous that it could be this way now that they had their degrees. He had been busy in college with all the pressures of studies and a part-time job and Alexandra, of course, but life had been different then. Simpler.

There had been no time for sports or trips or hobbies, for sure, but compared to the blur they were now living, college days in retrospect had been good to Alexandra

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and him. After all, it had afforded them the time and opportunity to fall in love.

And they had taken the time to be spiritual in those days. Every morning, they had spent a short fifteen minutes reading a devotional over their breakfast of toast and a banana, or whatever else they had time to eat. They had gone to church every Sunday too. And that had been enough in their crowded lives, or so it seemed.

But now things were different—very different. Nothing was simple anymore. Nothing was uncomplicated. Jacob needed answers. He must find his way to God out of the spiritual bog he was in. He had no choice, really. There truly was nowhere else to turn. With the headlines screaming at him here at the crack of dawn, it seemed the logical thing to do—the only thing to do.

And where was God in all the turmoil of the news? Did the Lord of the universe see what Jacob couldn't deny? That the world was coming apart? That every government under heaven seemed irretrievably involved in the pursuit of greed and money and outright anarchy? Did God care that the power grabbers of the world were jockeying for a bigger piece of the political pie? Politicians and religious tycoons appeared to be one and the same: carrying out their heartless games of war and destruction, forming alliances when it served their purposes in the cartels of drugs and slave trade, and turning on each other like cannibals when they no longer had a use for each another.

Did any of it matter to God? Did He have a stake in any of this, really? Certainly, with the grand scope of the universe to tend, this speck of a world was a minor blip on His divine radar, wasn't it?

For all that Jacob wasn't sure of, one thing was becoming increasingly clear in his mind: he needed God. He needed those morning moments in his Bible. He couldn't deny the fact any longer. He needed to get back on the straight and narrow pathway to heaven. There was no time to waste. He could not afford to be too busy. If that wasn't the strangest of oxymorons, he didn't know what was.

There was no time to be dabbling with doubt, no time to be wondering what would come next. Jacob knew what was coming next and had known for years. It was all in his Bible.

He went to the bookshelf and took down the black leather-bound book. It was time to stop his game of cat and mouse with God. It was time to put his spiritual house in order. He laid the Bible on the rumpled sheets of his unmade bed and knelt by its side.

“Lord, I want to make a new start,” he prayed. “I want to put first things first, and today You are first. Help me to get a hold of my life and put the really important things back into perspective.”

2

Jacob rubbed the sleep from his eyes and opened his Bible as the sun broke over the horizon. He could almost feel its colors as it cast its warmth through the window across his bed. Like every other day in time, the sun had come to bring the morning. And Jacob had to wonder how many more days like this could he expect in a world that was more in trouble with each rising sun.

“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come,” Jacob read from 2 Timothy 3:1. The verse gave him a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach like nothing he could remember in his life.

The signs of the times are everywhere, Jacob thought. The earth is growing old like a garment, ready to tear apart with all the stuff that is happening. Is the end of the world in sight like all the sci-fi movies say? Jacob felt his heartbeat quicken. Will everything go up in a bang with a nuclear holocaust, or will it go out with a whimper from some pandemic disease?

Jacob’s mind went to the topic he understood best: American history. Things in the good old USA had changed forever. He was sure of it. No more expectations of peace in the America he knew. No more spirit of solidarity in the land he loved. No more panoramic visions of waving wheat fields that made one wax patriotic. He could feel it in his bones. Everywhere, people were against each other for reasons they could not explain.

When Alexandra came home in the late afternoon, Jacob had supper waiting for her; nothing elaborate, but things he knew how to make, and well—spaghetti, garlic bread, a salad, and a cherry pie he had brought home from the bakery at the nearby supermarket.

They chatted about her day, the usual cases in surgery, the incorrigible coworkers, the new pair of shoes she had worn that needed to be broken in.

But that was as ordinary as their conversation could get because, after the meal, Alexandra turned on the local news network and got an earful. More news about the crises in Turkey and Iran laced the evening broadcast, along with the politics of aggression in China, the might of military muscle in Ukraine, and the downturn in Saudi-Russian trade talks.

“What’s the point of watching this stuff?” Alexandra fussed. “It’s all doom and gloom anymore. How could it be anything but that with our world going to pieces

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around us?” She sighed and turned down the volume.

“It’s depressing,” Jacob agreed, “but it does tell us what we need to know.”

“What’s that?” Alexandra’s thin eyebrows drew up.

Jacob glanced at his wife and then at the screen again. “It opens a window in time to let us see the future.”

“You’re talking about prophecy?” she said, though it was more a statement of fact than a question.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” Jacob nodded. “I was reading the news online this morning when I got up. All day it rumbled around in my head, and I couldn’t get it out of my mind. It made me think about that seminar we attended last year with all those prophecies. Remember the dream that ancient king had about a big metal man?” Jacob squinted at Alexandra.

“I remember.” She smiled now at the recollection. “The speaker told stories about Daniel and all those crazy-looking beasts he had in his dreams.”

Jacob frowned. “How did we let ourselves lose interest in all that stuff? It was pretty fascinating, as I recall.”

Alexandra’s eyes lit up. “It was. We used to come home at night and want to check all those Bible verses the speaker gave us. Remember?”

“I do. We stayed up late a bunch of nights, but it got to be too much with your early morning hours at the hospital.”

“And then we just seemed to forget about it all when the seminar ended.” Her eyes stared at the flat screen as though she didn’t even see the evening news. “My father was glad about that. He never was in favor of my going to a church that fusses too much about prophecy.”

“Yeah, but it was more the rat race we call life that put a stop to it,” Jacob added. “The people at the seminar were nice enough. We just got too busy. You took on those extra shifts at the hospital and then started classes toward becoming a nurse practitioner. I had to get my grades in for mid-term reports and research where I wanted to get my master’s degree. We were trying to get the house and lawn ready for winter. There were lots of things going on.”

“And then the holidays came.” Alexandra sighed again. “Thanksgiving. Christmas.”

Jacob rolled his eyes. “New Year’s.”

“Like any of that stuff really mattered.” Alexandra gave her husband a wistful look. “You know, we should look up that church where they had those seminars. The meetings were so appealing and made such sense. Maybe they’re going to have some more seminars on prophecy.”

“Let’s do it.” Jacob went to sit by his wife on the couch. “What can be more important than prophecy, especially at a time like this?” He smiled at her, so grateful that she was as interested in the spiritual things of life as he was. *Thank you, Lord*, he prayed as he studied the face of this woman he loved.

Something the news commentator said caught Jacob’s attention, and he suddenly

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turned up the volume with the remote.

“The state supreme court will hear a case tomorrow being brought by the American Center for Law and Justice. The case involves two basketball teams from Christian schools that played a championship game in a public arena. The teams were prohibited from using public address microphones to offer a student-led prayer before the game began because the arena was a community facility. The state athletic association claimed the prayer might be considered an endorsement of religion because students would be praying on government property. The case promises to fuel the fires of civil liberties organizations everywhere since issues like this one have been coming to court more and more frequently in the past few months. The question on everyone’s mind: Will the case become a referendum on freedom of speech, or separation of church and state?”

“Can you imagine that?” Jacob was indignant. “A bunch of kids want to pray, and the authorities won’t let them! That’s incredible! It’s just one more example of how messed up our society is! Don’t these people get it? Letting kids pray is exactly what our country needs. It keeps them out of trouble and points them in the right direction. Besides! What kid is going to want to commit a crime after he has prayed for his team and school?”

Alexandra had the next day off, and she called the local church where they had attended the prophecy seminar the previous year. She reached the secretary but was disappointed to hear no seminars were scheduled at the church in the near future.

“But we’re having a presentation this coming Saturday on the topic of prophecy,” the secretary told Alexandra. “The pastor’s topic is on the signs of the times.”

“I want to go,” Alexandra told Jacob that night when he came home. “I’m going to see if I can get the day off and take a shift for one of the other nurses next week, maybe a night shift.”

Jacob made a face.

“I know, I know! I don’t like working nights.” Alexandra shrugged. “But I think it’s worth it if we can hear the pastor speak about prophecy.”

She did get the time off, and they did go to hear the pastor speak. His message for the morning was taken from Matthew chapter 24, and they remembered hearing almost everything he said at the prophecy seminar a year earlier. But now, it made even more sense with the news of all that was happening in the world.

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Jacob and Alexandra had a wonderful time. They liked what they heard so much; in fact, they decided to return the following week and the week after that. The pastor didn't always speak on prophecy, but what he did speak about gave them peace of mind as they grappled with everything that was going wrong around them.

That the services were held on Saturday wasn't a surprise, partly because it wasn't a new idea to them and partly because a rest day at the end of the week made sense. The previous year, they had heard the seminar speaker address the topic of how church leaders historically had changed seventh-day worship to first-day worship. At the time, they hadn't bought into the concept of the good or bad of why that might have happened, but now they could see that seventh-day worship was very biblical. To them, biblical support for the idea was the most important thing of all.

It wasn't long before they were regular attendees, and though Alexandra couldn't always make it, she tried to get Saturday mornings off as often as possible. When she couldn't go, Jacob went by himself and then gave her a full report or brought her a link to the sermon online.

The church was different from any they had ever belonged to. Its doctrines and philosophy were based on the Bible. Its ministries were driven by compassion and designed to help the community as much as the church itself. Every meeting and activity seemed to point people to Jesus and a better way of life.

From the first, Alexandra and Jacob had loved the seminars on prophecy and the worship services geared for families. Now they began to really enjoy classes that let them join in discussions of the Bible. They learned new ways to cook old foods, and which foods weren't good for them. They joined in prison ministries, prayer vigils, and youth outings on Saturday afternoons.

The church gave a new sense of identity to the Moores. Before, they had seen themselves as struggling young professionals trying to get established financially. Now they considered themselves serious Christians searching for solutions in a world with no answers. And the Bible was their only way to do that, it seemed. They were more certain of that than they had ever been about anything in their lives.

Alexandra's father protested, as she knew he would. "Why do you have to join up with a church that's so quirky?" he demanded when they went out to lunch one day. "Your church belongs to a cult!"

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“The church isn’t quirky,” she insisted between bites of her veggie sub. “And I don’t think it’s fair to call it a cult just because you don’t agree with what it teaches.”

“They go to church on Saturday,” he griped, “and that’s weird.”

“Is that such a crime?” Alexandra asked. “The Bible actually says that’s what we’re supposed to do.”

“Nobody else does,” he kept at it.

“Jesus did.”

“Well, Jesus was a Jew.”

“Are you saying Jesus was only for the Jews? Because if you are, then we’re all in trouble. In that case, none of us can be saved, and that can’t be right.” Her eyes flashed. “The Bible says there’s no other One by which we can be saved.”

“You’re too stubborn for your own good,” her father growled, his face turning a deep red as his blood pressure went up. “Let’s just drop it. You’re ruining my lunch.”

They did stop talking, but Alexandra knew this wouldn’t be the last discussion on the matter. With her father, it never would be.

And Jacob’s mother? She said almost nothing about Jacob’s attending a Saturday-keeping church. Not at first, anyway. “You’re a big boy,” she told him. “At least you’re going to church more often, now. Me? I’m too old to be changing churches.”

Jacob’s father had never been a part of Jacob’s life. He had divorced Jacob’s mother and moved away to California when Jacob was five, leaving him and his mother to fend for themselves.

School was out for the summer now, and that gave Jacob a bit more time, though he was now knee-deep in graduate classes. He arranged and rearranged his schedule to fit in all the things that needed to be done, like attending classes at the university, completing course assignments, caring for the lawn, making meals, and doing laundry when Alexandra was working long shifts. She was taking two classes toward her practitioner’s degree now, and that was grueling. Compared to her clinicals and research papers, his class assignments were a piece of cake.

And as if these personal challenges weren’t enough for Jacob and Alexandra, problems in the local community were mounting too. The economy took a hit, causing rises in unemployment and mortgage foreclosures. Homeless shelters couldn’t keep up with the increased numbers of people living on the streets, and dozens were turned away every night. Not surprisingly, financial crimes like credit card fraud and identity theft were becoming more commonplace.

Violent crimes were also increasing in the city due to the number of gangs now running the streets. The police department had to hire more officers to respond to increasing crimes of robbery, arson, and rape. When a deranged shooter invaded a local church, killing seven people and injuring forty-three, Jacob and Alexandra began to feel very unsafe.

And the world at large had problems on a wider scale. Daily, the news networks told of famine in Sudan, national drug trafficking in Somalia, and the slave trade in

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Pakistan. Commuter trains were being bombed in Madrid. In Rio De Janeiro, violent protesters were destroying shops in the Copacabana shopping district because the owners refused to close on Sunday.

Sunday. Of all the related stories on the evening news, that one seemed strangely odd, and Jacob and Alexandra found themselves wondering what it was all about.

The days of summer passed one by one, in jumbled succession, with no relief in sight. Temperatures soared past one hundred degrees, and tempers did too. The friction of such chaos at home and abroad was taking its toll in the community and on society as a whole. People would pass one another in the supermarkets or parks or their workplaces with the anxiety of uncertainty written on their faces.

The experts were saying the nation was just going through the necessary growing pains of culture, diversity, and progress. That was the price for civilization, they said.

Others said America was paying the price for pushing God out of the nation. Kids weren't being allowed to pray on school premises. Politicians were afraid to mention God's name. Any case brought to the courts by a church or Christian organization was being discriminated against or settled quickly and quietly out of court.

On the Fourth of July weekend, Jacob and Alexandra spent a few well-deserved days at their family cabin in the big woods of the Adirondack Mountains. It was peaceful to be away from the bustle of city life, away from the headache of studies and schedules. To the young couple, nothing was more relaxing than being out in the high meadows of the warm mountain valleys where bees and butterflies flitted from flower to flower.

They did miss the church group and their studies in the Bible, but they had brought a Bible along, so they spent time reading some choice passages they had come to love. Psalm 91 was Alexandra's favorite, and Revelation 14 was Jacob's.

Home again after a good rest, it was back to the grind, and the young couple felt it. Things were decidedly different now in the tone and quality of city life. Maybe it had always been that way, but they both guessed that time alone with God in the mountains had opened their eyes to the realities of the life they now lived.

And the media buzz was the worst thing of all! Everywhere they went, they were inundated by it: televisions, radio, internet, phones, advertising on electronic billboards, and digital signs. It was in the malls they shopped, the offices where they did business, the grocery stores, and even in the hospital where Alexandra worked.

Then too, it was accentuated by the politics of marketing and government pressing in on their lives from every angle. The sounds and sights of its chatter filled the city's streets and skylines, drowning out the sense of anything personal.

But the tensions building around them were more than just a notion created by politics and the media—they were real. As Jacob and Alexandra lay awake on hot summer nights, listening to screaming police car sirens, the couple was certain things couldn't go on much longer like this. And they were right, but the change didn't come in the way they expected.