

THE LAST SUNDAY IN SEPTEMBER

A Short Story



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THE LAST SUNDAY IN SEPTEMBER

HOLBIE

The embossed gold words shimmered in the sunlight. His hands covered some of the letters as he rested his arms on the desktop with his fingers clasped in the grip of intercession.

“Father, please help me! I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say today! You know I’ve been studying all week. I’ve tried to be faithful, Lord. Please fill me and give me your words.”

Pastor Jotham Carter sat in the unoccupied bedroom that served as his home study. The light of sunrise slanted through the blinds as he closed his eyes and waited.

“I want to finish well, Lord. You called me to this place. I want you to be pleased as I finish this race, but I don’t know what to do! I need you.

“To be honest, I feel abandoned. Not by you, of course. I know you’ll never leave me or forsake me. But if I’m completely honest, I feel so lost and alone. What am I going to do? Not just today, but tomorrow? Where do I go from here? What do I do, Lord? What about my family?”

He ran his thumb across the edges of the pages and pulled the Bible open near its center. The book of Psalms. Many of the entries there had been written by men in similar situations. Despondent, confused, angry men who felt like failures.

You make us a reproach to our neighbors.

A scorn and a derision to those all around us. You make us a byword among the nations,

A shaking of the head among the peoples . . . All this has come upon us,

But we have not forgotten you,

Nor have we dealt falsely with your covenant.

He could hear the shower running in the bathroom across the hall. Someone was awake and getting ready to go to church—probably Charity, the youngest of his four children. She'd inherited her father's habit of waking early. The others would soon follow after.

"But what if we *have* dealt falsely with your covenant, Father? What if we've missed the boat completely? We've tried—I've tried—to remain faithful to you. To proclaim your truth. To fight your battle, Lord! Have we gotten it wrong? I'm not even sure what to think anymore!"

He flipped a fingerful of pages across and left the rest of the Psalms behind, hoping to find the New Testament more inspiring.

"With all due respect, Lord, I need something here. I'm on in three hours. Please! Please give me a word for these people. Please, God!"

His cell phone lit up on the desk and blared. He didn't recognize the phone number on the screen, but answered it anyway.

"Hello?"

“Hi, Pastor Carter. It’s Vidya from the *McCullom Review*.”
Jotham grimaced. “Oh. Yes! Of course.”

“Is this a bad time?” She’d obviously sensed the dismay in his voice, though he’d tried to cover it.

“No! Not at all. This is the time we agreed on. Sorry if I sounded surprised to hear from you. I guess I lost track of time.”

“I appreciate your willingness to talk on such a busy day—and a difficult one.”

He tried to sound upbeat. “Sure thing. Thank you for being flexible with your timing. I’m sorry we had to cut it short yesterday. Church member emergencies have a way of coming around at the worst possible time.”

“I can imagine.” He was impressed with the sincerity in her voice. It wasn’t what he’d been expecting to hear from a journalist. “Does that sort of thing happen often?”

“It comes in spurts. I might go for months without a peep from my congregation and then get three or four calls in a week. It’s unpredictable. Tragedy knows no timetable.”

“Yes. I’ve found that to be true as well. If it’s all right with you, I’ll start recording, and we can continue the interview.”

“Sure. That’s fine.”

He heard a few clicks and bumps on her end of the call.

“OK, then. I believe we left off with some questions about the downward trend in attendance your church has been experiencing for the last few years.” Her tone was different now. She sounded stern and official.

“Yes. Our numbers have been steadily decreasing for the last five years at least.”

“So what’s the real problem?”

“Problem?”

“Yes. What problem is causing your attendance to shrink?”

She'd used the same direct approach yesterday. He disliked it just as much on this call as he had before.

"Who says our low attendance is the result of a problem?"

"I think it's just a logical conclusion, Pastor. I've been researching America's decreasing church attendance for the last seven months. I've talked to dozens of pastors and leaders of churches that have already closed, are closing like yours, or will likely close within the year. In most cases, there is an underlying problem or combination of problems driving people away."

"Who says the problem is ours?" He stared at his Bible lying open on the desk.

"I don't understand."

"Your question assumes that our low attendance and low membership are being caused by something within our church. What if that's not true? What if the problem is somewhere else?"

"Is that what you believe?"

"Look, I won't deny that Evergreen and all the other Eastern Baptist churches have our issues. Of course we do." He tried not to sound as defensive as he felt. "But Jesus taught His followers to expect the world to reject our message. He taught us to expect persecution."

"Do you feel your church has been persecuted?"

"I wouldn't put it that way exactly. I was just quoting what the Bible says. My point is that our culture's declining interest in doctrinally sound churches like mine shouldn't be surprising to anyone who knows what the Bible teaches. The world is getting worse and worse every day. Churches like Evergreen are bound to find themselves increasingly marginalized until the Lord returns."

She didn't respond right away. Jotham assumed she was consulting her notes.

"I'm interested in hearing how you and your family have

been affected personally over the last few months. What kind of impact does it have to find out you're the pastor of a failed—forgive me, I don't know how else to put it—a failed church?"

She'd softened the edge in her voice again. When the journalist had first emailed him several weeks before, Jotham had

looked up her profile on the *McCollum Review's* website. In her picture, she looked young and ambitious.

"This is the most difficult thing I've ever faced. I've been a part of EBU churches for my entire life. Literally! I attended my first service when I was three weeks old. I can remember when the EBU had over three hundred thriving churches around the country."

"You mentioned yesterday that the church you attended as a child is no longer around."

"Correct. It closed three years ago during the first wave of downsizing in the EBU."

"Is that the church where you preached your first sermon?" "Yes. I was fourteen years old."

"How many times have you preached since then?"

"Oh, goodness! I don't have the foggiest idea."

"Can you make an educated guess?"

He switched the phone from one ear to the other. "I've been preaching three times a week since I was in my early twenties. That's nearly twenty-five years. I preached often as a teen and a college student. I'm trying to do the math quickly in my head here . . . four thousand times maybe?"

"Have you done anything different to prepare for today's sermon?"

"Not really. I've been studying and praying just like I always do."

"Praying for what exactly?"

Various words came to mind. *Hope. Inspiration. Courage.*

Something helpful to say? They all seemed applicable, but insufficient to describe how he felt. He settled on the last one that came to him.

“Strength.”

Another pause. More clicks and bumps. “Well, Pastor, I think I’ll cut it off there for now. I know you need to get going soon. Are you still open to a follow-up interview in a month or so? I’d love to track your story a little further down the road.”

“Sure. That’s fine.”

“Thanks again for talking with me. I hope the service today goes well.”

“Me too. Thanks.”

He set the phone facedown on the desk and closed his Bible. Susannah knocked on the bedroom door and pushed it open just enough to lean her head into the room.

“Good morning, darling. How’d you sleep?” Her voice was soothing. Though she wasn’t as early a riser as Jotham, she woke to the world cheerful and kind nearly every day.

“Not great. I tossed and turned all night. You?”

“Oddly enough, I slept very well.”

He leaned back in his chair and shrugged.

“At least one of us is well rested. Maybe you should preach instead of me!”

She pushed the door open wider and leaned against the doorframe with her hands behind her back.

“Still having trouble?”

He nodded.

“I can’t seem to figure out how to approach it. A preacher is supposed to challenge his audience. To lift their eyes to the Lord. How am I supposed to do that when there’s such a cloud of failure and defeat hanging over our church?”

“Failure? How can you say that?”

“What else can I say, Suze? What other way is there to describe it?”

She stepped forward slightly and crossed her arms in front of her.

“I understand how difficult this is for you. It’s difficult for me too, but it hurts my heart when I hear you like this. It sounds like you’re giving up. You’re not, are you?”

He shook his head.

“No. I wouldn’t do that. You know I wouldn’t.”

She came around the edge of the desk to rub the back of his neck.

“Don’t forget who we serve.”

“I know. ‘I believe, but help Thou my unbelief.’ Right?”
“Can we pray together?”

“Sure thing. You wanna go first?”



TEN O’CLOCK WAS APPROACHING. JOTHAM SAT IN HIS OTHER office—the one in the basement of the church building—and read through the notes he’d carved out over the last hour.

“I feel like I’m eulogizing an entire religion. Or maybe it’s more like a political concession speech. ‘I’m very proud of the efforts we’ve made, but in the end it just wasn’t enough to put us over the top. I’ve made the heart-wrenching decision to suspend my campaign.’ Only I didn’t make the decision, did I? The home office did. Or God. Or both?”

He heard the piano playing in the sanctuary above him. Lily had begun the prelude.

“On the dot. Just like she’s done for the last 30 years.”

He clicked the power button on his tablet and carried it along with his Bible to the lobby upstairs.

Ever since the home office had determined the date of their final service, Jotham had wondered about attendance.

Their numbers had been pitiful for years, and he didn't much expect today to be different. He reached the top of the stairs and found the lobby empty except for Dan and Phil standing near the archway that led into the sanctuary. Bulletins in hand. Usher pins fastened to their lapels.

He pushed on the thick wooden door at the church entrance and peeked outside. Though he couldn't see the parking lot from that vantage point, he saw that the street-side spots were mostly taken.

"Excuse me? Are you the pastor?"

He turned to see a middle-aged man in a Phillies baseball cap and stonewashed jean jacket smiling at him.

"Yes, sir. Jotham Carter. Glad to have you with us today! Is this your first time here?"

They shook hands as the man answered. "Yes, and from what I hear it will be my last, huh?" He chuckled, seemingly impressed with his own sense of humor.

"Well, we sure are happy to have you visiting with—"

"Is the Bible for sale?"

"Excuse me?"

The man pointed toward a glass display case centered along one wall of the lobby, in between the restroom doors.

"The Bible in the case? Eighteen forty-seven edition, right? King James Version?"

"Yes, that's correct." "Great! Can I buy it?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure I understand."

"I read online that all the EBU churches are closing and liquidating their assets. That's why I'm here. I run an online antique shop, and I'm looking for stuff. Hoping to get a few ringers!" He rubbed his hands together hungrily.

"Ringers?"

"Yeah. You know? Money-makers? That Bible over there could fetch at least four hundred bucks. Maybe five or six!"

"You're kidding! That much?"

As they walked to the display case, the man kept pointing at the massive copy of the Scriptures inside. “Definitely. Lemme tell ya, Rev, the market for this kind of stuff is really on the upswing. I’ve seen it trending upward for the last five to seven years, at least.” Standing directly in front of the case, the two men looked down at the 1847 KJV.

“Why is that, you think?”

The man shrugged. “Not sure exactly. I chalk a lot of it up to nostalgia.”

“Nostalgia? How so?”

“I don’t mean to be unkind, Rev, but your church here is a bit like a unicorn. Actually, it’s more like a white rhino.”

“Let me guess. Extinct?”

The man pointed at Jotham with a wink. “Almost extinct. Most churches these days do things a lot differently. At least that’s what I hear. Most Sunday mornings, I’m more of a ‘Church of the Unmade Bed’ kind of guy, you know? Pastor Sheets? You heard of him?” He laughed at his own joke once again. “Anyway, I’ve found that I can unload stuff I pick up from church sales pretty fast. Nice profit, too!”

“Hmm. That’s interesting. Almost feels symbolic.”

“I don’t know about that, but I do know I’d love to get my hands on this number right here.” He drummed his fingers on the glass above the Bible.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t sell it to you.”

The man’s smile dropped instantly. “What d’ya mean? The website said all the EBU churches were selling their stuff.”

“Yes, but I don’t think that includes this Bible. That announcement you saw on the Web was referring to things like the hymnals and the offering plates.”

“What the . . .” The man shot a quick look toward the sanctuary and then continued in a forceful whisper. “What the heck am I supposed to do with hymnals? I can’t get no money for those.”

“I’m pretty sure the EBU office created the sale to help other churches get supplies they might need.”

“What other churches? There ain’t no other churches!”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, wouldn’t you say?” The man shrugged. “Even if it’s not, I can’t sell you this Bible. It was given to this church shortly after the Civil War. It’s been housed in this building ever since.”

“But the building’s gonna be empty soon.” “Yes. That’s correct.”

“So what’s gonna happen to the Bible?”

“I’m not sure exactly. Listen, I’m really sorry I can’t help you, but it’s ten o’clock. The service is starting now, and I need to . . .” His voice trailed off as he looked past Dan and Phil into the sanctuary. Jotham had been in the habit of calculating crowd size for years, and he estimated that day’s total in an instant, surprising himself with the result.

Approximately three hundred people had shown up for the last service. Jotham stared at the sanctuary and tried to remember when he’d last seen a crowd that size.

He couldn’t recall.

The man smirked at Jotham as he walked past him toward the sanctuary. “Well then, Rev, I guess you better get up there and put on a church service. Nobody wants to be here all morning!” He plopped into the pew nearest the back and pulled out a smartphone.

Jotham walked quickly to the front of the sanctuary and took his spot behind the pulpit.

“Good morning! Welcome to Evergreen Baptist Church. It’s good to be in the Lord’s house today, isn’t it?”

Jotham paused for several amens of affirmation.

“As we all know, this is a special day—a sad day in many ways—but also a special day for our church. Evergreen Baptist has remained in this spot under different names and different pastors for over 150 years. That’s pretty remarkable

I'd say. We've stood our ground for quite some time, but now the moment has come for us to fight the battle elsewhere. God has used us as a church for great things, and I'm convinced He's getting ready to use us just as mightily even as we go our separate ways.

"So, let this be a day of rejoicing not only for what God *has* done but also for what He *will* do in the coming days, as He scatters our Evergreen family to go and do His work. Earl, please come now and lead us in our first hymn, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers!'"

As he stood at the back of the platform and sang the hymns, Jotham recalled his attempt the previous year to incorporate a "worship team" into the church services. After three painfully awkward weeks, he pulled the plug and told the congregation that they would be returning to a traditional approach to church music—even more traditional and conservative than before the worship team. At the time, he'd predicted to Susannah, "I bet we pick up an older couple or two when word gets out that we're doing only hymns with piano and organ."

Instead, three young families left within the month.

The ushers took up the offering. In the past, this part of the service would have caused Jotham anxiety. Today, he gave little thought to it. Everything the church received would be forwarded to the home office to cover remaining expenses, and the funds for his final paycheck had already been set aside.

After the congregation had sung three verses of "It Is Well with My Soul," Jotham approached the pulpit with his Bible tucked tightly to his chest. He set the Scriptures down and looked out across the rows of faces staring up at him.

"I'll admit that I've approached today's sermon with some fear and anxiety. To stand behind this sacred desk is always a

heavy burden of responsibility. I've felt the weight of it for most of my life.

"Today, however, feels heavier than all the others. It's difficult for me—and our regular members—to come to this moment. I don't mean to slight any of our guests by that statement. We are, of course, so glad to have you here with us today, but I want those of you that are part of our Evergreen family to listen especially well to this sermon.

"I can imagine what you must be thinking and feeling as you sit here this morning. This church—*our* church—is closing. The place you've come to worship and serve our great God, the place where you've raised your families and centered your life. It's going away for good! How can these things be?

"I can't pretend to have good answers to those questions. There's a part of me that feels defeated. Like we're surrendering ground to the enemy. It seems so discouraging. I've been dealing with those feelings for weeks now—ever since I heard from the home office that this Sunday would be our last."

Jotham walked to the side of the pulpit and leaned on it with one arm.

"But this morning I thought about that great man of God—Elijah. I was reminded about a time in his life when he felt discouraged and defeated. When he felt alone.

"In 1 Kings 19, Elijah finds himself in quite the predicament. Earlier in chapter 18, he'd secured a fantastic victory for the Lord when he defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. We've seen some days like that, haven't we? Some of you have been around long enough to remember the tent meeting in the summer of 1988. It was extraordinary! God's Spirit moved in a way unlike anything I've ever seen. Oh, how we long to see that kind of miracle again!

"But here in chapter 19, Elijah is facing a drastically different situation. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are out for

revenge, and it's not looking good for the prophet of the Lord. He's on the run, and can't seem to find anyone who's on his side. He wanders off into the wilderness alone, and . . . well, look at it for yourself in verse 4. Elijah was ready to give up. He said, 'It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life!'

"God fed Elijah, but the prophet's attitude didn't improve much. In verse 14 Elijah wails out to God, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts . . . I alone am left.'

"We here at Evergreen know that feeling, don't we? We look around and it feels like we're alone—the only ones left. Churches on every corner have already fallen away. We've come to our final Sunday, and we're tempted to ask God to put us out of our misery. To give up entirely!

"But I want you take special notice of verse 18. God said, 'I have reserved seven thousand.' That's seven thousand *servants of the most high God*. Seven thousand! We often refer to them as 'the Remnant.' They were God's reserves. Elijah didn't know who they were or where they were, but God said they were out there. They were doing the work of God in ways that old prophet couldn't quite grasp. Elijah needed to embrace the hope that God was still on the move."

Jotham moved toward the congregation, standing as close as he could to the front edge of the platform.

"We are grieving the loss of our beloved church today. Even if you're not a member of Evergreen, you can probably still identify with our sense of loss and discouragement. Perhaps you've lost something recently. A job. A relative. Maybe you've lost your sense of placement . . . of purpose.

"No matter what your circumstances may be or what particular discouragement you're facing this morning, I want you to

know something—*God is still out there! Working. Moving.* Like Elijah in this chapter, we want to see Him blow into town with a whirlwind or an earthquake, but it may be that He's working

in your life in much more subtle ways. As it says in verse 12—‘a still small voice.’ Do you believe that? Can you hear it?”

He paused. Most everyone was watching him intently. He stepped back behind the pulpit and swiped across the screen of his tablet to unlock his sermon notes.

“As I look at this passage, I see three important principles from the Scriptures that can help us recognize God’s voice in the wilderness around us . . .”

Twenty minutes and three alliterated points later, Jotham descended from the platform and stood at the head of the aisle, between the two sections of pews.

“At this time, I’d like to say—for the final time within these hallowed walls—the altar is open. If God’s Spirit has spoken to you today, I invite you to step out from your place, kneel on these steps, and seek God’s face. I’ll ask Lily to play a few verses of a song for us as God’s people pray.”

Jotham stood with his arms outstretched toward the crowd. He closed his eyes and swayed slightly to the music, praying silently.

“Father, I tried my best. Not sure it’s the greatest sermon I’ve ever given, but under the circumstances . . . Please take my words—*your* words—and use them for your glory. Please show me that—”

“Excuse me, Pastor.”

A tug on his suit jacket sleeve. He opened his eyes. A young woman—not much older than a teenager—stood in front of him. She’d completely shaved the hair from both sides of her head. The hair on top was neon blue and pulled back into a long, tight ponytail.

“Yes, ma’am. How can I help you?”

She cupped his hand inside both of hers and leaned forward to whisper in his ear. “I want to be baptized.”

“Baptized?”

“Yeah. You guys do that here, right?” “Yes, of course we do.”

She leaned closer, still holding his hand. Jotham picked up a thick mixture of odors—smoky, fruity, and sweaty—from her clothes and skin.

“Oh good!”

Jotham wanted to pull his hand out of her grip, but didn’t. “Have you been to Evergreen Baptist before?”

“No. Is that a problem?”

“Not necessarily. It’s just that—”

“I wasn’t planning to come here, but my boyfriend and I had a huge fight last week. He was being such a prick, and we started yelling. He walked out and hasn’t texted once. This morning I woke up and was real worried about him.

“I saw your church, and I thought, ‘Maybe God will help me find my boyfriend?’ I wasn’t even gonna stay that long, but then I heard you talking about how God is working even if we don’t see it. I just started thinking about how fu—oh sorry!—how . . . effed up my life is right now. I haven’t really talked to God or done much with Him for a long time, but . . . I dunno. Maybe it’s like you said! Maybe God is trying to speak to me and I just haven’t been paying attention, you know?”

She’d blazed through the entire narrative in less than a minute.

“I’m so glad you came to our church today, and I’m very happy you enjoyed the sermon.”

“I think God spoke to me, like you were saying.” “Yes. Here’s what I suggest—”

“Can you baptize me?”

Jotham looked past her at the rest of the congregation. Though most in the pews had their heads bowed dutifully, a few were squinting in his direction. He’d lost count of how

many verses of the song Lily had played through at that point.

“Are you a Christian?”

“I got saved when I was eight years old.”

“That’s wonderful. You didn’t get baptized back then?”

“No. Is that OK?”

“Well, you see, we usually ask folks to attend our new believer’s class before they’re baptized, but we’re not—”

She loosened her grip on his hand, and Jotham pulled away gently.

“A class? For baptism?”

“Not exactly.”

“What’s there to learn? You only have to hold your breath for a few seconds, right?”

“No, it’s not a class about baptism itself. It’s a class about doctrine.”

“Doctrine?”

“Yes. We want to be sure a person really understands—”
“So I can’t get baptized today?”

She stepped back from him. Jotham could still detect her strong scent. He glanced sideways to the piano where Lily still played, looking at him expectantly. Out in the pews, even more people were watching the goings-on at the front. The young woman had jammed her hands into the pockets of her jean shorts and was staring at him with confusion.

“Do you have a change of clothes?”

She shook her head.

“Wait here a moment, OK?”

Jotham twirled his finger in the air, signaling to Lily, before addressing the congregation.

“We’re going to extend the invitation for a few more verses. Perhaps this is God giving you an opportunity to meet with Him and listen to His voice. If God is speaking to you, please come forward.”

He walked along the front pew to the left aisle, where Susannah was sitting with their kids on the third row. She opened her eyes when he squeezed her shoulder.

“Do we have any baptismal robes left?”

She looked startled at the urgency of his tone.

“I don’t think so. We sold them, remember?”

“I know, but do we have any left? Any at all?”

“I don’t think so. Darling, what’s wrong?”

Jotham nodded his head toward the blue-haired girl at the front. “She wants to be baptized . . . today.”

“That’s wonderful!”

Jotham leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“I’m worried about her white shirt.”

Susannah looked again at the girl. “Hmm. Could be a problem.”

“She *really* wants this.” “Has she been saved?” Jotham nodded.

“Let me run downstairs real quick. Maybe I can find something!” She squeezed his hand as she breezed past him.

Lily cycled through several more verses of the song, but Jotham knew he couldn’t extend the invitation much longer. He conferred with Earl briefly before explaining the situation to everyone.

“As God would have it, we’re going to conclude our service today with a baptism. Earl is going to come lead us in a few songs, while we get ready. Earl?”

Susannah returned with a folded maroon cloth in hand, and Jotham ushered her and the young woman toward a door at the front of the sanctuary. Through the door were two dressing rooms and a small set of stairs that led down into the baptismal water.

Ten minutes later Jotham stood waist-deep in that water. He extended his arms, motioning for the young woman to emerge from the backstage area and join him in the baptistry.

She gripped the handrail and descended the steps. Ripples of water pulsed toward Jotham, and a few droplets arced over the top of his rubber waders and smacked against his white dress shirt with a frigid pop.

“I’d like to introduce a young woman who has come forward for baptism. Her name is . . . Nature.”

She was next to him in the water. She stood looking down at the maroon tablecloth wrapped around her like a sari. Jotham didn’t know exactly what his wife had said to her in the dressing room, but it didn’t appear the explanation had fully convinced Nature. She just stared and shivered.

“Nature, I apologize for the water temperature.” Jotham looked out to the congregation. “You might not be able to tell from the pews, but it’s *cold* in here! The heater takes several hours to warm up the water, and we didn’t get it turned on until just a few minutes ago.” He put his hand on Nature’s shaking shoulder. “I say we get this finished quickly so we can get out of here and warm up! Sound good?”

Several congregants laughed. Nature’s slight smile didn’t mask the fear on her face.

Jotham continued, “Nature, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”

Nature nodded.

“And when did you do that?”

“Um . . . I was like eight or so, I think.”

“Are you committed to being a passionate follower of Jesus all the days of your life?”

“I’ll try, but I’ll probably screw up a lot.”

Jotham kept his left hand on her shoulder while raising his right hand as if taking an oath.

“Nature, based on the authority of Scripture and your testimony before this congregation today, I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

He nudged her shoulder to get her to turn and face him.

He waited for her to reach up and pinch her nose like he'd shown her a few minutes earlier, but she only looked at him wide-eyed. Taking her wrist, he guided her hand up to her nose.

"Oh yeah! I forgot!"

She pinched her nostrils closed. With one hand on her wrist and the other between her shoulders, Jotham gently lowered her backward and down into the water. Icy waves lapped against his side.

"Buried in the likeness of his death . . ."

He pulled her upward, and her blue head broke through the surface.

". . . raised to walk in newness of life."

She gasped and blurted out as rivulets streaked down her face, "My God, that's freaking cold!"

After she had climbed out of the baptistry, Jotham faced the congregation.

"Well, folks, we've reached the end. As you leave Evergreen Baptist for the last time this morning, may you rejoice in what God has done and look forward to what He will do! May God bless you and keep you as leave this morning. Go in peace."

Lily played a triumphant tune for the postlude as Jotham climbed up out of the water and those in the pews cleared out.

In his cramped dressing room, Jotham wrestled the waders off and smoothed out his suit before racing down the aisle toward the lobby.

"Pastor!"

Nature ran from the backstage doorway toward him. Her clothes were dry, her hair damp. She grabbed his hand once again and smiled breathlessly. "I just wanted to say thank you! I'm so happy you baptized me. That was awesome!"

“I’m glad for you.” “What do I do now?” “What do you mean?”

“I really want to get my life in order. I feel like today was just the beginning. What should I do now?”

Had it been months, even weeks, earlier, his response would have been automatic. In fact, she would never have needed to ask the question in the first place. He would have paired her with his wife or one of the other women in the church for discipleship. He would have encouraged her to begin attending their Sunday school. He would have done a dozen different things that he’d been doing for twenty years in ministry.

Today, he struggled to think of any bit of pastoral counsel to offer her.

“Just keep listening for God like you did today. He won’t let you go.”

She nodded earnestly. “I will. Thanks!”

Susannah was standing in the lobby, greeting each person as they left the building. Jotham slipped his hand into hers.

“Thank you so much for coming! Have a blessed day!”

As the building emptied for the last time, the pastor and his wife participated in this—one of so many weekly rituals that had formed the backbone of their lives. They smiled, shook hands, and soaked in the comments and well-wishes from church members and visitors.

“Thank you for the sermon, Pastor.”

“I thought it was a beautiful service.”

“We love and appreciate you both so much!”

“My parents and grandparents were members of this church for decades. So sad to see it close.”

“I haven’t been here since I was a kid, but when I heard it was closing down I just had to come see it one more time. The place hasn’t changed a bit!”

“Well, that was a bit absurd.”

Jotham was caught off guard by Titus Brighton's caustic tone as the two men shook hands stiffly.

"What do you mean?"

"Baptizing that girl? Pretty shameful if you ask me."

Jotham had grown accustomed to Titus's complaints over the years and knew that the conversation could unravel quickly.

"It was a bit out of the ordinary for our church." "It made me very uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry, Titus. I assure you I didn't mean to—"

"I don't see the point of you explaining after it's already done. Do you?"

Jotham stifled a surge of indignation.

"No, I suppose not. Well, Titus, thank you for being a faithful member of Evergreen for so many—"

"Goodbye, Pastor."

As Titus turned and walked away, Jotham felt another rush of anger sweep past, but he wasn't sure at whom it was directed.

Half an hour later, Jotham was alone in the church building. Susannah and the kids had taken the minivan, and he planned to follow shortly in his sedan. After ensuring the lights throughout the building were turned off and the water in the baptistry was drained, he passed through the lobby once more.

A framed portrait of every Evergreen pastor from 1889 to the present hung on the wall near the church door. Though each man had different hair, eyes, shape of face—some fundamental quality about them looked strikingly similar. Was it the tilt of each head, or maybe the solemn look undergirding the smile? Jotham had never pinpointed it.

To his own portrait hanging at the end of the row, he wondered out loud, "What's gonna happen to you?"

He shrugged, then pushed open the wooden door. The

streetside spaces were empty now, except for a black Cadillac halfway down the block. A man in a baseball cap leaned against the passenger door, scrolling on his smartphone.

“Hey!” Jotham called out.

The man looked up and spotted Jotham. “Hi!”

Jotham approached as the man continued to scroll.

“What did you think of the service?”

“What’s that?”

“The church service. Did you enjoy it?”

“Pretty much what I expected.” The man scrolled on.

“Do you really think you can get five hundred dollars for that Bible?”

The man dropped the phone into his pocket and adjusted his cap. “Probably something close to that.”

“And you’re willing to pay that much to acquire it.” Jotham loosened his tie and pulled off his suit coat, slinging it over his shoulder.

“Well, not exactly. It might be able to fetch that much on the market, but I’m a retailer. That’s a horse of a different color.”

Jotham looked at the church building contemplatively. “You got cash?”

The man perked up. “I do.”

“I’ll give it to you for four fifty.”

He eyed Jotham with suspicion. “You jerking me around?” “What can I say? Miracles happen. Take it or leave it.” “Three hundred.”

“Four hundred.”

“Three fifty.”

“Cash?”

“Yup.”

Jotham turned away. “Wait here.”

He emerged from the lobby a few minutes later with the

antique Bible. He waited while the man placed the bills into his palm. Then he handed the leather-bound volume over.

The man took it carefully and turned it over in his hands several times. "Thanks, Rev. This will be a ringer for sure!"

"Let's hope so!" Jotham stuffed the cash into his pocket and shook hands with the man before walking away.

When he had stepped up to the wooden door of the church he turned the key until he heard the thump of the deadbolt locking into place. He walked around the corner to his parking spot and tossed his suit coat in the back seat.

As he pulled away, he glanced in his rearview mirror just in time to see the man in the ball cap put the Bible in his trunk and slam the lid closed.

