



THE LISTENER

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

The dream came on a Sunday night, after an afternoon of golf and an evening of watching politicians debate on cable. Like some divine hand, it seemed to grab Sam Bennett by the collar and pull him under. As if he were trapped in front of a huge movie screen, he saw a woman in a tiny room with a tin roof and a dirt floor, searching desperately for something. She grabbed things down from cupboards, off of shelves, turned things over, removed the cushions from her couch, searched behind doors and under rugs. It was a frustrating dream, one that seemed to have no end, until finally, Sam saw a coin, carelessly dropped in the corner of the room. The woman in the dream saw it at the same time, and she fell on it and snatched it up and began to weep with joy.

One lousy coin? he thought. Why would she be so excited over one lousy coin?

Restlessly, Sam turned over in his sleep and buried his face in his pillow. The words of his pastor's sermon earlier that day played over and over in his mind. Words about reaching a hurting world. About hearing people's spiritual needs. He hadn't even listened that hard when the preacher had uttered them, but now they came back to him like recorded phrases that reeled around and around in his head, refusing to leave him until they sank in.

And then he heard the voice, the voice that woke him as it reverberated through his mind with holy power. "Ephphatha! Ephphatha!" He sat upright in bed.

The word vibrated through him, though he didn't know its meaning. It was Hebrew, he thought. Or, perhaps, Greek. And whose was the voice?

He was wide awake now, drenched in a cold sweat, and he was trembling. Kate, his wife, lay next to him, undisturbed. Quietly, he got out of bed and stumbled through the house. He went to

the kitchen sink and splashed water on his face, then headed for the comfort and refuge of his recliner. It was four o'clock in the morning, too early to be up, yet he couldn't go back to sleep. It wasn't the dream that disturbed him so much, but the voice. It had had such power, such authority.

Ephphatha! What did it mean? Now that he thought of it, he was sure the voice hadn't been part of the dream. He had only seen the woman, the coin in his sleep. No, the voice had the authority of God. Could the Lord have spoken to him tonight? But why would he speak in another language? Why would God utter something that so disturbed his spirit, something resonating with importance, but something he wasn't able to understand? Was it some kind of sign, or was he just losing it?

He took a deep breath and tried to shake the cobwebs out of his brain. The thought of going back to bed and facing more of the same was out of the question, so he finally put on a pot of coffee. After it had brewed, he poured a cup, then sat there sipping on it, trying to decide if the dream was something he should give more thought, or if he should dismiss it altogether.

Did it have something to do with the sermon he had yawned through yesterday?

John, the pastor, had been waxing eloquent about the lost sheep. Something about leaving the ninety-nine to go after one.

Sam had been more interested in the second hand on his watch. He'd figured if John didn't wind down soon, there would be a ridiculous line at every restaurant in town.

Was that why he'd had the dream? Did that word, Ephphatha, contain some kind of rebuke about listening in church? Now that he thought about it, John had been on a roll yesterday. By the end of the sermon, his face was reddening and he was leaning over the pulpit, shaking his hands to make his point. Sam hadn't seen John that worked up since he'd given his life to ministry during their sophomore year of college. Back then, John had often gotten red-faced and loud when he tried to change the hearts of Sam and his friends. Sam had hoped it wouldn't mean that John would give a long, drawn-out benediction, then have them sing all four verses of the final hymn, while the Presbyterians got to the restaurants first.

"Have you ever considered what God hears in the hearts of people?" the pastor had asked. "What spiritual needs cry out to him? What if we could hear with God's ears?" Then he had looked around the sanctuary at the faces one by one. His eyes had met Sam's, and Sam tried to look more awake. He felt guilty when he saw disappointment cross over John's face.

"Most of you don't even hear with the ears you have," the pastor said in a duller voice. "Your ears are clogged up, and you can't hear the most obvious things. So there are people with needs out there just crying to be met, yet so few of God's laborers are going out to rescue them. If you

want to hear, if you want to truly see, come to the altar now. Get on your knees and ask God to use you.”

If God was mad at him now, Sam thought, it was because of his attitude yesterday. Sam had checked his watch again. He remembered thinking that if anyone went to that altar during the first verse and ripped out a quick prayer of commitment, they might still get out of there by twelve. If no one came, they might wind down after the second verse. But after the second verse, the pastor had nodded to the choir director to keep the song going. He said that he knew there was someone out there who felt the Holy Spirit calling, and he didn’t want to close the service until they did their business with God.

Sam had actually considered going himself, just to wrap things up.

When no one responded, the pastor finally gave up and brought the service to an end. Sam hadn’t wasted any time grabbing his wife’s hand, making his way out of the pew, and pushing through the crowd to the exit door. He hadn’t given the sermon another thought.

Now he tried to sort back through the points in that sermon. Was there something there about lost coins? Had John mentioned that unknown word? Had all of it somehow gotten snagged in his consciousness, even though he couldn’t remember it now?

He was still trying to understand the dream when Kate got up some time later.

“You’re up early,” she said.

He sipped his coffee. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Was I stealing the covers?”

“No. I just had some dreams.”

“Bad ones?”

He shrugged. “No, not really. Just weird stuff. You know the kind. Something’s lost and you can’t find it.”

“I have those dreams,” Kate said, her sleepy eyes widening. “I’m running through the airport to catch a plane, but I can’t seem to make the gate. Or I’m in college and I’m trying to get to my final exam, only I haven’t been to class all semester and don’t know where the room is. Or I have to speak to a room full of people, and I look down and realize I’m still in my pajamas---”

“It wasn’t like that,” he cut in, irritated. “It was a little scarier.”

“Scary? Why?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

She considered that for a moment. “I have scary dreams sometimes too. The ones where someone’s about to hurt me, but I can’t scream.” She poured herself a cup of coffee, then remembered another one. “Or the one where someone’s throwing matches at me, but I can’t put them out . . .”

He gazed at his wife. “Kate, have you thought of getting psychiatric help?”

“Hey, you’re the one who couldn’t sleep last night. I slept like a baby.” She brought the cup to her lips.

“I want to be useful.”

He frowned at the out-of-context comment, then decided that she meant it in regard to his dreams. “Don’t worry about me.” He got up and stretched. “Guess I’ll go take my shower.”

By the time he had showered and dressed, he was feeling a little better. The dream was just a dream, he thought, just a collage of images and phrases that he’d heard in the last few days. The preacher’s message, something they’d talked about in Sunday school, maybe something he’d overheard subconsciously. It didn’t matter. It had all mixed together in some kind of virus of thoughts, and his brain was just coughing it up as he slept. There was nothing to worry about.

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