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## **PROLOGUE**

# *A Crisis of Faith*

## ALTAR

The drizzle sprayed lightly on the windshield as Caleb drove home. The day had been tough, so he turned off the music to think more clearly. He could now hear the sound of rain gently hitting the roof of the car, the baritone rhythm of the wiper blades, and the occasional swish of rubber running over wet asphalt.

His slim frame let out a long sigh. Though he was only a sophomore at the University of Washington, his life seemed a total failure. His microbiology midterm score was low enough to put his medical school future on the altar.

*Kill it mercifully*, he thought as he wrung the steering wheel.

Med school wasn't even his idea. He pictured his dad crossing his arms and his mom shooting deadly looks if he ever told them he didn't want to go. It sent a chill down his back.

"Asian parents," he sighed. He quickly decided not to tell them about his midterm, at least not tonight.

He made his way down Forty-Fifth Street, approaching the right turn where he would head north on I-5. As he merged onto the freeway, he didn't pay attention to the small streaks his aging wiper blades left on the windshield. Instead, his mind was on something else entirely.

## BENTO

Earlier that day Caleb and Anna had been having a late lunch over a couple of teriyaki-chicken bentos at Naoko's. The lunch crowd had already thinned out, leaving only three other customers in the restaurant, so they were able to sit near the window.

Caleb had met Anna Hughes in Psych 202—biopsychology—last quarter when they'd been assigned to the same group project. They became good friends. Today, she wore a secondhand-store jacket over a black T-shirt that said, "Save Darfur." And he couldn't help noticing the way her blonde hair rested on her shoulders. But he didn't want to stare, so he instinctively looked down at the pieces of tofu and seaweed floating in his bowl of miso soup.

After a sip of the soup, Caleb looked up to see her blue eyes staring hard at him. She had a habit of doing this, especially when she wanted to grab his attention from the mire of his own thoughts—and it always unnerved him. He'd been silently repeating his mantra of the afternoon: *No, this isn't a date. We're just friends.*

He coughed, blushed a bit and put the soup back on the table. He stared for a moment at the billowing clouds of miso turning in his bowl. She didn't seem to care.

“What’s up?” he said, trying to be nonchalant.

“I saw something today that totally bugged me,” she said. “I was in Red Square on my way to class. Did you know there was a Pride rally today? It was wet out there, but lots of people still came out. And it was crazy—costumes, makeup, all of that. But what bugged me was the group of people on the sidelines. They shouted and screamed, yelling and saying nasty things. They held signs that said, ‘God hates fags’ or ‘AIDS is God’s curse.’ They started chanting, ‘Burn in hell! Burn in hell!’ They were Christians! And they were angry.”

“But—” started Caleb, lifting his hands in protest.

“I know, I know,” she said. “Not all Christians are like that. Relax, will you? I’m not talking about you. But come on: what good is Christianity if it makes people like that? What good is any religion if it just makes them angry, critical and narrow-minded?”

He tried to cut in again. “I’m not finished,” she said. She spoke slowly now. “It finally hit me. They reminded me of the church I used to go to. You know, I used to go all the time before college, but I haven’t been back since. Maybe they’re not out there with picket signs yelling at gays and lesbians. But they were pretty critical. The youth pastor always made me feel totally guilty. Every week I had to sit and listen to him pick at every tiny fault I had. I couldn’t have any fun—I couldn’t even breathe. Either I listened to the wrong radio stations, asked the wrong questions, wore the wrong clothes or dated the wrong boyfriend. They even tried to cast a demon out of me—I think they called him ‘Bob.’”

Caleb smiled at that one.

“I couldn’t get it right the way you did,” Anna said, now with more gravity. “God wanted it perfect, and he was always looking down at me, hoping I’d be better but knowing I never would be. He was always right—I was always wrong. It’s like he had a report

card, and I always came out below the curve. I can't help but think he's bummed out, disappointed and pissed off with me. And isn't God looking down at the Pride rally too? Isn't he just as critical, shaking his head and writing them off too?" She pointed at Caleb accusingly.

Her intensity carried her like a river's current. "Yeah, he probably is. Just like everyone at church. Just like the people at the Pride rally. Just like my dad. He was a deacon at our church, and he . . ." Anna's voice trailed off and she fixed her gaze over Caleb's shoulder, watching the cars pass by outside the restaurant window.

Caleb wondered what she was looking at. He waited for her to say something else. She didn't, so he glanced around the room, looking for anything to distract him from the awkward silence. He couldn't figure out what was going on. He heard a few more cars swoosh by on the wet concrete. Then he shifted in his chair, and the throbbing pulse in his ears grew louder and louder.

With a tear falling and her teeth clenched, Anna broke the silence. "Christianity's just another screwed-up religion! Look at what Christians do: they guzzle gas with their SUVs, join the NRA, picket abortion centers, bomb other countries and spend, spend, spend at the mall, right? They only care about themselves. Seriously, what has Christianity done for us—or the world for that matter? They're just a bunch of hypocrites, that's what I think! Are they good for anything?" At the word *good*, her hands hit the table with a thud that drew the glance of the other customers.

She glared at Caleb while wiping away tears, waiting for a reply. Long seconds ticked away. He scrambled back into his mind, trying to find something that would sound great, hoping that something—anything—would give him the right words to cool off the white heat of anger. But he found none. He wished he could transform into an ostrich

and stick his head in the sand. He furrowed his brow even further. He exhaled hard and shrugged his shoulders, saying the only truthful thing he could at that time.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I just don’t know.”



## SCRIPT

Caleb turned onto the freeway, where a sea of blinking brake lights lit up the wet concrete like a Christmas tree. He groaned: after fifteen minutes he'd only reached the Lake City Way exit, and he knew that it would be a long commute home. So he had time to let his words to Anna echo loudly in his mind: "I just don't know." After a moment, his face flushed and sweat started to collect around his neck. *I'm a moron.* Keeping one hand on the wheel, he took off his fleece and opened the vent to let some cool air in.

He recalled his pastor's challenge, to "do the work of an evangelist." If that charge had come from anyone else, Caleb wouldn't be feeling the angst he was right now. But Jeff Corbin had everyone's respect: not only was he a great speaker, he'd also grown his ministry from twenty to about two hundred in the last four years. And he believed in Caleb; he'd given him a chance to lead worship at Experience, the college ministry at University Community Church. They spent a lot of time together, and Caleb felt Pastor Jeff's care and concern deeply. Caleb didn't want to let him down.

Pastor Jeff had said that no leader at Experience was exempt from this charge. He reminded them that in the Bible, Timothy received the

charge even though he had a hard time speaking up—even though he wasn't the "evangelistic" type. Caleb led worship at Experience, which meant he held the title of *leader*, but he couldn't even get the band to sound right, much less share the faith with his friends.

*I'm no evangelist.* Caleb had earnestly tried to share his faith with his high school buddies, and he'd continued to do so when he lived in the dorms his freshman year. Some friends had even started coming to Experience—their first forays into a religious community—because of his efforts.

Still, being called an "evangelist" conjured up images of Brother Jeb, who wore sandwich billboards depicting silhouetted mobs burning in red-hot hellfire. Brother Jeb would storm through UW's Red Square like a tornado, squashing any ounce of interest an observer might have about Christianity with his fist-raised condemnations against atheists, homosexuals, liberals, tree-huggers, hecklers and anyone else who dared stand in his path.

*I know, I know.* Caleb could almost hear Pastor Jeff's voice asserting that he wasn't asking Caleb to be Brother Jeb. He just wanted him to share his faith with his friends. It wasn't an unreasonable request: didn't Jesus want him to do that as well? Yet Caleb felt like Brother Jeb when his friends asked, "What about those people who have never heard about Jesus? Are they going to hell?"

He usually recited the answers he had been taught. But he felt like an actor in a bad B-movie who still faithfully delivered his lines. Whenever someone said Christians were hypocrites, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for their point of view.

Suddenly a Grand Cherokee swerved into his lane, barely missing his front bumper. He leaned on the horn far longer than needed to give the warning.

*I could win an Oscar.*

## VALUES

He tailed the Cherokee until his car crawled past the Northgate Mall. Then he gave up the chase and allowed his heart rate to lower back to normal. His thoughts went back to Anna's question in the restaurant: are Christians really good for anything?

Shifting in his seat, he tried to answer the question as best he could, mentally compiling a list of Christian values: Christians should become more like Jesus. Yes, and they should have a vibrant, authentic relationship with God—talking to God, hearing from God, acting on what they'd heard. Christians should also witness about their faith to their friends, both here and abroad. They shouldn't be hermits—they should love each other, interacting as a community. Christians should love the poor and fight for justice. And didn't the call of Jesus propel them to the forefront of racial healing, of bridge-building between Hutu and Tutsi, Serb and Croat, Arab and Jew? And what about spending less on their own material possessions so they could give more away? Shouldn't they try to make this world a better place? Yes, Jesus would want this for all of his followers, right? It seemed like the kind of community that Jesus envisioned.

The traffic slowed even further—a pedestrian would have outpaced

his car. But by now Caleb didn't care. His eyes glowed with new energy as he continued to flesh out his vision. *Christians like this could change the world!* he thought, tapping the steering wheel like Thumper after seeing Bambi bounce into the forest glen.

*But Christians didn't usually look like this,* he thought. Some who had an inkling of being called to this lifestyle chose to ignore it because of the inconvenience and difficulty. Like Hollywood stars who crave both publicity and privacy, these Christians wanted both the security of faith and the dream of prosperity and prestige—and they questioned neither. Others didn't know—they were well-meaning Christians who'd never been taught to live this way. Did the gospel even tell them to live this way? The gospel was only about life *after* death, right? No Christian needed to live this way. They were all getting into heaven anyway, right?

## GARBAGE

Caleb looked back and checked his blind spot. As he changed lanes he had a surprising thought: *Maybe that's why Christians are so focused on converting people. It's only about heaven, right?* But that couldn't be . . .

His memories of Manila popped up and shouted that it couldn't be. Last summer he'd found himself with a group of college students from all over the country, but mostly from San Diego. He'd expected their tans, their flip-flops and their constant use of the word *dude*, but they'd surprised him with their lack of cynicism and utter openness to God. Before they left for Manila they read articles together about injustices in the world—between men and women, black and white, rich and poor, America and the rest of the world. They also studied Old Testament prophets like Amos and Isaiah, who described God's great compassion for the poor and oppressed. It had been like getting a new pair of glasses: he could see more clearly but his head started to hurt with all the new ideas and implications.

Living in Manila for six weeks with the urban poor had rent his heart wide open. His team had slept in the slums, shantytowns built on top of smoldering garbage mountains. The sour stench never went away, but

after the first few nights the mini-explosions—set off by the buildup of methane gas under the decomposing trash—no longer surprised him. He slept in a small shack of corrugated metal built so precariously that he was afraid to lean against it for fear of pushing the whole thing into the polluted river behind them. The slum’s residents collected recyclables and other garbage and sold it to middlemen for pennies a day. Yet they survived. He’d never seen anything like this. And often he wondered what God could do in a place like this. Was he even here? Caleb wasn’t in Seattle anymore, and he wondered if he could click his heels three times and return home.

One morning the neighborhood had been eerily quiet. Blood was splattered across the wall of one of the shacks, and the children were sitting in front of it in a daze. This would’ve been a bad horror movie in the making if it weren’t so real.

*This can’t be good*, he thought.

Then the news came: a teenager had been knifed to death the night before in a tussle with drug dealers. The team started to pray, more intensely than Caleb had ever prayed before. Some villagers wondered what they were doing, especially when they put their hands on the children to bless them and pray for their protection. But others joined in. The villagers prayed in Tagalog, and though Caleb didn’t comprehend their spoken language, he understood their hearts. Their prayers quilted them into one. And as they held hands in that moment, the entire team recognized that even here in the slums there was hope for a broken world. Because God was there. In turn God was pouring into them a love for people who were nothing like their highly educated yet apathetic American peers.

Later, back in the States, Pastor Jeff asked the new leaders at Experience to share about their summers. Caleb couldn’t help but gush over the things that he had learned, particularly that God was a God of peace and

justice and had a special place in his heart for the poor. Caleb shared with tears in his eyes about how Experience could start supporting the poor overseas, how they could hold prayer meetings for the people that he had met and fallen in love with. He stood up and pleaded with them to make more space in their hearts and schedules for this. Then he sat down.

“That’s awesome, bro!” Pastor Jeff said. “It’s great to see what God’s doing in your life! And those are great ideas. Let’s think about how we can do some of those things. So how many got saved?”

“Um, we didn’t really get that far. I mean, I guess we were just ‘sowing seeds.’”

“Okay, that’s a good start,” he said, trying not to sound disappointed. Then he turned back to the rest of the students, “So, what else happened this summer?”

Four other students shared. Then Lisa raised her hand and said, “I felt God leading me to pray for my best friend Janet every day this summer. I thought, ‘How can we be best friends if we don’t even talk about Jesus?’ I was always afraid to bring him up. But we were just hanging out one day and I felt like I had to share about my faith. I told her about Jesus and why he’s important to me. I wanted my best friend to know what he’d done in my life. She listened, like *really* listened. So I invited her to come to church with me, and she’s been coming to Experience for the past month. She’s not a Christian yet, but I think she’s really close. Isn’t that awesome? Would you guys pray for her?”

“That’s incredible!” Pastor Jeff said. “Did you hear Lisa’s story? Did you see what she did? And did you see what God did? That’s what we need to be about here at Experience. I’ve been praying all summer about the upcoming year, and we need to be focused. This year we need to do what Lisa did. This year needs to be about evangelism.”

Jeff beamed, but Caleb slumped in his chair and buried his head in his hands.

## BRIDGE

The traffic started to ease up and Caleb's thoughts sped ahead of him.

Before Manila, Caleb had always gone to Pastor Jeff for advice on ministry, faith and girls—not necessarily in that order. Since Manila, however, Caleb had increasingly withdrawn. To him, Pastor Jeff seemed increasingly concerned only about building the Experience empire.

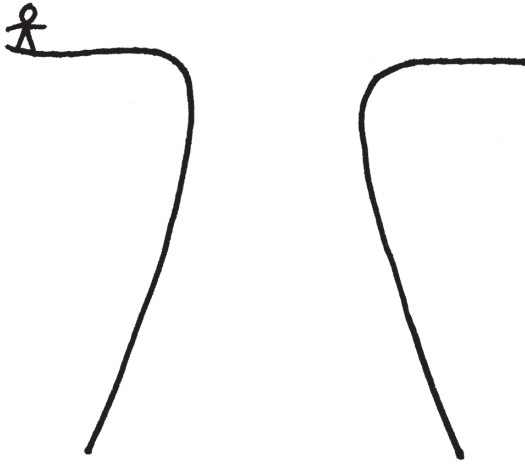
Although Caleb knew this critique was a bit unfair, something was starting to click on this drive home. For Pastor Jeff it was all about heaven. If someone wasn't secured a place in heaven, then all efforts should be marshaled to help people get in, right? The mantra was, "We should try to get as many people as possible to Experience so they can hear the gospel and be saved." Serving the poor in Manila, no matter how worthy a cause, didn't come anywhere close to saving a soul.

*This is crazy. Is there a possibility that we Christians aren't living out our faith not despite—but precisely because of—what we've been taught?*

The windshield had clouded up, so Caleb hit the defrost button. As the fog slowly disappeared, his mind still scrambled for clarity.

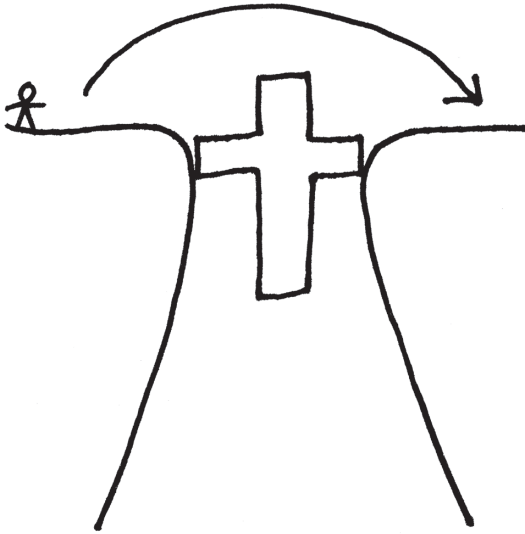


*Okay, start at the beginning. What's the gospel?* He pictured the bridge diagram that Pastor Jeff had taught him:



When a person sinned—by lustfully looking at a hot girl or breaking curfew and thereby disobeying his parents—God became furious with him. God couldn't stand sin; he was too perfect to have sin anywhere near him. So in his wrath he punished the sinner for eternity. The person was, therefore, separated from God. "For the wages of sin is death."

Jesus, God's Son, Caleb went on thinking, suffered the cruelest death ever invented by humankind—crucifixion. As proof that God had power over sin and death, God raised Jesus back to life. Through the ultimate act of sacrifice and forgiveness, people could now be with God forever; Jesus died to pay for their sins so they could go to heaven when they died. All they had to do was accept what Jesus had done and then enjoy paradise forever. Caleb pictured in his mind how a person could cross over the bridge of Jesus to meet God on the other side:



Jesus, innocent of any wrongdoing, took that person's punishment on himself. As in an exchange of hostages, Jesus died instead of the prisoner.

"His life for mine," Caleb said aloud. "I'm forgiven." Pastor Jeff would've been proud.

Forgiveness was Christianity's unique claim in the market of world religions, and it defended Caleb from the guerilla warfare of self-condemnation that often sent multiple sorties into his head and heart. Whenever he felt himself hating his parents for their unfair expectations or succumbed to Internet pornography, he would wallow in his shame.

But at some point he would find himself able to ask God for forgiveness. He would remind himself that Jesus had paid for his sins and that God still loved him. Then the truth would sink in: mercy triumphs over judgment. No condemnation—he was guilt- and shame-free.

Caleb could rest knowing he couldn't do anything to make God love him less or more. He was saved not by works but by God's grace. He needed only to accept the truth of what Jesus had already done. He needed only to believe and enjoy God's embrace. Through Jesus his relationship with God was restored. And it was God's mercy that extended this wonderfully unfair forgiveness to him so that in turn he could forgive others. Sometimes he had trouble trusting this message, but in the end he needed it. *Where would I be without the gospel? This is good news, right?*

The red lights of the car in front of him flashed on, and its rear bumper kicked up suddenly. He hit his brakes hard, avoiding the collision.

*I should pay more attention to the road.*

## RIVER

But his mind ignored the brake lights and continued down the same road. If people only needed to accept this truth to be saved, then could a Christian go to heaven believing in Jesus yet hating Arabs? Could Christians accept what Jesus had done for them and still buy large houses and vacation homes, drive Benzes, jet-set to Monaco, and dine on prime filet and Dom Perignon while giving nothing to people who foraged in a garbage dump to put food on the table? If they could afford it, Western Christians tended to go for the good life. So would they go to heaven? Caleb suddenly heard the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. thundering in his head, quoting Amos: “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

Where were these streams and rivers in the church? With the gospel of the bridge illustration, Christians didn’t need to share their faith with others, stand up for the oppressed, become more like Jesus, love people of other cultures and ethnicities, take care of the environment or be concerned about the poor at all. If they just believed, they’d be in heaven, right? And they could still claim to have a relationship with Jesus. Everything else was just extra credit.

Caleb thought about Jesus’ story of the sheep and the goats—those

who didn't feed the hungry, offer a drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick or visit the prisoner suffered eternal punishment. But the gospel also seemed to say that to end up in paradise, you just needed to believe Jesus died for your sins—even if nothing in your life reflected his teachings.

Caleb gripped the steering wheel hard, his knuckles turning white. He didn't notice that he was clenching his jaw. Would Christians who didn't love their neighbor get into heaven? If he were pressed into a theological corner and asked to fight, he'd have to drop his hands and surrender. The answer according to the gospel he'd been taught was "yes." Their punishment had been paid. No lives needed to change. Nothing else needed to happen. Believe in your mind; confess with your lips; accept the truth in your heart—and Jesus would make sure you got into heaven. Such a faith had nothing to do with life here and now but only the life to come. Caleb didn't need to try to change the world or make it a better place. He could just wait—while keeping his personal relationship with Jesus intact—for paradise after death.

*Where is the abundant life Jesus promised in that?* Caleb was losing feeling in his fingertips, and the assault of questions didn't let up. What did this gospel have to do with living out faith today? What was faith supposed to look like? What was faith? What was the gospel? Was this truth? Or were the last twenty years of his spiritual life a farce? If he could question the central message of his faith, he could question anything. Everything was suspect.

*I can't believe I'm thinking this way.* Caleb's heart pounded heavily. But his thoughts continued down their path. When he considered Pastor Jeff's challenges and strategies, evangelism seemed like just another way for Christians to force their superiority on others, arrogantly proclaiming their lock on the truth. *How do we proclaim one objective truth in a world that sees many paths to God? We may have the truth,*

*but what's the good in that? What good news are we bringing to a suffering world? Do we even have good news to share?*

Caleb knew the Bible was full of great news, but the gospel he'd been taught seemed to leave out all the revelations he'd learned in Manila: that God loves the poor, that he comforts the suffering, that he reconciles people to one another and heals the sick. This should have felt like a cure for AIDS—it was good news for all people, whether they had AIDS or not. But his gospel didn't talk about these things. It simply offered people an escape from the world's troubles through death into a life with God. It didn't seem to care about a suffering world. So Christians didn't care about a suffering world. In fact, they seemed like the most selfish pigs on the planet! Maybe Anna was right.

Blood rushed to Caleb's face. He slammed his fist down hard on the dashboard and shouted, "This is not good news!" His eyes started to water. And with the drizzle, it was as if God's tears were joining his. His thoughts finally quieted, and the only sound was the *whump-whump* of the wiper blades.

## SEARCH

Caleb finally parked his car and walked through his front door, joining his parents for a quiet dinner before going up to his room to work on his organic chemistry problems. But he couldn't will himself to care about the difference between a ketone and an aldehyde. He closed the textbook, needing someone to talk to about his questions.

He picked up his phone and called Dave Morrison, who played bass behind him on the worship team. Dave was one of his best friends, and he had to let him know what was on his mind.

"I'm crazy, right?" asked Caleb.

"Yup. Certified," Dave answered in his low, laid-back voice.

"I'm being serious, man."

"Okay. I dunno . . . have you prayed about it?"

"Not really," Caleb replied. "I'm still processing."

"Still, maybe you should. What about Pastor Jeff?"

"I want to talk to him," Caleb said, grimacing. "But things don't seem right between us these days. I don't know if he'll understand."

"Hmm. How about Professor Jones? Remember she said that we could come to her with any question? It seems like she might have wrestled through this stuff."

Shalandra Jones was an ethnic studies professor who taught classes on religion and race, and they both had taken her class last quarter. She definitely cared about larger issues in the world. That was clear from her classes. She had also spoken at Experience about the need for active reconciliation between people of different ethnicities and cultures and had offered a standing invitation for people to come see her during her office hours. But were her views biblical? Caleb just didn't know. Still, it was a place to start.

"That's not a bad idea," said Caleb. "I'll look her up. Thanks."

"I'll be praying for you. And I'll remind Tom to pray too. Hey, so what's going on with you and Anna these days?"

Caleb grinned sheepishly and was glad Dave couldn't see it. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow," said Caleb. "I promise."

"Okay, but don't leave me hangin' too long."

Caleb went straight to his computer. He searched for "Shalandra Jones" on the Internet, and the results led him to the UW website. Her office hours were listed on her faculty bio page. Perfect. He could meet her tomorrow afternoon.

Then he asked God for guidance. *Lord, help me . . .*



## EMBRACE

In the morning Caleb drove to school in yet another day of drizzle. But today something was pushing him through the rain. Or perhaps it was pulling, leading him through traffic until he parked in the underground lot. After his classes, it ushered him eastward across campus to Padel-ford Hall. It shepherded him to the black-paneled directory and through the long wait for the elevator to a fifth-floor office in the American Ethnic Studies department.

The door was wide open. It was a small room, and Professor Jones had her back to him; she was leaning back in her chair staring out through the tall windows. Books filled the shelves lining every wall, and papers were piled high on the cherry desk. Behind Professor Jones a colorful Kenyan tapestry hung over a burgundy leather chair. She kept the fluorescent lights off, and the glow from a tall floor lamp and a desk lamp gave a warm touch to an already-inviting room.

Caleb hadn't said a word, but Professor Jones swiveled around anyway. She smiled broadly. "Can I help you?" she asked.

He smiled back. "Um . . . I was wondering if you had some time to talk?"

"Sure, that's why I'm here," she said. She spoke clearly and delib-

erately, like someone who'd been teaching a long time. She stood up to greet him, appearing even taller than she was due to her slender frame and heeled shoes. Her hair was dark and natural: tightly curled and cropped short. Her black-framed glasses and professional gray suit gave her an air of authority and credibility. Otherwise she might have looked quite young—like a student herself.

“Hi, professor. I’m—”

“Caleb, right? I remember you.” She stepped forward and wrapped him in a strong hug. For a split second he squirmed. But quickly a rush of warmth flowed into him and dispelled the drizzle’s chill. When she let go, he realized that his neck and shoulders had been tensed for a long time. He took a deep breath and let his body relax. He felt like he’d roamed through a dense, overgrown jungle and finally found a wide path; he didn’t know where it would end up, but at least it went somewhere.

“Hang up your coat and have a seat.” She motioned to the chair. He sat down and sank into its plush comfort.

“What can I do for you?” she asked as she sat down.

“Professor, I thought you might be able to help me,” he started. Then a torrent of words came tumbling out: he described his struggles with his faith, his questions, his frustrations, his concerns—everything he’d been wrestling with. She listened attentively, nodding and saying, “Hmm” at all the right places. When he finally stopped, she smiled. Then she began to talk.

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