



CLEAR

A journey into truth, doubt,

WINTER

and what comes after

NIGHTS

TREVIN WAX

[Theology in Story]

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

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CLEAR WINTER NIGHTS

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*For William Browder Wyatt,
Nevin Wax, and Bill Alexander*

Saturday, October 7, Knoxville, Tennessee

Can we leave now? I don't want to be late," Ashley said, tugging at Chris's arm and drawing him out of his thoughts. It was late afternoon, and she had stopped by the apartment her fiancé shared with a couple of other college students in the run-down Fort Sanders neighborhood in Knoxville. The two were about to head to a meeting for a new church start-up they were involved in.

Ashley always sought to make a good impression. That's one reason Chris liked her. Self-aware without being self-absorbed. She was cute too. Small, with shoulder-length strawberry-blond hair.

"I don't feel like going," Chris said, meeting her smile with a furrowed brow and hoping she could sense his irritation. The sunlight coming in at a low angle through the window touched his wavy dark hair.

Ashley pressed on. "I told Luke and Cami we'd be there."

"Is it okay with you if we just walk?"

"I guess," she said. Her sigh said it wasn't.

Chris grabbed a jacket, and the two turned toward the door. As they left, Chris was wondering, *Should I go ahead and say it to her today? Do I really want to?* He sighed and turned the key in the lock.

OCTOBER IN EAST TENNESSEE. The trees were surrendering their leaves, and the sidewalk and street edges were hiding under a

blanket of harvest colors. One more hour of daylight would give them enough time for a walk and a talk.

Chris was a gentleman. He made sure he walked on the outside, next to the street, and that his wiry frame was shielding Ashley's eyes from the slanting sunlight. He escorted her, arm in arm, with an air of old-fashioned sophistication. They passed one large old house after another, most of them long since converted to student housing for the University of Tennessee.

Ashley asked him, "Are you having second thoughts about helping start the church?"

Chris didn't answer. Didn't Ashley realize this conversation could go south? Maybe she did. Maybe that's what she wanted. If she insisted, he would oblige.

"I... Yeah, I'm having second thoughts about...about a lot of things," he said.

Chris saw concern on Ashley's face. But she covered it with an uneasy smile and leaned in closer to his side as they walked.

Just a few months earlier, Chris had his life mapped out. He'd finally given Ashley a ring, and the two were planning to get married next spring. He was supposed to graduate from college in the summer, help a friend start a business, and take on a leadership role in the new church start-up.

But one by one, all his plans had fallen through. An unexpected class requirement postponed his graduation until December. His friend decided to start his business somewhere else. When it came to church, Chris was waffling on more than just being a part of the church-planting team. And the longer he was with Ashley, the more he wondered if his ring was really a fit for her finger.

"I'm here for you, no matter what," Ashley said. She stroked the inside of his palm. "Are you still having doubts?"

"Doubts?" Chris tried to act surprised.

"You know, doubts about the new church, about what you believe."

Doubt sounded like a bad word the way Ashley used it. "It's not really doubting," he said. "It's more like...questioning." That was better. But Chris knew he wasn't fooling her.

"Okay." Ashley played along. "Questions, then. Has Dr. Coleman gotten under your skin lately?"

An image of his religion professor's tall figure and unrelenting gaze entered Chris's mind. "No more than usual," he said. "Some, I guess. He's definitely got me thinking."

"He does that to lots of his students. I had a hard time for a while too. But in the end, I think I came out stronger for it."

"Yeah, well, we're different," he said. He knew she was trying to help, but it wasn't working.

"Have you told Luke about any of this?"

"He's got enough on his plate."

"He wouldn't mind."

"He's trying to start a church. Last thing he needs is for one of us to tell him we're not bought in one hundred percent."

"Well," Ashley said, "if he sees you like this, he's going to think you're not bought into his vision, anyway. He might think he's done something to upset you. That it's because of him."

"It's not."

"But he doesn't know that. He doesn't know the doubts you have."

"Questions."

"Right. Questions. He's always saying the church needs to be a place for people to be real. To doubt. To question."

"I don't think Luke is ready for his leaders to be this real."

Both were quiet for a few moments. Then Ashley said, "Have you talked to your grandfather?"

At the mention of his grandfather, Chris felt a wave of joy crash into a shore of guilt. Gilbert Walker was a retired pastor who lived in the charming old town of Lewisville, about ninety miles west of Knoxville. At eighty years of age, Chris's grandfather seemed to be in good health, sharp in mind and strong in body. He and Chris couldn't get together without losing themselves in interesting conversation, sometimes even argument. But the house was out of the way, nestled in the hill country, and Chris hadn't visited as often as he thought he should—only for lack of time, not for lack of love.

"It's too soon," he said. "Grandma's only been gone a month."

"Maybe you're right," Ashley said. "But I bet he'd enjoy the company."

Chris nodded. Ashley was always thinking of others and seemed to know instinctively when people's gifts and personalities would complement one another. Just bring the right person to the right place at the right time for the right meeting, and everyone would be stronger.

As they walked past the old brick Christ Chapel, Chris thought again of their church-planting team. "So you think I should talk to Luke?"

Ashley's response came so quickly it caught Chris off guard. "For sure. That's what he's there for. You're not supposed to walk this road alone. I don't know what I would've done without some older, wiser people around me." Then she added, "I know what you're going through."

Chris felt his temperature rise. Ashley's attempts at empathy were working against her. He started to think of all the things that made his situation so much more difficult than hers had been. He remem-

bered when she had gone through her “dark night of the soul.” Aptly named, because it seemed as though it lasted only one night. Chris, on the other hand, had been wrestling for months, and the nights were only getting darker. Is there a dark year of the soul?

“You’re not me,” he said.

“I never said that,” Ashley said, slower and quieter. “But no matter who you are, you need others. You can’t hold on to a childlike faith if you don’t grab hold of a grownup every now and then.”

“There’s a difference between a childlike faith and a childish faith,” Chris said.

“Chris Walker—” She bit her lip and turned away from him, doing her trademark eye roll used to keep from crying.

“No, Ashley. Seriously.”

“So I have a childish faith?”

“I didn’t say that.” Chris groaned. “Come on, Ashley, you know I admire the way you’ve thought through things. I think it’s great you’ve gotten stronger through everything. Last thing I want is for you to turn into me.”

He grinned. She returned the smile, noticeably halfhearted.

Chris continued, “It’s just...you know what Luke’s been saying. How this church is going to require commitment, more than any other church we’ve been a part of before.”

“You said that’s a good thing.”

“Yeah. It is. I think. But it’s a little scary too. Luke even wants us to sign a covenant that says what we believe.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. I think it’s awesome.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Ashley’s tone betrayed her exasperation.

"I don't know," Chris confessed. "I just want to be sure that I really believe all this stuff before I commit. I don't want to be the guy who's telling other people to get right with God, to come to church, to love Jesus and all that, when I'm not one hundred percent sure of everything I'm saying. You know, about God...truth...morality...and Jesus...the Bible."

"You're doubting all those things?"

"Not completely." Chris's response wasn't reassuring, even to himself. "I guess I just don't know how everything fits together anymore. Not just what is true but why it's true. Why it matters. And I want to get this right. I don't want to be a hypocrite."

"I like that about you," Ashley said. "But isn't there a point where you need to open up and ask for help when you've got so many questions?" She delivered the question sweetly, but there was no way for Chris to keep from feeling judged.

"God wouldn't give us minds if He didn't expect us to use them."

She cringed at his jab. "Questions are supposed to lead to answers, Chris."

Before Chris could say something he might have regretted, his telephone buzzed. It was a text from Luke. "Hey, man, are you and Ashley good? The gang's all here. Just checking in before we get going."

He shot a text back: "Not going to make it tonight. Talk soon."

A COUPLE OF MINUTES PASSED in silence as they continued to walk together. Chris could hear a train rumbling in the distance. The sun slipped behind one of the mountain peaks and left him and Ashley in twilight. The chill in the air caused him to pull the hood of his jacket over his head, and it reminded him of the first time they met.

They'd been at a bonfire for their campus Christian fellowship, and the reflection of the flames had flickered in her eyes. She was trying to roast a hot dog but found the fire too hot to let her get close enough. Half the hot dog was blackened, and the other half felt as if it were still refrigerated. Chris offered to roast another one for her. He singed the hair off his knuckles trying to get it done just right, but once he was finished, she had a perfectly roasted hot dog. And he had won the right to a chat with her. It was to be the first of many. But lately their talks had gotten increasingly difficult.

"This is about your dad, isn't it?"

She really did it. She dropped the dad bomb.

Chris felt a tightness grip his chest and started to quiver. "No," he said. Firmly. As if he could shut down that conversation with will-power alone. "Maybe," he added weakly. He shrugged and sighed. "I don't know."

September 12. Chris would never forget the date he found out everything. That was the date of Grandma Frances's funeral, and he was in Lewisville with his mom, his grandfather, and a bunch of other relatives. He kept looking for his father to show up, but Christopher Walker Sr. never appeared.

Chris had been puzzled. After the divorce nine years ago, his father and mother never got together anymore. Come to think of it, he'd never seen his father with any other relatives, though he knew his father would get in touch with his grandfather occasionally. But this was his own mother's funeral—where was he?

After the service, Chris mentioned his disappointment over his father's absence to his favorite cousin, Dave.

"Come on, you're surprised?" said Dave. "No offense, but that jerk can't be trusted for anything."

Chris couldn't believe what he was hearing. Although he hadn't seen his father much since the divorce, he'd always looked up to him as a saint, as a role model, even from a distance. He'd viewed him as a long-suffering husband who'd been forced to leave the family and make a new life for himself.

But at the funeral, all of Chris's illusions had been torn down as Dave proceeded to spill the salacious details of the events that had led to his parents' divorce. The specificity of Dave's knowledge of these events, and the confidence in his tone, left little doubt that Dave was telling the truth. More than that, it all fit. The pieces of information he had picked up over the years without understanding them, the history his parents and grandparents had left unspoken, and the circumstances he had always blamed on his mother—everything became clear.

He'd had everything backward. His father was the hypocritical lowlife, and his mother was the honorable one who'd refused to divulge the details out of respect for Chris's view of his dad. Respect his dad never deserved.

Ashley brought him back to the present. "It *is* about your dad."

She was right. Dr. Coleman bothered Chris, but it was his father's deception and hypocrisy that had forced Chris into a sea of doubt. And here he was now, kicking and struggling toward the surface, drowning in his questions. If his father could fake his faith so well all those years, maybe the faith itself was false.

Ashley continued. "He made decisions that affected you and your mom. Those were his decisions."

"Yeah, but I have to live with them," Chris said. "I can't believe how stupid I was. All those years I thought of him as the righteous one."

"You've got to forgive him and move on," Ashley said matter-of-factly.

Nothing enraged Chris more than Ashley's quick counsel to forgive and forget. As if his relationship with his dad were something he had to get over so he and Ashley could begin their picture-perfect life together.

Neither said anything for a few minutes. They walked on.

Chris finally broke the silence, speaking quietly and controlling his voice. "I don't know if this is going to work." He didn't have to elaborate.

She stopped walking, seemed to try to respond, but couldn't.

He went on, "M-maybe if we took a breather, a little time—"

Ashley pulled her hand from his. She was fighting back tears, choking back words.

"I don't mean that we break up," Chris said, backtracking. But the damage had been done. He'd cast the idea out there, and there was no reeling it back in.

"It's all me, Ashley. I just...I need to get some clarity on some things."

"Oh, Chris," Ashley said, backing away from him and wiping away her tears. She ran off in the direction of her own apartment.

CHRIS STOOD IN PLACE AWHILE, then plodded to "the strip" and found a bar, quiet at this early hour. He sank into a seat in the front where he could watch people going by outside, then ordered a burger and a beer.

Had he really done it? Broken his engagement? Given up Ashley forever? The Ashley he'd had so many wonderful dates with and spent so many hours spilling out his heart to? The Ashley he'd pictured himself spending the rest of his life with?

For a moment, he thought of jumping up from the table to chase after her, begging her to forget what he'd said.

But then he stopped himself. No, there was a real problem here. He had to figure out what he believed...or didn't believe. Ashley had a rock-solid faith in God and a firm understanding of who she was and who she wanted to be. But Chris was in quicksand. And as he sank, he told himself, he had no business marrying her.

Even though the burger looked delicious, Chris somehow couldn't take more than a single bite. But the beer was going down easily. He was just about to order something stronger to drink when his phone's ringtone activated. It was his mom. He groaned, not in the mood to talk, but answered anyway.

"Hey," he said.

His mother spoke rapidly. "Chris, I'm on my way to the hospital in Crossville. They've taken your grandpa there in an ambulance. They think he's had a stroke."

Chris was stunned. Just a month before, they'd buried his grandmother after her stroke. Was he about to lose his grandpa too, and in the same way?

"What happened?"

"Ruth went over there today as usual, and she found him on the floor. She said his speech was slurred and he couldn't move his left side. It's bad."

"I'm coming too. See you there." He pressed a button to end the call.

He slapped a handful of bills on the table and was gone.



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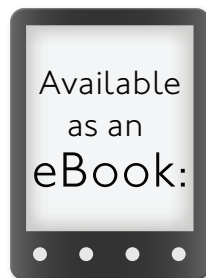
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