



THE
CROSSING

A NOVEL

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Prologue



TEN YEARS AGO

No one prepares you for this. Parents, teachers, professors.

Preachers, at least, try to make you aware of that final moment, just before your heart stills and breath stops.

If you die tonight, will you be ready? The two-dollar question anyone raised in church has heard a hundred times.

But when the time comes...

After the bullets tear into your body, while your blood spreads out across your new white shirt and your extra large Diet Pepsi splatters to the floor, as the man holding the gun screams at the kids on the bus to shut up or they're next.

...will you be ready?

Now isn't the time to ask why.

My body slumps to the floor like the strings holding me up have suddenly been cut. Somewhere, Claudia is crying. If she's crying, she's alive. *Lord, she's eighteen and searching. She's not ready for life to end.*

He's nudging me with his foot. I pray he doesn't check my pulse.

"Leave her alone!" The voice of a football player coming to my defense. *Don't be my hero, Casio*, I want to say, but I can't move, can't speak. The gun fires.

No, not Casio.

A few students are screaming. Most are crying. But the noise of the passing train is drowning them out. Everyone except Claudia.

One



It's strange. Since childhood, I've believed I would die in my sleep.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...

In my mind's eye, I picture myself sandwiched between Mama and Daddy as we knelt beside my bed, speaking the prayer together. It always seemed like they were sucking up all the oxygen, leaving me with none. I thought I might suffocate. But I could smell Mama so well. She hadn't had her nightly bath yet, so she still smelled of southern cooking and a hint of Chanel No. 5. The smallest amount behind her ears and inside the crook of her arm was enough for it to linger wherever she wandered in the house. I loved the smell of Mama.

I remember the expression on her face when she opened the box one Christmas morning. By the look of wonder, I knew she loved it. She blushed under Daddy's admiring gaze as she dabbed some on her wrist and lifted her arm to his face. As I watched, a bubble, like the ones I used to blow with those huge pieces of sugar-coated bubble gum, started deep inside me and got bigger and bigger. It was a rare moment of sheer joy in our family.

A few years later, a pin of reality burst the facade, but in that moment...joy. I'm glad my mind took me back to that place, if only for a minute. I can remember Daddy as he was. And forgive what he became.

...and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

PRESENT DAY

Claudia

Claudia hated this moment. Stopped at the tracks, watching the lights flash and hearing the bell clang. First in line, as the wall forms in front of her. The whistle growing louder as the engine nears. The rhythm of steel against steel, the train racing by, beating in her ears. Other cars had lined up behind her, hedging her in. Suffocating. Blocking any chance of escape.

Could a heart really pound right out of its chest? She felt her breath coming in short bursts. Her phone beeped, but she couldn't bring herself to look for it. Closing her eyes tight, she gripped the steering wheel.

Her chest hurt, and she could smell the metallic tang of blood. The rest of her senses picked up the sensation. She could taste the iron, way back in her throat, and her ears pounded with the rhythm of her heartbeat. Then her hands felt a sticky warmth—BJ's blood, soaking her cheerleading skirt. The wetness spread over her legs. She gasped and stared down at her lap. Her Diet Coke had spilled on her light tan linen pants. Still, she couldn't move.

No matter that the train had come and gone, still she sat, staring at the bare metal tracks. Her body shook all over. Vehicles sped

around her, blaring their horns. People glared at her, some even shouting obscenities at her, but it was no use. She'd become paralyzed. She didn't know how many minutes she sat there while the world swept by her, a still body in a raging storm.

A dull tap registered in her brain. She turned toward the sound and tried to focus on the man outside her window. He reached out and made another clipped, three-rap knock on the glass. Finally, recognition flashed, trying to convince her that everything was okay. She pressed the button and lowered the window for the waiting police officer.

"Claudia?" His voice sent a shiver down her spine. Images sped through her mind, blurring her focus. "Is there something wrong with your car?"

His voice was a little deeper now than it had been ten years ago, but she could still hear it screaming, "Leave her alone!" And then the gunshot. She could feel herself fading again...

"Claude!" He reached in through the window and shook her shoulder. "Come on, girl. I know what this is. I've been there too. But snap out of it. You're in the middle of the street."

She felt herself slowly ascending, as though swimming from the bottom of a deep lake. At the surface, a ragged, cold breath filled her lungs. "Casio." Tears filled her eyes.

"It's okay, baby," he said, his voice soft, taking her back to the days when he was quarterback, she was cheerleader, and everyone said they'd be America's sweethearts. "Can you drive the car into the parking lot?" He pointed to the right where a mom-and-pop café sat practically empty.

She nodded.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

It took every ounce of willpower to slide the Tahoe into gear and drive toward the parking lot. Once she stopped, her lungs screamed and she could feel the breath-stealing, muscle-seizing horror of hyperventilation coming on. Casio appeared at the passenger side door. Clutching her chest, she pointed toward the glove box. “Bag,” she managed to gasp.

“What?”

“A bag. In there!”

“Oh! Okay! Are you okay?” Hang on.” Casio opened the glove box and pulled out a paper bag, then brought it to her mouth. “Breathe. In-out-in-out.”

She did. Her lungs felt like they might burst as the panic spiked. “Oh, God. It’s just like that night.” A scream vibrated in her throat, and she squelched it before it could pierce the air inside the Tahoe.

“No.” Casio’s hand pressed against her clammy neck. “Now, listen, Claude. Keep breathing.” His smooth-as-silk tone calmed her and evened out her breath. She tried to focus on his tone. “This isn’t like that night on the bus. No one is after you. The person with a gun was after BJ. No one else. It wasn’t a random act or I wouldn’t have just been shot in the arm. Right? If that man was on a killing spree, we’d all be dead right now.”

His voice was beginning to soothe her, and slowly, the words sank into her muddled brain. She set the bag in her lap and filled her lungs with a cleansing breath. “Thanks, Casio,” she whispered and tried to smile. “You’re a hero.”

His jaw clenched as he inhaled from a freshly lit cigarette and

then passed it to her. “Yep, that’s what I am.” He expelled a stream of smoke. “A real hero.”

At the sarcasm in his tone, Claudia regretted her choice of words. She reached across the seat and took his hand. “We did what we could.”

“Too bad that doesn’t make the dreams go away.”

She stared into the horizon where clouds were beginning to roll their way. Silently, they sat, hand-in-hand, passing the cigarette between them, remembering that they shared a bond of pain and loss.

Somehow, for the moment, it made things calmer.

Victor

Embarrassment wasn’t a normal part of Victor Campbell’s MO. As a matter of fact, he’d been accused of overconfidence more than once during his rise to ADA. And the talk around town was that he’d be a shoo-in for DA if he chose to run. But as capable and on his toes as he liked to think of himself, he sat in awkward silence across from the clearly irritated event planner named Lindsey and fought an excessive need to squirm.

The twenty-something woman glanced down at an elegant gold watch wrapped around her delicate wrist. She seemed too young to be so put out.

“I’m sure my wife will be here soon,” he said, drawing on his lawyer voice.

But even his trust-me smile didn’t appear to soften her tough-as-nails demeanor. Rather, she looked across her desk with poorly concealed impatience, breathing in deeply, then giving a controlled

exhale. “Mr. Campbell. I have another appointment in twenty minutes. If you’d like to call your wife again, perhaps we can check her schedule against mine and find a more convenient time to meet.” She punched in some keys on her computer. “My next available opening is...” She squinted at the screen and punched in another key. “Tuesday.”

Retrieving his Blackberry from the jacket of his black “court” suit, Vic pulled up his own calendar. Claudia was going to hate waiting five more days, but it was her own fault. She’d just have to pull together the anniversary dinner of the year that much quicker. “That might work. I’ll call and find out why she’s so late. This really isn’t like her.” Or it hadn’t been until lately. He started to place the call, but hesitated, casting a quick glance at the attractive Lindsey.

Exhibiting surprising intuition, the young woman pushed back from her desk and rose. “I’ll give you a minute of privacy.” A tight skirt hugged her slim figure, and he quickly averted his gaze as he punched in number one on speed dial.

The phone rang four times then moved to voice mail.

He pressed his lips into a tight line. Of course she still wasn’t answering. Claudia’s erratic behavior had been escalating since suffering a miscarriage two years ago. He’d attributed it to postpartum depression, but lately, instead of getting better, she seemed to be getting worse. Being late for a meeting to plan the thirty-fifth anniversary of her parents in marriage and ministry was definitely over the line. How long would this go on? Part of the reason he’d fallen for her in the first place was her ability to organize and hold things together. Where had that Claudia gone, and good grief, when would she be back?

He ended the call without leaving a message and pressed the number again. Still no answer. Shoving the phone into his pocket, Vic walked to the door.

In the foyer, he looked around, but didn't see Lindsey, so he made the Tuesday appointment with the receptionist in Claudia's name and headed for the elevator. The Lord knows he tried to be understanding, but the incompetence and inconsistencies Claudia was displaying lately were getting old.

Claudia

As Claudia pulled onto the street where her parents lived on the cul-de-sac, she stared straight ahead, her thoughts on the last hour, sitting with Casio, opening up to each other about that night on the bus. It had been almost a relief to rehash that night with someone who truly understood how she felt. Fleeting, she wondered if she smelled like smoke from the cigarette she'd shared with him. She'd know soon enough. If her mother smelled smoke on her, she definitely wouldn't let it pass. After all, it wouldn't do for the daughter of Pastor and Mrs. King to be seen committing a sin of the flesh, would it?

The thought was so ludicrous she would have laughed if she didn't want to cry. Cover your sins and keep up appearances. The unspoken rule, more sacred than the Golden.

She glanced at the clock. It had been an hour since she'd called her mother to let her know she was running a little late and to ask if she would please pick Emily up from school. She'd tried to get there sooner, but this episode, or flashback, whatever it was, had lasted longer than ever before. She simply hadn't been able to move.

The familiar 1970s-*Knots Landing* homes slipped past her with

their perfectly manicured lawns and respectable members of AARP sitting on porches or watering flowers out front. Claudia remembered days and nights when her parents gathered her into the backseat of their car and “took a drive” through streets of these nicer neighborhoods, dreaming of the day when God would “bless” their faithfulness. A house on the good side of town. Their reward on earth.

The smiles and waves she now received from the neighbors as she fifteen-MPHed her way toward her parents’ house were a far cry from the reception her parents had received as the first biracial couple in the neighborhood—even after twelve years of ministry to the growing town of Conch Springs. A suburb of Dallas wasn’t exactly the most welcoming place on earth to set down roots in the late ’70s and early ’80s if you weren’t white and Republican, but Daddy had a call from God and had no intention of running away from white hoods and backwoods bullies. He was the bravest, smartest, holiest man Claudia knew.

They’d weathered the threats, broken windows, and smashed-up mailboxes. Everything short of burning crosses. And here they were still. Standing proud and strong. Living well. Thirty-five years in this town and in ministry.

Even though Claudia hadn’t come along for several years after her parents had arrived in Conch Springs, she had to admit a certain amount of pride when she thought about all the obstacles her parents had faced coming here and refusing to be ashamed of their relationship or Daddy’s heritage. Her mother was a paradox. Married to a black man and proud of it, but refusing to be honest about anything else that might draw criticism.

The town had its bigots—some had even left the church after Daddy took over as pastor. But the ones who stayed—even reluctantly—came around pretty quickly. Daddy had a way of winning over skeptics. It was one of his gifts.

Too bad Mother was the one standing on the porch looking like she had something on her mind.

Claudia drew in a breath and prepared herself as she climbed out of the Tahoe and walked toward the porch. She smiled as five-year-old Emily rushed out of the house and skipped toward her. “Hey, sweetie,” she said, stopping halfway down the front walk and kneeling. “How was kindergarten today?”

“Fun.” Emily shoved her backpack into Claudia’s hands. “Miss Grishem sent a note. It’s inside.”

“Okay, hop in the car and buckle up.” Still smiling, she stood and focused on her mother, who stood in the threshold of the front door. “Thanks for picking her up.”

“I didn’t mind. But Vic has been calling. He said you missed the appointment.”

Alarm seized Claudia’s stomach. “He didn’t tell you what the meeting was about, did he?”

She scowled in the way only Mother could, making Claudia feel small. “No, he didn’t. Although I don’t see why it’s such a secret. Are you pregnant again?”

“No, Mother,” she said, wincing at the way her tone dropped, but resolute. “And I can’t tell you what the meeting was for. That’s between Vic and me.”

But Mother would know soon enough. The night of the

anniversary dinner, she would complain and protest as they asked her to trust them and not ask questions on the way to the four-star restaurant. Then she would realize there was a party given in her honor, and for an hour or two, she would smile and be so pleased. Then later, when the two of them were alone, she would pick it apart.

“Did you tell Vic I called?”

“Of course. But you better have a good excuse for missing that meeting—whatever it was about. He’s pretty upset.”

“I have a good *reason* and that’s also between Vic and me.”

Her mother gave a shrug of her slim shoulders. “Fine. Keep your secrets. I best get inside and tend to your daddy’s dinner. You know he likes it on time.” The implication being, of course, that Claudia might not care about her husband, but her mother would not disappoint hers.

Everything in Claudia wanted to blurt out fifteen years’ worth of reminders, but instead, she met her mother’s gaze with the appropriate amount of humility and bit her tongue.

“Bye, Mama. Thanks again.”

Claudia remained where she stood on the walk between the driveway and front porch until the door shut, then with a sigh, turned toward her waiting daughter.

Fat raindrops splattered over the hood of her SUV. Thunder rumbled overhead fifteen minutes later as she pulled into the driveway of the forty-year-old split-level home she and Vic had purchased the year Emily was born. She’d loved it back then, but now, even after her remodel of the kitchen and addition of a master bedroom, it didn’t feel like home anymore. She couldn’t explain the unrest, just

that it felt like her whole body was jittery, tickly, like all she wanted to do was make it stop, but everything she did made it worse.

The sky moved again. Claudia hoped a gentle thunderstorm was on its way. Maybe she'd sleep tonight.

She frowned at the sight of Victor's Camry and shot a glance at the clock. So he'd decided not to go back to work today. That was a surprise, considering how hard he'd been working lately with DA Slattery's pending retirement. She glanced in the rearview mirror. "Looks like Daddy's home early, Emmy."

"Yay!" The little girl's enthusiastic response brought a smile to Claudia's face. If anyone understood daddy hero worship, she did.

Claudia slid the car into park and glanced over her shoulder at Emily. "Don't forget your backpack."

"I won't!" Her tiny body looked even tinier against the massive Tahoe door as she reached for the handle.

"Wait for me to help you out."

Emmy scrunched her nose, looking exactly like Vic when he was trying to form his closing arguments. "I can do it." Before Claudia could stop her, Emmy pushed open the mammoth door with a grunt and slid out.

"Be careful, Emily!" Honestly, sometimes the child's independence nearly gave Claudia a heart attack.

Shaking her head, she grabbed her shoes from the back floorboard and her purse from the seat next to her. Her gaze fell on the Camry as she walked past. She reached out her hand and felt the hood. Still warm. He hadn't been home long. Claudia couldn't remember the last time Vic had come home early.

Guilt slammed across her heart. Would she ever stop letting everyone down?

Casio

“Dear Jesus, please make him stop.”

The voice sliced through Casio’s rage, and he stopped short, as though something otherworldly stayed his hand, this close to smashing his two-thousand-dollar entertainment system into a million pieces. For the first time, Casio Hightower took stock of his surroundings. The broken glass, destroyed TV—a forty-seven-inch LG flat screen. What the... ?

Harper lay curled in a fetal position, her body shaking with silent sobs.

“Oh, my...” He took an engulfing breath. “God, what did I do?”

He swiped a pool of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and knelt down beside the woman he loved.

If only she hadn’t turned down his proposal.

Her lip was split and bleeding. He was the worst kind of monster.

She put up her hand to shield her face, and a diamond sparkled from the engagement ring he’d forced onto her finger. Slowly he reached out. She gasped and shriveled before him. “Don’t...,” she pleaded.

“It’s okay. I’m done.” He lifted her hand and gently removed the ring. “I’m sorry. Honey, I’m so sorry. Forgive me.”

“C-can I go?”

Nodding, Casio sat back, knees up, arms and fingers clasped loosely around his legs. Weak, tired...so sorry, he watched her scoot

away from him and stand up slowly, painfully. She grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter and stumbled to the door.

Lying back, he closed his eyes, replaying the stupid, mean, vile things he'd said and done to the woman he thought he'd spend the rest of his life loving. Frustration pushed through his throat as a groan. He hadn't had a flashback of the night on the bus in months. But tonight, he couldn't stop seeing the man in the mask, all the blood on the floor of the bus. BJ Remington's death. It had to have been caused by seeing Claudia again. Rehashing those events had triggered this craziness.

Shame washed over him. He knew there was no way to free himself from the guilt that clenched his gut, nauseating him with the memory of his hand slamming into the woman he loved. She'd taken him back before when he'd gotten a little rough, but the fear in her eyes, the blood—no way would she walk through those doors again. Not even to pick up her things.

Weary, he shoved to his feet and started the process of cleaning up the mess. Harper knew how much he loved her. They'd been through too much together for her to just walk away. She'd be back and he would get help this time, so that he could cope with the anger that built up in him.

When the phone rang a few hours later, he'd barely finished the cleanup. "Yeah?"

"Hey, man, it's Bob down at the station."

He sighed, resigned. At least they'd done him the courtesy of not showing up at his door with cuffs and a warrant.

"We have a situation."

"Yeah, I know."

If she'd gone to the hospital and she was pretty beat up, the doctors would have called it in.

"Harper says you raped and beat her. We might not be able to make this go away. They're calling in a special investigator from Dallas to look into her allegations against you."

Rape? That's not the way he remembered their lovemaking. Things had gotten rough later, but he hadn't forced her. The very thought grated on him. He'd never had to force a woman to be with him. He struggled to keep his voice calm.

"When do you want me in?"

"In the morning. Nine o'clock."

After the call, he stood in the middle of the room, feeling it spin around him a million miles an hour. Harper's betrayal smashed against him, harder than any blow he'd landed on her.

His boots crunched over a pile of broken glass he'd forgotten to sweep up, and he made his way to the bathroom. He washed his hands and stopped, staring at himself in the mirror. The memory of her face, already beginning to bruise, shoved into his mind. The scrapes on his knuckles were telltale—open-and-shut case. That couldn't happen. As much as he cared about Harper and hadn't meant to go that far, his job on the force was all he had, and he couldn't let this incident rob him of the rest of his life. He staggered into the kitchen and glanced around.

Victor

A suspicious mind came naturally to Vic. After all, he'd been raised by his mother in a rough part of Dallas, and his job depended upon him being suspicious.

He dumped Emmy's half-full glass of water from dinner and set it in the dishwasher. A rueful smile touched his lips. Half-full. Maybe that was his problem. A suspicious Assistant District Attorney with optimist tendencies. No wonder he was always in a state of turmoil. At least where Claudia was concerned.

She had looked good coming home a few hours ago when he'd met her and Emmy at the door. Almost too good in her snug jeans and the low-cut blouse he'd never seen before. He tried not to step in on household things. He knew she'd always done well with the budget, but lately new things were showing up all the time. An ADA in the state of Texas didn't make anything close to the six figures he could make in private practice—especially defense.

When Claudia missed appointments like she had today, he couldn't help but worry. He thought back to their predinner conversation, right after she'd sent Emmy to put away her backpack.

"So, where were you?" he'd asked, trying to keep his voice even, unthreatening.

She had glanced at him sharply as though she might snap, but he decided to diffuse the situation before an argument ensued.

"I was worried."

She expelled a heavy breath. "I had another panic attack," she said. "Only this one was really bad. I got stuck at the tracks and then I couldn't move even after the train was gone. Someone called the police, and lucky for me, Casio Hightower was the one who came. He got me off the road and sat with me while I calmed down." Her shaky smile touched his compassion. "I took a few puffs of his cigarette to calm me down."

He shoved down his jealousy at the thought of Claudia and the

police officer sharing a cigarette. When he stepped forward, she moved into his arms.

The rest of the evening had gone smoothly, but Victor sensed a deep unsettling in his wife. He hated how helpless he was to do anything about it. How could he be so good at putting away bad guys and so bad at making his wife happy?

“Hey, look at you, cooking and doing the dishes too. How’d I get so lucky?”

Vic looked up to find Claudia standing in the doorway, wearing a pair of yoga pants and a strappy top that hugged her figure and made him want to forget the dishes and carry her upstairs. “Emmy all tucked in?”

She nodded, walking into the kitchen. She plopped her hands onto her curvy hips. “Go relax. You’ve done enough. I’ll finish up here.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Thank you, honey.” He transferred the dishtowel from his shoulder to hers and pressed a kiss to her cheek. The faint smell of smoke still clung to her hair. “Claude?”

“Yeah?” She angled her gaze to him as she plunged her hands into the soapy water. Her beautiful brown eyes were wide and innocent, but her body had tensed in such a way that he knew, from two years with this virtual stranger, they could easily go from friendly banter to an argument in no time flat.

“Never mind. I’ll meet you in the living room when you’re finished and we can watch a movie or something. Whatever you want.”

“Sounds fine. I won’t be long.”

The AC kicked on, sending a blast through the vent as he walked by. He stopped and let the semicool air dry the sweat glistening on his skin from the warm kitchen. “Did you call the air-conditioning people?” he asked.

Claudia let out a long breath. “No. I forgot. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“It’s just that Indian summer is in full swing.” He tried to keep his tone light. “The weather guy on Channel Ten said no relief from the heat for at least five days.”

“I said I’ll call tomorrow. Okay?” She kept her gaze fixed to her task.

“I didn’t mean to sound critical.” Vic walked back to the sink and slipped his arms around her, unwilling to let go of the ease of the afternoon and evening.

She sighed and set down the baked beans pan she’d been scrubbing. She tilted her head, inviting him. “I know you didn’t. I’m sorry, baby. It’s just been a rotten day.”

He buried his face in her neck.

Turning in his arms, she slid her soapy hands around his neck. Victor leaned his head back and studied her face. The emptiness in her eyes stole his passion. He knew she would do her duty, but her heart and her mind wouldn’t be engaged in their lovemaking. Her indifference chafed his ego.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I have some work to do.”

Her expression changed only by a fraction, then she turned back to the sink.

Vic wandered into the living room. He missed Claudia. His

Claudia. The funny, sexy partner he'd had for the first five years of his marriage. He caught a glimpse of her every now and then, but eventually that vacant look returned, and his Claudia went away.

As he dropped onto the couch, his mind took him back to the day they'd met. The day his life had gone from empty to full. He had walked into her dad's office to discuss a church robbery case where Pastor King was to testify. Claudia had worked as her dad's assistant back then, and the moment he saw her at the desk, smiling as she spoke on the phone, he was a goner. Her smile still made him weak.

He only wished he could help her find her joy again.