

crossing *Oceans*



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Crossing Oceans

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For my sister, Jodi, who has already crossed.

*Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared
to the glory he will reveal to us later.*

ROMANS 8:18

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CHAPTER ONE

NOTHING DEEPENS A stream like a good rain . . . or makes it harder to cross.

Just a few hundred feet away from the home I'd sworn never to return to, I sat on the smooth surface of a boulder. With my jeans cuffed and toes wiggling in the cold water, I reflected on how recent rains had caused these banks to widen and swell.

Perhaps a decent relationship with my father might also rise as a result of the storm we'd endured. Much could happen in six years. Maybe my absence had, as the adage promised, made his heart grow fonder. Maybe my homecoming would be like that of the Prodigal and he'd greet me with

eager arms. Together we'd cry for all that had passed between us—and all that should have but didn't.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

It's going to go just fine, I told myself as I traced the slippery surface of a moss-covered branch with my foot.

"What's funny, Mommy?"

Isabella's voice startled me. I didn't dare admit that what my five-year-old interpreted as mirth was really a grimace, because then of course she'd want to know what was the matter. "Nothing, sweetness."

She threw a pebble at the water, but it dropped inches from its goal, clinking against slate instead. "You were smiling like this—" She bared her teeth in a forced grin.

Gently, I pinched her cheek.

"You're beautiful, Mommy."

"Thank you, baby. So are you."

"Yes, I am."

I smiled at that. I smiled at just about everything she said and did.

"Mommy, why'd we drive here 'stead of Cowpa's house?"

Cowpa was her name for grandparents of either gender. I probably should have corrected her long ago, but I found the odd term endearing. Besides, I reasoned, she'd grow out of baby talk all too soon without any help from me. I found myself wondering what other lessons she would learn in my absence.

The thought overwhelmed me, but I refused to cry in front of my daughter. Unloading my heavy burden onto her

delicate shoulders was not an option. I might not be able to control much in my life lately, but I could still protect her. Nothing mattered more.

“This was my thinking place when I was a little girl. I wanted to show it to you in case you wanted to think sometimes.” I breathed in the area’s familiar fragrance—a combination of damp leaves, pine, and earth—and eyed my surroundings. Same trees. Same sounds. Nothing much ever changed in this spot. That, more than any other reason, was why I loved it so much. Especially now.

I’d spent half of my life here, sitting on this unyielding rock, trying to make sense of the world. The loss of my mother. My father’s neglect. The sometimes-sweet, often-bitter, words of my ex-boyfriend, David. It was here I’d first gotten real with God, begging Him not to take my mother. Railing at Him when He did.

Isabella bounced on one foot. “What did you think about here?”

I poked my toes through water, watching droplets glide down my pink toenails. “Well, when I was little, I thought of catching frogs and grasshoppers and wondered whether I would ever have a best friend to share my secrets with.”

“Did you find your best friend?” A dangling pine needle twirled from one of her curls.

Love overwhelmed me. “Yes, sweetness. I got you.”

She gave me one of her endearing smiles, pulled the debris from her hair, examined it, then dropped it in the stream. I scooped a handful of the cool water and let it slip through my

fingers like the life I'd just left behind—my studio apartment that never really felt like home, the corporate ladder I'd just begun to climb, my coworkers who never became the close friends I had longed for. All of it now gone, as though it had never existed at all.

My daughter looked at me askance. "I wanna go."

The hum of nature faded. The only thing I heard now was the sharp tick of my wristwatch reminding me just how short time was. Standing, I assured myself that I could do what I had come to do. For Isabella, I could do it. I slipped my damp feet into my Birkenstocks and brushed off my rear before collecting my daughter's chubby hand in my fingers.

I forced one leg in front of the other and made my way past my car, along the winding dirt road.

A familiar picket fence dressed in tangled braids of morning glories came into view. I clutched my daughter's fingers tighter, feeling more like child than mother.

Placing a hand over my heart, I stopped and took it in. I'd forgotten how beautiful my childhood home was and how much I'd missed it. As I remembered running barefoot through this yard and cannonball jumping into the pond out back, joy pricked at me . . . until my gaze settled on the bare dirt beneath the stairs. How many times had I hidden under that porch, wounded by my father's words? Too many. My smile died.

Isabella looked up at me eagerly, giving the motivation, if not the courage, I needed to continue. Ghosts of summers past faded as the fragrant scent of roses washed over me,

and with it another wave of doubt so tall and wide, I felt as though I might drown in it.

What if my father wouldn't receive me? Or worse, what if he didn't accept my daughter? I felt sure Mama Peg would embrace her, but could he? Accepting me had proven impossible for him, but perhaps a child as charming as Isabella could thaw his arctic heart.

Now on the second stair, I paused to look behind me at the road, feeling a sudden urge to retreat. Isabella bounced on the balls of her feet, anxious to continue.

When we reached the porch, I squatted to her level. "Are you ready to meet your grandpa and great-grandma?"

The longing in her maple syrup eyes needed no words, but she added them anyway. "Jane has a cowpa, Natalie has a cowpa, Carter has two cowpas, and . . ." She gave me a look that said, *Must I continue?*

"Okay, I get it." I stood and lifted a fist to the door. Before I could knock, Isabella lurched forward and did it for me. She tapped her sandaled foot twice, then reached to knock again.

I grabbed her hand. "Give them a chance."

The oversize wildflower wreath swayed as the door creaked open. An elderly woman with thick gray hair fashioned into a bun stood before us, oxygen tubes protruding from her nostrils. Deep wrinkles fractured her leathery skin. Her eyebrows were bushes, her lips were shriveled like raisins, and a heavy, floral perfume emanated from her.

Isabella gasped, but I beamed. "Mama Peg."

My grandmother winked at me before turning her milky gaze to her great-granddaughter. “You must be Bella.”

Isabella’s mouth opened and a strange squeal escaped. I don’t know who was more horrified at that moment—Isabella at the sight of Mama Peg, Mama Peg at Isabella’s revulsion, or me at their initial reactions to each other.

Mama Peg broke out in a deep belly laugh, intermingled with emphysemic hacks. Isabella leaped back as though she expected my grandmother and her tank to explode.

I laughed so hard tears streamed down my cheeks. That seemed to calm Isabella, and soon she was grinning too.

“I’m a wretched sight now, little girl, but not so long ago, I used to be as pretty as you,” my grandmother managed through her own amusement.

Isabella looked at me to dispel this ridiculous claim. I could only nod. I should have prepared her for this.

Mama Peg raised an unruly eyebrow at me. “I don’t think she believes me.”

Catching my breath, I wiped my eyes. “I’m not sure I do either.” I added a wink to soften the jab. I knew she had been lovely, of course. I’d seen the proof in photographs. She still was in my eyes—one of the most beautiful women I had ever known, despite the cruel effects of tobacco and time.

An exaggerated scowl deepened her wrinkles. “Genevieve Paige Lucas, you’re still a brat.”

Leaning in, I hugged her with all I had. “I missed you, Grandma.”

“You too, Jenny. You stayed away far too long.” She hugged

me tight, then slowly pulled away from me. Her eyes glistened, but her tears, every bit as stubborn as she, refused to fall. She scanned the porch. “Where are your bags?”

“In the car. I’ll get them later.”

She squinted past me at the empty brick driveway. “You parked in front of the stream, I gather?”

I nodded.

A glint of understanding crinkled her eyes as she stepped back, motioning us into the house. My grandmother, more than anyone, understood my need to commune with nature.

When I entered my father’s home, my heart once again found my throat. I ushered Isabella across the threshold and hastily scanned the living room, searching for him. I watched Isabella take in the cozy surroundings. Braided rugs protected the hardwood floor. Vases of garden flowers rested on lace-covered tabletops. Everything was just as I remembered . . . including the chill creeping through me, which had nothing to do with air-conditioning.

“It’s beautiful, Cowpa!”

Mama Peg shut the door and turned to me. “What did that child call me?”

“That’s her word for Grandma—” I cleared my throat—
“and Grandpa.”

My grandmother shook her head, eyeing my daughter. “Call me Mama Peg. Understand?”

Without responding, Isabella made her way toward the stone fireplace, enthralled with the portrait hanging above it. A woman with long chestnut curls flowing about her

narrow waist sat sidesaddle on a white horse. My mother's painted gaze followed me. Her sad little smile made me long to comfort her.

Isabella moved as close to it as she could without stepping onto the hearth. "It's you, Mommy."

Mama Peg grabbed the black handle of her oxygen canister and rolled it to where my daughter stood. "That's your mama's mama. They look a lot alike, don't you think?"

Isabella nodded.

"She died before you were born."

A familiar ache settled within me as memories of my mother's last days forced their way into my mind, elbowing away more pleasant memories.

Isabella picked at the glitter on her T-shirt. "Where do you go when you die?"

I flashed my grandmother a warning look. "Never mind." I had no desire to explain death to her at that moment. "Where's Dad?" I asked.

Mama Peg's shoulders sank. "Upstairs being him."

"What did he say when you told him I was coming?" I held my breath and fingered my thick braid.

"You know him. He . . ." Without finishing the thought, she made her way to the kitchen and we followed. The hard rubber heels of her shoes scraped against the tile floor as she shuffled to the back door. She pulled the lace curtain to the side and looked out the window at the pond out back.

Isabella lifted the top from a white candle in the table's center, releasing a waft of vanilla.

I wrinkled my nose at the sickeningly sweet smell, took the lid from her, and replaced it. “You didn’t tell him everything, did you?”

“I told him he had a granddaughter.”

“That’s all?”

Her voice began to break up. “Of course. A mother should never have to tell her son—”

“Bella?” I interrupted before Mama Peg could say more in front of my child than I was prepared to answer for.

Isabella’s gaze ping-ponged between us.

“See if you can find Sweet Pea.” The thought occurred to me that there I was, trying to avoid the subject of death, and the cat might be long gone. I lowered my voice, though Isabella stood no farther away than Mama Peg. “He is still—?”

“Alive?” With a chortle, she let the curtain drop back into place and turned to face me. “His Royal Stubbornness refuses to cash in his ninth life. You really must want to change the subject badly to send your sweet girl searching for that homicidal monster.”

Isabella’s expression filled with alarm.

“Not a monster.” I tousled her soft curls. “Just a kitty.”

Mama Peg hacked, her skin taking on a grayish hue. I rubbed her back, hating the plastic feel of her polyester top. When her cough subsided, she plucked a napkin from a pile on the table and wiped her mouth. “That furry devil will scratch her bloody.”

“She’ll never catch him.”

“You forget, six years have passed. He’s old and slow now.”

Considering what the tabby might do to Isabella if she tried to pet him gave me pause. I took her hands in mine and squatted to eye level. “Look for him, Bella, but don’t get too close. He’s got a bad temper and sharp claws that will give you boo-boos.”

She promised obedience, then raced off for the hunt.

Mama Peg turned to me. “She’s braver than you were at her age.”

“Who isn’t?” I had never been the fearless child Isabella was. She saw everything as a ray of sunshine living just to warm her. No matter how many times I counseled her that not everyone had her best interests at heart, she refused to believe it. After all, she loved everything and everyone, so why wouldn’t they love her back?

Mama Peg adjusted the tubing threaded over her ears. “When are you going to tell your father?”

I walked to the stove and picked up the teakettle. Finding it heavy, I set it back down and turned on the burner. A snap preceded a flame.

“I want to see how he treats her first.”

“Of course he’ll love her. She’s part of you. Part of your mother.”

An old, familiar dagger lunged into my chest and I hated that even now it could penetrate me. “He hasn’t loved anything since Mom passed.”

“That’s not true,” she whispered, as if saying it softly

could somehow breathe truth into the falsehood. She pulled two ceramic mugs from the cupboard. “He’s a good man, Jenny.”

I felt a sudden heaviness about me as I pulled a chair away from the table to sit. “A good man with a hardened heart.”

She dropped a square of tea into each mug. “Having someone you love taken from you has a way of changing a person.”

I crossed my arms.

She averted her gaze. “Stupid thing to say to you, I guess.”

“I guess.”

“So what if you don’t like the way he is with her? Then what will you do?”

It was the question that had kept me awake for the past two weeks. The most important question in my world.

“I’m not her only parent.”

“I guess now would be the time to tell me who her father is.” She raised my chin, forcing me to look at her. After several seconds of reading me, she withdrew her hand. “As if I don’t already know.”

My face burned and I opened my mouth to say his name, but it stuck in my throat—a dam holding back half a decade’s worth of tears. “I never told him.”

Mama Peg’s face drained of what little color it held. I could almost feel her heart splinter. “Oh, Jenny.”

I deserved her scorn. But she wrapped her sagging arms around my shoulders, smothering me in her generous bosom, flowery perfume, and acceptance. Relief overwhelmed me.

“I found him! I found him!” The pattering of feet accompanied my daughter’s shriek.

Mama Peg released me, and we turned to the doorway in anticipation of Isabella’s excited return. She appeared, dragging my father by the hand.

His short, wavy hair was more gray now than brown. He wore his polo shirt tucked neatly into creased pants and a leather belt fastened around his trim belly. I’d have better luck trying to read Chinese than gauge his emotions by his stoic expression.

My fingernails dug into my palms and I felt the need to sit before registering that I was already seated. When his gaze met mine, he gave me a quick once-over. I studied the lines around his eyes. Was he fighting a smile? If so, was it due to smugness that I’d come crawling home or joy at seeing me after so long? Or was I imagining it all?

Without a word, he walked to the kitchen window, held his hand over his eyes, and panned the side yard.

Mama Peg threw me an annoyed glance. “What the dickens is he doing?”

He turned around, this time donning a sly grin. “I’m looking for the airborne swine.”

The dumb look on his face told me he expected laughter, but I just sat there slack-jawed.

“As I recall, you said you’d come home when pigs fly.”

Though I promised myself I would curb my usual retorts, my mouth opened before I could will it not to. “Yeah, I get it. I’m smarter than I look.”

He surprised me by waving his hand in dismissal. “So after six years of nothing, you’ve finally decided to let me meet my granddaughter. How very humane of you. I assume you’re here because you’re broke?”

My thoughts flashed back to the phone call home I’d made after leaving. I’d tearfully told my father I was pregnant. Five minutes into a lecture on the sins and consequences of fornication, I hung up without a word and never called again.

Every day for two weeks after that, his number showed on my caller ID. Not wanting further berating, I never answered or called him back. After several months of silence, the number flashed again. This time I picked up, but it was my grandmother on the other line, not my father. Never again my father.

“Assumptions have always been your specialty.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted them back. Why was I waving a red cape before this bull instead of the white flag I’d intended?

The teakettle’s high-pitched scream pierced the uncomfortable silence. Mama Peg hurried to the stove and jerked the vessel to a cool burner.

My father squatted before Isabella. “Do you know who I am, young lady?”

Considering the question, she looked to the left. “My daddy?”

I cringed at her unexpected response and my gaze flew to meet my father’s eyes. The icy glare he sent my way could have frozen an ocean.

“That’s your grandpa,” I managed.

She looked up at him with adoring eyes, then flung her pudgy arms around his shoulders.

I exhaled in relief when he reciprocated. After the hug, he stood. His expression once again bore the emotional void I’d come to expect since Mom died.

Clearing his throat, he straightened an already-even belt buckle. “I think I saw Sweet Pea run by.”

Isabella jerked her head left, then right. My father pointed to the living room and off she went, oblivious to the manipulation.

“She doesn’t know who her father is?” He glared at me as I fought back tears of frustration. I didn’t trust myself to speak, and he probably felt the same. After a few long seconds, he snatched a set of keys from the wall hook, glowered at me one last time, and slammed the door shut behind him.