

CROSSING'S REDEMPTION



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*Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed;
save me and I will be saved,
for you are the one I praise.*

Jeremiah 17:14

CHAPTER 1



*A*MBER YAGER PULLED HER 2010 black Jeep Liberty off Highway 26 at Crossing, Oregon. Running her hand through her dark hair, she rested her slender arm on the console between the front seats. “We’re almost home, baby boy.”

She looked in the rearview mirror to see the reflection of six-month old Daniel in the mirror fastened above his rear-facing car seat. He had fallen asleep shortly after leaving the doctor’s office in Portland an hour ago, and his chubby cheeks and closed eyes weren’t showing any signs of waking now. The May sun coming through her window warmed her enough that she didn’t have to worry too much about constantly adjusting the heat in the Jeep. She liked it warm, but the child did not like being too hot.

She turned right onto Hood Street and thought about stopping in the town square to see her parents who helped run the local hardware store. “Not sure I’m ready for all of Dad’s questions about the appointment today, God.” His journalistic mind frequently took over in conversations, and today she feared he’d seek answers she wasn’t sure she had. She drove by the two-story building, vowing to call her mom soon.

Just as Amber approached the turn-off that would take her a short distance out of town to the home she shared with her husband, Peter, she noticed Patricia Guire sitting on her front porch steps. Amber raised her hand in greeting, but the sixty-six-year-old woman barely acknowledged her.

That's odd, thought Amber. *She's usually friendly to me.*

She braked in front of Patricia's home and rolled down her window. "Hi, Mrs. Guire," she called out. "How are you?"

Patricia barely lifted her hand in response.

Amber tried again. "Are you okay, Mrs. Guire?" She barely heard the response.

"Fine."

Amber watched for a moment, trying to decide what to do. Patricia's short, gray hair blew slightly with the breeze, but the rest of her was uncommonly still. *Something's not right, Lord.*

Go help, came a gentle response.

Amber pulled into the driveway and put the Jeep into park. Leaving it running and hoping Daniel would sleep for a while still, Amber grabbed her phone and got out of the vehicle. Patricia didn't look her way.

Amber crouched one step below Patricia and looked up into her face. Thankfully, most of the porch was in the afternoon shade. "What's wrong, Mrs. Guire?"

"I..just need...a moment," she said breathlessly. "I'll be... fine...in a minute."

Amber unlocked her phone and went to her contacts list. She clicked on her brother's work number. "I'm calling Ryan."

Her brother being a licensed EMT had come in handy several times over the last few years, but she was now just as thankful that Mrs. Guire lived only a few blocks from the town clinic where he was working to become a physician's assistant.

The receptionist answered on the second ring. "Crossing Clinic."

"Hey, Becka. It's Amber. Sorry to be short but I have a problem. Is Ryan there?"

"Yeah. He's just finishing up with a patient. Do you want to hold?"

"No," said Amber. "Please have him meet me at Mrs. Guire's house. Tell him I need him now."

Amber ended the call and picked up Mrs. Guire's small, trembling hand. "Ryan will be here in just a minute. He is at the clinic."

"It passes," said Patricia breathlessly.

"How long has this been going on?" Amber prayed the rumble she heard was Ryan's 1968 black Mustang starting. As rarely as she called him at the clinic, he would know this was an emergency.

"I don't know," said Patricia, beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

Ryan Griffin pulled up in front of the house and turned the car off. Grabbing a medical bag, he jumped out of the car, a lock of dark hair falling on his forehead. Running most mornings with Peter helped keep his twenty-five-year-old body in great shape, but his wavy hair resisted control. "What's up, ladies?"

Amber gave Mrs. Guire a moment to answer, but she barely acknowledged Ryan's presence. "I was on my way home and saw her sitting here," said Amber. "She's not really talking much and didn't say anything when I called you."

Ryan looked at his elder sister, eyebrows rising. Patricia Guire was not known around town for quiet compliance. He kneeled in front of the older woman and felt for a pulse in her wrist. "What are you feeling, Mrs. Guire?"

"Tired," said Patricia. "I'm just...tired."

"Uh-huh," said Ryan. "Anything else? Any pain?"

"I just need...to lie down." She shifted her eyes to look at Ryan for the first time since he arrived. "It passes."

"Does it now," said Ryan. "And how often does it pass?" Ryan

pulled out a pulse oximeter and attached it to Patricia's left index finger.

"Every few days or so." Patricia's voice was soft but becoming more steady.

Amber turned to look through her car window but didn't see any movement from the car seat. She prayed Daniel still slept peacefully.

"Are we talking more than once a week?" said Ryan as he watched the reading on the pulse ox machine.

"Not normally." Patricia's eyes were clearing, and she watched Ryan's movements.

"How about you let us help you inside so we can get this jacket off?" said Ryan. "I'd like to take your blood pressure."

"No need to worry," said Patricia, weakly waving him off. "If I can just rest for a while..."

"Mrs. Guire," said Ryan. "That wasn't really a request."

Amber watched the two of them size each other up. She'd never seen her brother stand up to Mrs. Guire quite like this before, but she knew his obstinate side very well. Just five years younger than she was, she remembered many stand-offs growing up.

After a brief moment, Patricia nodded. "Okay."

Ryan extended both his arms, and Mrs. Guire leaned on him heavily as she stood.

"I'm just going to grab Daniel from the car," said Amber.

"Oh, child," said Patricia, "go on home." Patricia carefully climbed a step, obviously relying on Ryan to steady her. "I'm fine. Really."

"With all due respect, Mrs. Guire," said Amber, "I'll feel much better once Ryan's convinced you're fine."

Amber opened the front door of her Jeep and turned the engine off, then went to the back door and opened it to see Daniel looking at her. "Hey there, handsome." She unlatched the

seatbelt and pulled the car seat towards her. "We're just going to go inside Mrs. Guire's house for a few minutes."

By the time she made it inside, Ryan had Patricia sitting on her couch and was helping her out of her jacket. She seemed like a weak version of her normal self, yet more responsive than before.

"I don't know why you think this is necessary," said Patricia.

Ryan fastened the blood pressure cuff around her right arm. "Because you were sitting on your front porch allowing me to attach medical equipment to you without an argument."

"I simply over-exerted myself for a moment," said Patricia.

"Really," said Ryan calmly. "Doing what?" He inflated the blood pressure cuff.

"I was tending to my bluebells in the garden," said Patricia.

As he began to release the pressure on the cuff, he felt her pulse at her wrist again. "And what were you doing last time this happened?" asked Ryan.

"Last time?"

"Yes," said Ryan. "You said this happens once a week or more. Were you also tending the garden last time?"

"That's not any of your concern," snapped Patricia.

"It's good to hear your attitude returning to normal," said Ryan.

Amber felt the tension rising in the room but wasn't sure what to do to help.

"Now you listen to me, young man," Patricia began.

"No, ma'am," said Ryan. "You listen to me." He sat down on the couch beside her and removed the blood pressure cuff. "I don't know how often your family checks on you by phone, but with the exception of your niece's trip here six months ago, I've not seen any of them rumble into town."

"I dare say nothing rumbles in this town but that old Mustang of yours," Patricia muttered.

Ryan continued on without letting her distract him. "And

I'm willing to bet that I'm the closest thing to a doctor that you've seen in a long time."

Patricia crossed her arms. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Mrs. Guire, as both a medical professional and a friend, I care about you. And what I saw when I first got here concerns me."

"Is my blood pressure bad?"

"It's not horrible," said Ryan.

"And that contraption you put on my finger. Was it reading okay?"

"It was acceptable."

"So what exactly are you proposing?"

"I'd like to start by testing your blood sugar now."

Patricia raised her eyebrows. "You think I'm diabetic, boy?"

"That's one possibility."

"And what are the other possibilities?"

"Truthfully, Mrs. Guire, the possibilities are quite extensive because I have a very short list of symptoms. I'd really like you to come back to the clinic to tell me more about what's been going on and to allow me to draw blood for some tests."

"And what if I don't want to?"

"I don't mind setting up shop right here. I have quite a bit of what I need in that bag." Ryan pointed his index finger in her face. "And I'm not above calling someone to bring me everything else so you don't have a chance to lock me out."

Patricia grabbed his finger. "You're about the most irritating boy in this whole town."

Ryan grinned at her. "I'll take that as a yes."

CHAPTER 2



CONVINCED HER JEEP WAS EASIER for Patricia to get out of than Ryan's Mustang, Amber insisted on driving her to the clinic. Upon arriving at the front door, Patricia thanked her for the ride. Ryan opened her door and held his hands out to assist her. "I wouldn't get used to this, young man," she said as she leaned on him to get out of the Jeep.

Ryan shut the vehicle door and waved to his sister. "I'm rather counting on you hanging around for a while to help spoil Alaina."

"How old is your sweet child now?" Patricia knew she was moving more slowly than normal, but her steps were taking so much effort.

"Two weeks old today. We thought she and Peter might share a birthday, as late as she was coming."

Ryan opened the front door of the clinic, and Patricia shuffled through, pausing in the small waiting area. Two people sat in chairs to her right, and Patricia determined not to look to see who was going to know she'd come in the door on Ryan's arm.

"Hey, Becka," said Ryan. "Is Exam 2 open?"

Becka's blonde ponytail bounced with each movement of

her head. "Sure is," the receptionist replied before answering the ringing phone.

"Just a little farther, Mrs. Guire," said Ryan. "We're going back here to the left."

Patricia straightened her spine and gave each step concentrated effort. *I will not look like an invalid*, she thought.

Just as they reached the exam room door, the door to the right opened. Dr. John Williams stood to the side while seven-year-old Joshua Davis and his mother, Amy, stepped out.

"Hey, Doc Ryan!" said Josh. "Doc John says I'm doing great!" Josh emphasized his last word by jumping as high as he could with his fist in the air.

Patricia thought back three years when Ryan first appeared in Crossing, before the days that Crossing had a regular doctor in the clinic. Josh had been showing signs of a flu that wouldn't go away and nose bleeds every few days. When the small child had fainted at Amber's wedding reception, Ryan had been the one who insisted on taking the child straight to Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, where he had been diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia.

"Give me five," said Ryan, holding his hand out for the child to hit.

"C'mon, Josh," said Amy. "Let's not 'old everyone up."

Patricia smiled at Amy as she directed her child toward the front door; then her eyes briefly met Dr. Williams'. She jerked away, releasing Ryan's arm so she could walk into the exam room.

"Everything okay?" said Dr. Williams.

"Yeah," said Ryan. "Just doing some routine checks."

"Let me know if you need me," Patricia heard Dr. Williams say.

She refused to acknowledge his presence in the hallway. She could sense Ryan's confusion, and she knew she was being rude,

but she would take a firm stance. She could not let her guard down.

Finally, the doctor moved on, and Ryan shut the door.

"Want to tell me what that was about?" said Ryan, walking over to help Patricia sit up on the exam table.

"I thought you wanted to hear more about my episodes."

"I do. I'm just wondering if whatever that was has anything to do with your episodes."

Patricia breathed in deeply and folded her hands in her lap. "He and I have a history I'd rather not repeat. That's all." She turned to focus intently on Ryan. "What are your other questions?"

Ryan watched her for a moment. "Interesting." He picked up a clipboard with papers attached and grabbed a pen. "Okay, let's talk about these episodes. When did they start?"



AMBER PULLED IN FRONT OF HER LOG CABIN HOME AND SIGHED deeply. The scene before her was calming. The young maple tree in the front yard was budding, small flowers were beginning to poke their heads out of the dirt in front of the long deck, and a soft glow was coming through the front windows. "Daddy's home, baby boy," she whispered.

Daniel had started whimpering before they dropped Patricia off at the clinic. Now he was fully upset. Between the doctor's office, the long drive, finding Patricia, and Daniel's cries from the back seat, her nerves were shot.

Just as she released Daniel's car seat and pulled it to her, Peter opened the front door. "Want some help, Ray?" Their Australian shepherd, Sassy, barked beside him.

"Yes." She smiled. She marveled at how Peter still calmed her. *Thanks, God, for bringing us together.*

She grabbed her purse and the diaper bag from the floor-

board and then moved out of the way so Peter could get to Daniel. He easily lifted the car seat, closed the Jeep door, and wrapped his free arm around Amber while they walked inside. He adjusted his much longer stride to her shorter steps.

“I was starting to wonder about you two,” said Peter.

Amber set the bags down beside the soft leather couch and turned to greet Sassy, who spent most of her time with Amber. “It’s been quite a day,” she said, rubbing the dog’s dark brown ears.

Amber saw concern etched in Peter’s blue eyes before he turned his focus to pulling Daniel from the car seat. “Everything go okay in Portland?” he said, patting the child’s back.

Amber sighed as she adjusted a pillow on the couch behind her and prepared to nurse her baby. “Yeah, and I have a lot to tell you about that. We have some decisions to make. But on the way home, I found Patricia Guire on her porch steps.”

“Her porch steps?”

Peter handed Daniel to Amber before sitting down beside her, and while the baby latched on and began to eat, Amber told Peter about how Patricia looked and calling Ryan.

“Did Ryan say what he thought was going on?”

“Can you grab me a rag or something?” Amber wiped the small stream of milk on Daniel’s cheek. “He mentioned diabetes, but he said he had so little information that he had a long list of ideas. I took her to the clinic where she was going to talk with Ryan more and let him take some blood to send to the lab.”

“Well, we know she’s in good hands. Ryan will do his best.”

Amber shifted slightly so she could lean into Peter. He wrapped one arm around her. “I know. I guess I’m just remembering how fragile life can be. I know in my head that none of us is promised tomorrow, but life just seems to go on, and I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about someone not being there.”

“That’s quite a statement,” said Peter.

“What do you mean?”

Daniel let go and turned his head to look at Peter. Amber wiped around his mouth and handed him off to Peter while she adjusted her clothing. Peter placed Daniel on his shoulder to pat his back.

“You spent six years in a family that was falling apart after the death of your sister, then ten years on the road running from the reality of that. For you to say that you don’t spend a lot of time thinking about someone dying shows God has really done a lot of healing in the past three years.”

“Maybe.” Amber thought for a moment. “Or could it just be that I expect things to continue tomorrow as they were today?”

“Do you?”

Amber looked at her husband just as Daniel gave two small burps. She handed him the rag in case any milk came up with the burps.

“Or do you expect God to work and change things according to His plan?”

Amber sighed. “I pray for God’s best. I know He’ll take care of us and guide us. But I’m not sure I spend any time thinking about what that means, what that looks like in terms of tomorrow.”

“All it means is that tomorrow could be different. The question you need to settle is if you’re okay with that.”

Amber sat quiet for a minute, her thoughts circling through different arguments in her head. Finally, she said, “I guess, if I truly want God’s best and I really trust Him, then I have to be okay with whatever comes. I may be sad or I may not like it, but ultimately, I have to trust in God’s love for me.”

CHAPTER 3



*J*UST AFTER LUNCH THE NEXT afternoon, Amber knocked on the front door of Ryan and Brittney's one-story log cabin. Ryan, holding a sleeping two-week-old Alaina, opened the door. Amber could see Brittney on the edge of the overstuffed leather couch, tying her shoes.

"Please say you feel like going for a walk," Brittney said. Her long, auburn hair pulled back in a messy bun, her dark eyes pleaded with Amber for escape.

Amber laughed. "Sure. Feeling trapped?"

"Staying home sounds like such a luxury until you can't do anything but stay home!" said Brittney.

"Just take it easy, Britt," said Ryan. "Not too fast and don't go too far. Your body is still recovering from giving birth." Amber looked at Alaina, her dark hair spiking out in odd directions from the top of her head.

"Yes, doctor," said Brittney, rolling her eyes. "Come on, Amber, before he decides I need a wheelchair!"

Brittney gave her husband a quick kiss, and the girls headed out the door and towards a well-worn path beside the house. If they followed the path long enough, it would wind past Peter

and Brittney's parents' home and eventually to Peter and Amber's home.

"Are you still feel pretty good?" said Amber.

"Yeah," said Brittney. "But then after almost forty-two full weeks of pregnancy, even the day after giving birth felt better!"

Amber looked up at the tall trees around her. Even though their feet crunched leaves on the ground from the past fall, the maples and oaks were all coming to life with the spring. She reached down to grab a small dead branch from the path.

"Tell me what happened at Daniel's doctor appointment yesterday. Mom said it went well, but she wasn't sure she had all the details right."

Amber sighed. "The physiological test on his ears still shows some abnormalities, which is why they did the tym-pan-nom-i-tree. Am I saying that right?"

"Pretty close," said Brittney, putting her hands in her pockets. "Tympanometry is where they test the eardrum, right? In all my nursing classes, I was always horrible at the ear, nose, and throat stuff."

"Yep, it tests how well the eardrum moves. And apparently Daniel's eardrums are great. The other test also came back good," said Amber, concentrating for a moment, "bone conduction test, I think. The one that tests the inner ear."

"So, now they know that the problem is definitely with his middle ears?"

Amber began peeling back a little of the loose bark on her stick. "Yes."

"What's next?"

Amber paused in the path and looked at the trees around her. Some of them reached 200 feet over her head.

"Britt, do you ever wonder why God chose to make the fir trees here so tall?" Amber focused for a moment on the variety of life around her. "Even the cedars and cottonwoods tower over the maples."

Brittney reached out and put her arm on Amber's shoulder. "What's that got to do with Daniel?"

Amber looked at the maple tree nearby, her eyes brimming with tears. "I feel so inadequate." She looked at Brittney, the tears beginning to overflow. "We have a beautiful baby boy. I know that. I should be thankful." Amber wiped away a tear running down her cheek, swallowing and trying to get some control over her emotions. "I'm thankful. I am. But everything the doctors talk about, sign language and hearing aids and directional microphones and... I just don't know if I can do this."

"Oh, girl," said Brittney, her eyes feeling with tears of empathy for her sister-in-law.

"Why did God give Daniel to us? Why not to you and Ryan? You guys are the ones with medical training. This would be so much easier for you."

"Maybe that's exactly why." Brittney grabbed both of Amber's hands and squeezed tight. "Because God knows that you will rely on Him to get you through this. Ryan and I would keep defaulting to our medical training and connections."

Brittney took one of her hands and motioned to all the trees around them. "All these grand and glorious trees. Each one unique and each one serves a great purpose, even the maple. Don't wish your purpose away just because another one looks easier."

Amber hugged Brittney tight. *God, help me*, she prayed.



THE NEXT WEDNESDAY, PATRICIA SAT IN A WHITE WICKER CAMEL back rocking chair on her front porch enjoying the sunshine and warmer temperatures. The afternoon was coming alive with children playing outside after school; she loved listening to the laughter and screams of delight.

Her mind was just beginning to wander back in time when a familiar rumble pulled in front of her house. Ryan stepped out of his Mustang and walked towards her.

"You ever gonna get that hair cut?"

Ryan leaned on the railing along the steps and smirked at her. "You don't like the curls?"

"They're better suited on a girl. I like that spikey style you wore over the winter."

Ryan laughed. "Yeah, well, to be honest, I do too. I'm heading to the barber shop after I talk with you."

"Get on with it, then. Guessing you got test results to give me."

Ryan sat in a wicker chair beside her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "I do have results, and they are all looking good. You know your blood pressure is okay, and your blood sugar levels are within acceptable levels."

She leaned in, anxious for the bottom line.

"Your thyroid is fine, and your heart is great for a sixty-six-year old woman."

"If everything is so good, then what is causing the pain, Ryan?"

Ryan looked at her for a moment. "I think that's the first time you've called me by only my first name."

Patricia sat back and tried to dismiss the moment. "Don't go reading nuthin' into that."

Ryan leaned back in his chair, bringing one leg up to rest his ankle on his opposite knee. "Mrs. Guire, I don't think anything is seriously wrong with you."

Patricia looked at him, confused about the symptoms that had been plaguing her for months. "Then why the pain?"

Ryan sat quiet for a moment, like he was uncertain how to proceed.

"Spit it out, boy."

"I think you are having panic attacks."

“Panic attacks? Why on earth would I panic while tending my garden?”

“The symptoms all fit: sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness. Even the tingling in your fingers. They usually last ten minutes or less and tend to take a toll on your body so you feel wiped out afterwards.”

“But what would cause me to panic? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sometimes panic attacks start over real fears, life-and-death situations, or circumstances where we truly believe that we are in danger of some sort.”

Patricia motioned toward her flower garden. “There is nothing dangerous in that garden.”

She watched Ryan’s jaw tighten. “Just because we believe we are in danger doesn’t necessarily mean it’s true.”

Patricia thought about his statement for a moment. His facial expressions were masking something. “You sayin’ that this is all in my head?”

“I’m just...”

“You listen to me, boy,” said Patricia as she stood from her chair, “although I’ve accused you of it a time or two, I don’t believe for one moment that you are dense.” She pointed her finger in his face. “A bug or two in that garden hadn’t ever sent me running before. So please tell me what exactly you think has got me all terrified without me knowin’ it.”

Ryan stood, forcing Patricia to take a step back. “Mrs. Guire, let me be clear. I don’t think these panic attacks have anything to do with your garden.”

“What then?”

“I’d like for you to trust me enough to tell me.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ryan put his hands in his pockets and walked toward the porch railing. He took a deep breath and then turned to face

her. "These panic attacks started about three years ago, about the time Dr. Williams came to town."

Ryan's words exploded in Patricia's head. *Dr. Williams! Could it be true? Is that what this is all about?* She turned and walked a couple steps away from Ryan.

"I know there's a history there, and whatever it is has caused you to disappear from anyplace he likes to go. You never come to lunch at the diner anymore. Robert at the General Store asked about you last month because he hasn't seen you much..."

She heard Ryan walk up behind her.

"And you slip in and out of church, coming in late, sitting near the back, and leaving before the final prayer is finished."

This cannot be happening. Patricia reached out to find the railing in front her, looking for some support before she fell to her knees. Weakness seemed to be taking over. *Lord, why? After all these years? I thought this was in the past.*

Ryan moved around in front of her, placing one hand on her upper arm. "Mrs. Guire?"

She swallowed, trying to regain control of her voice. Her eyes burned, and she feared tears would soon come. She had to get inside, figure this out. "Thank you, Ryan. I won't keep you further."

Patricia turned with as much dignity as she could muster and walked inside her house, closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER 4



“*R*YAN,” SAID AMBER.
“Hmmm,” said Ryan, turning his head to look at his sister.

“It’s your turn, dude,” said Peter.

Peter, Amber, Ryan, and Brittney sat around the dining table at Peter and Amber’s home Friday evening, a card game of Spades half-played before them. Daniel sat in a jungle-themed exersaucer near Peter, happily bouncing and chewing on plastic keys while Alaina lay sleeping in a bouncer near Brittney.

“Sorry,” said Ryan. “My mind just isn’t into cards tonight.”

“Really?” said Brittney sarcastically.

“What’s up?” said Peter.

“Nothing I can talk about,” said Ryan. “Just a difficult patient.”

“Has to be Mrs. Guire,” said Amber, grabbing her glass and walking to the open kitchen to get herself more iced tea.

“You know I can’t say anything, Sis,” said Ryan.

Amber took a sip of her tea and leaned against the black-engineered stone countertop closest to the table. “Well, how

about this? As a friend, should I be concerned enough to check on her, see how she's doing?"

Ryan looked at his sister, thankful for the relationship God had restored between them. But he needed to proceed cautiously so he wouldn't damage his professional integrity. "As your brother, I would encourage you to check on any friend that you found largely unresponsive on her front porch within the last week or so."

Amber nodded. "Consider it done. I'll call her tomorrow and set up a time for us to have lunch next week." She walked back to the table. "Now, can we get back to cards? I think Britt and I can win this hand."

"Ooh!" said Brittney. "If your hand is that good, we got this!"

"You girls have to be bluffing," said Peter, looking at his cards.



SATURDAY MORNING, PATRICIA SAW THE BANK ON THE CORNER and made her left turn onto East Powell Boulevard in Portland, Oregon. She settled back, letting traffic flow around her 2008 Ford Escape. Although it would be good to see Jake and his kids again, she was in no hurry.

When she'd called him earlier in the week, he'd decided to take part of the day off from working in the garage they owned together so they could enjoy lunch. She'd missed her normal end-of-month appointment with him in April, and she could hear the concern in his voice.

She turned onto Southeast 62nd Avenue and soon saw his old Nissan Quest minivan beside the little white house. Seven-year-old Andrew sat on the front porch step, his blond hair almost sticking up more than it was lying down.

As soon as he saw her, he jumped up and ran inside. Before

she had the engine turned off, both he and five-year-old Emma were running toward her.

Andrew opened her door. "I thought you'd never get here!" He beamed at her, bouncing as he waited for her to get out of the vehicle.

"Well, here I am," said Patricia, grinning at the enthusiastic greeting.

"We've been waiting simply forever!" said Emma, one front tooth conspicuously missing in her smile. "But now you're here, and we can have fun!"

Patricia got out of the car and retrieved a bag from the back seat. "Were you not having fun before I got here?"

Emma crossed her arms. "No! We had to do chores—"

"All morning—" said Andrew.

"And they took forever—" said Emma.

"But Daddy said that when you got here—" said Andrew.

"We could play!" said Emma.

As they slowly made their way to the front door, Patricia dutifully listened as the children excitedly told her all the things they'd done that morning to prepare for her visit. Patricia looked up to see Jake and nine-year-old Taylor waiting for her on the front step.

Patricia took both hands and pushed Emma's light brown bangs from her eyes. Moving in close, Patricia said, "So now must be time for fun."

Emma's smile lit up her entire face.

"Me too!" said Andrew, jumping up and down.

"You too," said Patricia, smiling while she tousled his hair. "Presents for all!" she announced, holding up a large bag hanging off her arm.

Jake shook his balding head, grinning. "You spoil them."

"A grandmother's prerogative," she said seriously.

"One I won't deny you," said Jake, taking his arm from around Taylor's slight frame to give Patricia a hug. "I appreciate

you stepping in to be a grandmother since their own are so distant.”

“It is my pleasure,” said Patricia as she touched Taylor’s cheek. “Now, come inside, everyone, so I can sit down.”

Jake held the door while Andrew and Emma rushed into the small living room and Taylor wrapped her arm around Patricia’s waist to walk beside her.

“I see you have new glasses, child,” said Patricia.

“Yeah, the other ones were getting old,” said Taylor, pushing the small metal frames farther up her nose.

“I like the purple color,” said Patricia. “It suits you.”

Taylor smiled.

Patricia sat on a worn blue couch just inside the door, the large picture window behind her. Taylor sat beside her, and Andrew and Emma sat on the hardwood floor at her feet. Jake took a seat in a teal-colored chair on the adjacent wall. Patricia opened up her bag and pulled out the first box. “For my little Emma.”

Patricia handed over a brightly wrapped box. Emma tore open the paper, pieces flying everywhere. She looked at the box, uncertain. She tried to sound out the words. “A – s – t – r – o...”

“Very good,” said Patricia. “It says *astrolamp*. It shines stars on your wall at night.”

Emma’s eyes lit up. “My very own stars? In my very own room? Daddy!! Do you see? I simply can’t wait! How long until dark?”

Her chatter faded slightly as Patricia pulled out another box. “For my Andrew.”

He barely tore the paper off one side before he stopped and looked at the box. He jumped up, shouting, “Woo hoo!! A rocket! Yes! Look, Dad!”

“A rocket?” Jake looked suspiciously at Patricia as he took the box from his son.

“Just a stomp rocket,” she defended herself. “I remembered

my promise after the science kit that I wouldn't bring anymore exploding or volcano-like substances into the house."

"Or things that stain," added Taylor. "It took Megan a week to get all that blue out of her hair."

"Megan?" said Patricia.

"A girl at school," said Taylor. "Somehow Andrew put the blue dye from that science kit into a cup of water without the teacher seeing. Then as they sat at their desks, he took Megan's braid and dipped it in the cup. She didn't know what he was doing until the tips of her hair were dyed blue."

"It was so cool," said Andrew. "Her hair soaked it up just like the celery stalk did when we put it in red water!"

"That was science class," said Jake sternly to his son.

Andrew quickly sat down, subdued for the moment. "Yes, Dad."

"No more dye for Andrew," said Patricia, winking at the boy. He smiled back at her. "Now, for my Taylor," she said, pulling out a small box from her bag.

Taylor carefully pulled at the paper until she came to a small jewelry box. She opened the box and gasped. "Oh, Nanna!" Inside was a small dolphin pendant with a matching silver chain. She pulled it out to put it around her neck. Fastened, the dolphin fell to where her heart was. Taylor put her hand over the dolphin and looked at Patricia. "I will treasure it. Thank you."

"Okay, you guys go play," said Jake, "and we'll have lunch in a little bit." Andrew and Emma ran outside to set up his new rocket, while Taylor picked up a book from the coffee table and headed to her bedroom. Jake looked closely at Patricia. "You're different with them."

"I don't know what you mean," she said, picking up pieces of wrapping paper near her.

"Uh-huh. So what happened last month?"

"Things were just busy."

"Really? Too busy to come see the kids?"

Patricia just nodded.

"Patricia, I've known you for almost nine years. You took a chance on me and Kelly, hiring me to help us get back on our feet after our families disowned us when we came to Christ. You stepped in for our moms when the kids came along, supporting Kelly as she adjusted to motherhood. And I don't know what I would have done without you two years ago when Kel lost her battle with cancer."

Jake adjusted his glasses. "You missed last month's appointment to go over the books from the garage. And you show up today looking worn out and tired."

Patricia sighed. She didn't want to drag her past out for anyone to see, but Jake was more like a son to her than anyone. "I've been having some..." She paused, looking for the right words. "...health challenges."

Jake sat forward in his chair. "What kind of challenges?"

"Nothing serious."

Jake raised his eyebrows at her.

"Truly," she said. "Ryan has run all kinds of tests, and he said everything is fine."

"Then what is it?"

Patricia took a deep breath. "He says I'm having panic attacks."

"Panic attacks? Why?"

"We don't know for sure."

Jake sat back and looked at her for a moment. "But you suspect."

Patricia looked at the empty fireplace across from her. How she longed for a child to come running into the room to change the subject. "Yes."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Do?"

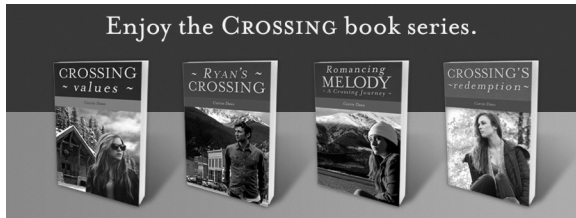
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“As I understand it, panic attacks are about being afraid. So what are you going to do to deal with the fear?”

Patricia hesitated.

“Or are you going to continue to live with the attacks?” said Jake.

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