

Crossing the Line

Prologue

You can't take it back. Once you cross the line: that intangible demarcation between morality and immorality, good and evil, light and dark. When you find yourself on the other side you realize that you cannot go back.

My name is Paul Wickes and I made a mistake. While my impropriety was not one that would horrify, or bring forth angry torch-wielding townspeople for revenge, it is also one that I can neither justify nor remedy. My sin was one of the flesh; a moment's lapse of judgment, made in a priapic state. I committed this vile act willingly; I wasn't coerced into doing so. I could have walked away, but I chose not to. It's not that I didn't love my wife; on the contrary, I did and still do love her, even now that she has gone away, unable to cope with the fallout of my decision to cross that line. I have come to accept the fact that my wife and I will never share another loving moment. Trust is not something that is easily replaceable. Once betrayed, it is difficult, if ever possible, to truly forgive and forget. Sharon was never one to act impulsively; that was my vice. But the night she learned of my affair with Lisa, she knew instinctively how living with that knowledge would affect our future. I know her decision to leave was based on the fact that no matter how many times she swore to forgive me that she could never go on acting like she had forgotten. Her face silently spoke these hidden truths as she stood by the door to our home and said good-bye to me that night. I saw no trace of doubt in her eyes as she explained that it would be best for her to go back to North Carolina to be closer to her brothers and sister.

I let her go. It was the least I could do for all that I put her through as a consequence of one Tuesday evening in September five years ago. I still hang on to the guilt like a dying man to his last breath, using it almost as a comfort, the only thing that lets me know I am still alive. I had remained true to our vows for seven years after Sharon and I spoke them in a wonderful ceremony at the Savannah Riverfront. It took one brief moment to undo it all.

No, I can't take it back.

Chapter 1

A full moon hung in the distance, swollen and heavy, intermittently obscured by gathering storm clouds. Suspended as it was in the black sky, it looked as if it could drop into Mercy Lake at any moment, hissing as it hit the water, raising bubbles, and dissolving, leaving the lake dark and the sky even darker.

Traveling down this side of Mercy Mountain, even in daylight, was treacherous: each twist and turn in the road made less negotiable by the fact that each curve ended at the beginning of the next, and each subsequent change of direction was more severe. Not to mention the downhill grade and not a single guardrail in sight. Throw a little rain onto the roadway and you may just as well stay home, where it is safe; where the worst that can happen to you is to slip in your bathtub and strike your head on the porcelain tiles, lacerating your scalp, possibly fracturing your skull. A few hours in the hospital followed by several days in bed and you're good to go. Much better than careening off the side of a mountain at forty miles an hour, free-falling for several hundred feet, at the end of which, a few millennia in eternity will make all of the hospital stays in your life combined total one blink of an eye.

A light mist began to fall, so I eased off the accelerator and covered the brake, not wanting to take any chances. My wife reminded me last month to put new tires on the Audi, but new tires or not, I wouldn't be able to control the car if I was moving any faster than twenty-five miles an hour on this blacktop. I glanced at the clock on the dashboard and figured that, including the rain factor, we would arrive back in town in about an hour or so, double the usual driving time. That would put me home a bit later than I felt comfortable with; as it was, it was already nearly eleven, and my wife had called when Lisa and I were eating dinner at Outback Steakhouse in Knoxville. I told Sharon that I had taken some clients out for dinner and we were going back to the office afterward to make the deadline for tomorrow's project. By now, she was probably wondering where the hell I was and why I hadn't called.

As I slowly wound through each turn, I could feel eyes upon me. I looked out of the corner of my eye and Lisa was staring at me, her head tilted just enough and looking at me with that kittenish grin.

“What?” I asked her, speeding up as the hill leveled out.

“Nothing,” she purred as she withdrew a cigarette from the pack and cracked her window.

“Well, it must be something,” I said, feeling slightly aroused. “You’ve been staring at me for five minutes.” She knew that it drove me wild with anticipation when she looked at me that way.

“Okay. There is something.” She pushed back a loose strand of jet-black hair from her forehead. “You know what I’ve always wanted to do?” She put the pack of cigarettes back in her bag and took out a lighter.

“What have you always wanted to do?” I let off the gas as the mist turned to a light rain and the road bent sharply to the left. She lit her cigarette.

“I’ve always wanted to have a little fun with you while you’re driving,” she said, almost in a whisper. I could hear the smile in her tone at the same time I felt her hand on my thigh.

“Lisa, seriously,” I said. “Of all places, you want to fool around on *this* particular road in *this* weather?”

“Why not? That’s what’ll make it so exciting. Besides, you’re taking it easy,” she said as she blew the smoke out the open window. “Come on, Paul, it’ll be erotic.”

There wasn’t much that Lisa couldn’t talk me into doing; rather, *look* me into doing. It didn’t take much more than that crooked smile and the offering in her chocolate brown eyes to send exquisite tremors coursing through my body. Even now, in our current predicament, driving down the steep side of a mountain, every curve hiding impending death, a light rain falling, she still got to me.

I met Lisa last year when she started working as an administrative assistant for our new company, Swanson & Wickes. My partner, Andrew Swanson and I met at Parker, Feeney & Associates in Knoxville. Andrew had worked for PF&A for five years when I arrived there. One

day over lunch, he remarked that he had had enough of working for someone else; he wanted to be his own boss. He said he had been saving for the last few years to open his own firm. I had worked for three firms including PF&A since I earned my architecture degree and was ready to venture out on my own as well. Andrew and I found an affordable office in Tazewell, Tennessee and we opened for business a little over a year ago.

Over the next few months, we got pretty busy as new contracts starting coming in. Consequently, we had several projects that required Andrew and I to work late into the evening, and Lisa offered to hang around and take some of the load off of us. We really appreciated her desire to help us succeed, and after a couple of big clients signed us on for work, we gave her a raise and took her out to dinner to celebrate.

About a month ago, not long after the celebration, I was working on an historical home that needed renovating. The historical society had contracted our firm because some of the structure had been damaged by a tornado several years before and they wanted to restore it to its original condition. Lisa, as usual, went above and beyond the call of duty to help as I conducted research on Victorian homes, as well as spending countless hours tracking down some of the blueprints from the architectural firm that did the original work.

Lisa and I had been working on the house into the evening almost every day for about a month when it happened. Usually we ordered food in and took a break to recharge our batteries. Andrew, and Marcia, our office manager, had left an hour earlier, leaving Lisa and I alone in the office. After so many hours spent working in such close proximity, our heads close together as we pored over blueprints, the smell of her hair constantly invading my senses, Lisa kissed me. Just like that. I was startled initially, but was quickly overcome by a feeling that I hadn't experienced since my very first kiss. So I kissed her back. One thing led to another and before long we were having sex on the couch in my office. That was the first of many times. After that night, whenever we worked into the early evening, we would head to a hotel across town for an hour or so before heading back home. Other times I would take her to dinner. There were even times we just parked the car and fooled around like two teenagers.

Clouds were beginning to block out portions of the moon, and the lake, some half-mile away now, was soon covered by a light fog. The rain sustained a drizzle as I carefully finessed the Audi through each turn. I could feel Lisa's hand on my thigh, slowly making its way toward my crotch. I pushed her hand away.

"Lisa, please, I'm trying to drive. I really don't think this is a good idea." I rolled down my window to alleviate some of the condensation that had built up on the inside of the windshield. I flicked on the defroster.

"Then why are you hard?" She pointed toward the obvious erection I had and smiled.

Geez, I thought, I'm hard the minute I see her. Like I need any encouragement. "Lisa, you know it gets to me when you look at me that way and talk like that. I just don't understand why you have to do it while I'm driving. Besides, we did it less than an hour ago."

"I told you, Paul, it's erotic. And you're obviously ready again." She hiked her dress up so I could see she didn't put her panties back on. I could just make out the soft tuft of black hair between her thighs.

There is nothing erotic about driving off a mountain, I thought. But, as always, when she began massaging me through my pants I couldn't resist; I took my foot off the accelerator and slowed down while she undid my belt.

"Just relax. It'll be fun." She popped the button on my trousers and slowly lowered my zipper. She began stroking me with her nails through my briefs. My heart sped up and with it, so did the Audi.

"Oh, God, that feels so good," I panted, as she continued raking her nails across my erection.

"Mmm, you're enjoying this, aren't you?" She giggled.

I couldn't speak. My throat felt closed up. As I glanced at the speedometer, I realized we had picked up speed. This distraction wasn't good, but there was nothing I could do about it now. I decided to pull over.

"What are you doing?" Lisa asked, suddenly serious. She took a final drag from her cigarette and pitched it out the window.

“I’m pulling over. I can’t do this while I’m driving.” I had begun to perspire, beads of nervousness appeared on my forehead. “There’s a spot over there, the shoulder is widest. We can park.”

“Forget it, Paul. What makes this so exciting is the fact that we’re in a moving vehicle. If you pull over, I’m not doing anything,” she said adamantly as she stopped stroking me and pulled her hand away.

Before I met Lisa, I admit that I was very narrow-minded when it came to sex. I had never explored more than your basic sexual positions and never participated in kinky activities. However, Lisa enjoyed being tied and blindfolded; no pain or anything twisted like that. Just enough to spice up things; keep our encounters interesting and fresh. Since our affair had begun, I found myself eager to experience new things. I looked forward to our meetings so much because I never knew what Lisa would do; it was her lack of inhibitions that that really got me going. What she didn’t understand about this particular act, playing with me in the car, was that I didn’t want to kill us. Had we been on an open road, a parking lot, anywhere but driving in the rain four hundred feet up the side of a mountain, it would have been fine. But, against my better judgment, I let her have her way. I always let her have her way. As soon as I pulled back onto the road, Lisa reached for me.

“Aw, you’re soft. Well, I guess I’ll have to work a little harder, now won’t I?” She giggled as she leaned over and put her head in my lap. As soon as I felt her wet, hot tongue on me, I was hard as a rock.

“Now, that’s better, isn’t it?” She said as she sat back up in her seat.

I moaned as she gently squeezed me, sliding her thumb over the tip.

The rain was beginning to let up, but the road was very slick. I slowed down a bit as she began to stroke me slowly and deliberately. I shot a glance at her and she had such a pure look of pleasure in her eyes, as if *I* were the one stimulating *her*, that it drove me wild with lust.

At this point, we were a few hundred yards from arriving at the base of the mountain where the roadway leveled off and the lane widened. I knew I should slow down as we approached the

last two turns, but as Lisa began going down on me, I inadvertently increased our speed as my eyes began to roll back with pleasure.

At the end of the second turn, which breaks very hard to the left, there is a pull-off on the right that overlooks the lake. On cool summer evenings there would be lovers in parked cars, or folks who have stopped to enjoy the magnificent view of the lake in the moonlight. As the Audi came into the second turn, I shifted my eyes back to the road. Realizing that we had gained quite a lot of speed, I glanced at the speedometer and noticed that we were traveling at almost fifty miles an hour; Lisa was sucking me furiously at this point. In my heightened state of excitement, I accidentally pounded the brake, which caused the rear tires of the Audi to skid to the left. As I turned into the skid, Lisa brought her head up and her arm got caught up in the steering wheel. I attempted to gain control of the car, which had seemed to pick up speed.

“Move your arm!” I shouted. “Lisa, move your arm!” She apparently panicked and in the process of moving her arm inadvertently grabbed the wheel as I was trying to straighten out the skid. In an effort to extricate her arm, she pulled the wheel to the right.

I heard Lisa scream. It was at this moment that I saw the man. He was standing near the rear, driver’s side of a dark-colored vehicle parked in the pull-off, smoking a cigarette. I could see the faint glow of the cigarette growing brighter as he inhaled. He was partially facing the lake as we approached and didn’t see us until he heard the Audi skidding toward him as I desperately, and mistakenly, forced my foot down on the brake. The man turned toward the sound of the Audi’s tires squealing, and a look of sheer horror appeared on his face as the front of my car caught him full on. I heard a sickening thud along with breaking glass, and saw, through the scattered moonlight, the man’s body sliding across the hood of the Audi. I stared in terror as his body impacted the windshield and was propelled up and over the roof of the Audi to the right. I jerked the steering wheel to the left, narrowly avoiding the car the man was standing next to not a split-second before, and came to a screeching halt a hundred feet or so past the car. It was then that I realized Lisa was still screaming.

I neither know how long we sat in the car, nor how long it took me to get Lisa calmed down, but by the time she stopped screaming, the rain had begun in earnest. I looked around and

noticed that, aside from the man's car, there wasn't anyone else parked in the rest area. I sat there, attempting to catch my breath. The night was eerily quiet around us. I could tell by the single beam of light illuminating the mist in front of the car that one of the Audi's headlights had been broken. My windshield, surprisingly, had only a small crack in it. I looked around us for a moment, expecting another car to drive by, see the accident, and stop; but there wasn't a single vehicle of any kind moving in either direction along the roadway.

"Lisa, stay in the car," I shouted as I realized my pants were still open. I quickly pulled up my zipper, secured the button, and opened my door to get out.

"Don't leave me here, Paul, please!" Lisa begged, grabbing for my jacket.

"Please, just stay in the car. That man may be seriously hurt and need help," I told her quickly. I grabbed my cell phone from the dash and left the car.

The humidity was suffocating and I could smell burnt rubber from the tires of the Audi. It was raining harder now, and I wiped the rain from my face as I slowly started walking toward the man's car. I looked back and I could see Lisa's terrified face peering out the back window at me, her breath, which was coming in quick gasps, fogging the glass. I faced forward and began looking for the man.

"Hey, are you all right?" I called out in the dark. *Silence.* "Where are you? I have a phone and can call for help. Please answer if you can." *Still nothing.*

I walked a little farther down and saw what looked like a pile of clothing at the far end of the pull-off. I broke into a jog and made my way toward a bank of trees at the end. The man lay in a heap like a rag doll, face down in the dirt. There was blood on the back of his head and his right arm was set at an impossible angle, resting across his back, as was one of his legs. I felt my stomach lurch and moved closer. I couldn't tell whether or not he was breathing.

"Hey, mister?" I said, my voice cracking. When he didn't answer I crouched down next to him and gently shook him. When he still didn't respond I laid my cell phone on the ground and reached out with both hands to turn him over. One look at his face, or rather what was left of it, told me he was dead. My adrenaline immediately began pumping and I started to move back

toward the car, and stopped abruptly when I saw Lisa standing several feet behind me with her hands over her face.

“He’s dead isn’t he? Oh, my God!” she cried, her voice cracking.

“Don’t look, Lisa. Please get back in the car.” I blocked her view of the body as I moved to my right. At six feet tall, it was easy for me to shield her five-foot, four-inch frame from the scene.

“Oh my God, Paul—.” Lisa muttered. I grabbed her by her arm and began walking her back to the Audi.

“What are we gonna do?” Her hands were trembling and her breath was coming so fast I was afraid she might hyperventilate. “We’re gonna have to call for help.”

“What good is that? He’s already dead!” I yelled.

“But we can’t just leave him here like this.” She twisted out of my grasp.

“Well, we can’t call for help. If we do that, Sharon will find out about us.” I felt panic well up in my chest.

Lisa took a step back toward the car. “Then what the hell do you suggest we do.”

“I don’t know, Lisa.” I ran my fingers through my wet hair. “I don’t know.” As I walked Lisa back to the car, the only choice I had made itself clear.

“Okay, Lisa. Listen to me.” My mind started working of its own accord. I opened the car door and helped her inside. “You stay in the car. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going? Don’t leave me here alone!” Lisa started sobbing again.

“Just—stay here.” I looked up the road from the direction we had come. No headlights. I turned back to look in the opposite direction. No cars coming from that way either. Longfellow Road didn’t get much traffic at this time of night. I prayed that my luck would hold out a few minutes longer. I walked to the back of the car and stopped. It was a late-model Mercedes, black. For the first time I realized that the car was still running. What the hell was he doing out here, anyway? Didn’t he realize how dangerous it was?

I walked back to where the man was lying on the ground. He was laying exactly the way I left him. A part of me was hoping he would have moved, letting me know that he was still alive

so that I could at least help him; another part of me just wanted to get this over with. With my mind racing and my heart pumping so loudly that I could hear it, I knew what I had to do.

I grabbed the man by his legs and slowly dragged him toward his car. I noticed an incredible amount of blood underneath him when I first moved him. Fighting the burning acid at the back of my throat, I made my way carefully back to the man's car. I stopped, checked the road again for oncoming vehicles, saw and heard nothing but the rain, and turned back to the man. I crouched down and managed to position my arms under his to lift him up. I couldn't believe how heavy he was. Most of the blood was around his head and neck, and as hard as I was trying, I couldn't avoid getting it all over my clothes as I lifted him.

Using strength I didn't know I had, I managed to maneuver him into driver's seat. It took me a few minutes to get his broken leg positioned under the dash. After I got him situated, I slipped the car into neutral, turned the steering wheel so the tires pointed east, toward the lake, and shut the door. I tried to use my weight to push the car to get it moving, but it was too heavy. Then, realizing that the car had to be in drive to make the accident look real, I punched the shifter into drive and the car began to move slowly toward the lake. As I walked beside it, the gravel crunching under the tires, it slowed as it neared the edge of the shoulder. There was a slight rise in the roadway that kept the car from moving. I opened the door and attempted to reach the accelerator pedal but couldn't get around the man's legs. Getting nervous now, wondering when my luck would run out and someone who happen by, I decided to use my car. I closed the door and ran back to the Audi.

When I got inside, Lisa was sitting and staring out the windshield, smoking a cigarette.

"What did you do with him?" she asked after I was settled back in the car.

"I put him in the car." I said. "Now I need to push it over the edge of the shoulder. Make it look like an accident."

"Oh God, Paul. Is this gonna work?" Lisa began sobbing again.

"How the hell do I know? All I know is we can't just leave him lying on the road." I shouted, making her flinch.

I backed up the Audi and positioned it behind the other car. The moment seemed to last forever and I'll never forget it. I couldn't hear the other car's engine, but I could see the exhaust as it met the moist night air, sending up small puffs of gray smoke. I shifted the Audi into first gear and slowly approached the rear of the vehicle. There was a slight bump when our fenders met, and I could hear the gravel crunching under the tires of my car as we moved forward. I revved the engine a bit more, still in first gear, and the car inched slowly toward the end of the shoulder. And then it was gone. It went over so quickly, that Lisa, as she looked up from lighting another cigarette, missed it.

I snapped the shifter into park and jumped out of the car. I quickly made my way to the edge of the roadway and looked over. It took a few seconds for me to locate the car, but I caught the glint of moonlight off the chrome bumper of the car as it rolled down the embankment toward the bottom. The car was halted momentarily by small bushes and foliage, but the momentum carried it to the bottom of the ravine, coming to a stop when it smashed into a tree. I ran back to my car, opened the door and jumped in.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said. Then I yelled, "I told you not to fuck around in the car. I told you it was dangerous."

"I'm sorry." Lisa said softly.

"Sorry doesn't fix the problem." I carefully backed up and made my way back to the road.

"You'd better hope we don't pass any cop cars on the way home. I don't want to get stopped out here because I'm missing a headlight. They would see the damage to the car."

"We'll be okay, Paul. I know we will."

Lisa had calmed down quite a bit by the time we pulled up to her car, which she had parked several blocks away from the office on a residential side street.

As mad as I was at her, I was also concerned. "You gonna be okay?" I asked her, taking her hand and squeezing it.

"Sure, I'll be fine." As she opened the door she said, "I'll see you tomorrow at work."

"Lisa, you can take the day off. There's no sense in you coming in after what happened tonight."

“No way. That would look too suspicious.”

“I guess you’re right.” I conceded. “But if anyone should ask, I hit a deer tonight on the way home from dinner with clients.”

“Okay.”

I waved as she closed the door. I watched her until she was safely in her car, got it started, and then I drove off.

When I got home the house was dark. I quietly moved through the downstairs, entered the den, and made myself a Manhattan. I carried my drink into the kitchen and set it on the table. I shed my wet and bloody clothing, and grabbed a trash bag from the cabinet. I shoved my clothes into the bag and dropped it by the front door. I ran down to the basement and grabbed clean clothes from the stack on the dryer. Back upstairs I picked up the bag and carried it to the trash can on the curb. As I pushed the bag to the bottom, I thought how lucky I was that they pick up the trash on Wednesdays.

In the kitchen I picked up my glass, headed back to the den, and collapsed into my favorite chair. As I sipped my drink, horrifying visions of the accident appeared in my mind. I could see the man’s face, the surprised look as we hit him. I ran over the scene in my head several times over the next half-hour. After my third drink I felt calm enough to go upstairs. I quietly made my way into the guest bedroom, which was down the hall from our room, and took a shower, hoping not to wake Sharon. As I stood under the hot water, I knew that no matter how clean my body got, the water would never be hot enough to wash away my sin. Afterward, as I entered our bedroom, I saw Sharon stir. I carefully slipped into bed beside her. Thanks to the booze, sleep came quickly.