

Alicia Cruz McCall lives two lives. Her standing as a nationally recognized portrait artist masks her true calling as a contract killer. Little did anyone suspect that this quiet, gifted girl could become a feared assassin.

Cruz Control

By Clay Corley

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CRUZ CONTROL



CLAY CORLEY

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959620-26-6

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-777-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Corley, Clay
Cruz Control by Clay Corley
Library of Congress Control Number: 2024912684

Chapter 29

Graduation

By Friday, Alicia had taken all but one of her senior finals. The last one was scheduled for the following Tuesday, and she was through with high school. To celebrate, she and Will drove out to Leiper's Fork.

They passed through the little community and continued south about four miles until Old Hillsboro Road became Leiper's Creek. They turned left at a country store onto Robinson Road, crossed a bridge, passed a single brick residence on the right, and then turned left on Bear Creek Road. They traveled a half-mile when a large white colonial appeared through the trees on the left. It had a multi-car garage west of the house and several smaller buildings in the back. The professionally manicured yard was completely fenced, with iron front gates that could only be opened by an electronic keypad.

Continuing another hundred yards down Bear Creek, they passed a second gate on the left, a painted aluminum gate, and a sign that said, "Pine Hill Lake, Private Property, STAY OUT." The big chain was double-wrapped and secured with a large yellow padlock.

A quarter mile farther on, the road curved to the right, and a small trail veered left. This is what they were looking for. There was barely enough room to drive behind undergrowth and hide the car. Carrying their painting equipment, they began walking up the narrow trail. The terrain was steep, and the

pathway was heavily shrouded. After several minutes, they looked down on the east end of Pine Hill Lake. They stood above the headwaters of a little creek that flowed from the surrounding hills and supplied water.

It was an artist's paradise. Where the stream entered the lake, it flowed over colorful rocks that glistened in the sunlight filtered through the trees. On the far side of the lake set into the hillside was a low, in-ground block building hidden among the foliage. It was hardly noticeable and did little to damage the splendor of the setting. Alicia and Will had been here before and marveled at its beauty each time. Once, Alicia brought a picnic lunch, and after they ate, they lay together on a blanket, Alicia's head on Will's chest, his arm around her.

As they descended toward the lake, muffled voices rose from below. Having never seen anyone on previous visits, they were surprised to hear talking. *Probably fishermen* thought Alicia. Their painting certainly wouldn't disturb the fish.

They moved lower, following the voices, until they saw a dirt road along the shoreline about halfway up the lake. They had always stayed at the upper end and never noticed the road. Alicia thought it must surely come from the red gate.

At the end of the road, beside the water, sat a grey, four-door pickup truck with oversized tires, chrome bumpers, and a winch on the front, the type of vehicle used in construction or farming. In the truck bed were some lumps, probably logs, covered with a canvas tarpaulin. They didn't see anyone at first, but as Will and Alicia continued down the path, two men materialized on the far side of the truck, bending over next to

the water. They talked in low tones and seemed to be working on something at the lake's edge.

Will stopped and said to Alicia, "This doesn't feel right. Let's go."

Not easily spooked, Alicia answered, "We're not hurting anything, Will. They're probably treating the water."

"Come on, let's go. We're not supposed to be here. Let's find another spot." He turned and grabbed Alicia's hand.

Because of Will's insistence, they started back up the hillside. Behind them, someone shouted, "Hey there! Wait! I wanna talk to you." And when they continued up the trail, the man screamed, "I said wait, damn it. Stop!"

Alicia and Will turned to see a man limping down the shoreline toward them, waving his arms. He was dressed in coveralls, heavy work shoes, and a hat that hid most of his bearded face. He yelled again for them to stop, but they continued up the hill toward their car. When Alicia reached the top, she looked back, catching a glimpse of their pursuer limping back toward his truck.

She hurriedly backed her car through the brush and took off toward Leiper's Fork. When they passed the red farm gate, it was still closed and locked, but the gray truck with the winch sat behind the gate with two men in the seat. They didn't get out or gesture as the two young people drove by.

After they passed, Will said, "Some people are touchy." Alicia knew that if Will had been frightened, he would never admit it. Hiding a slight smile, she remained quiet and drove on. As they approached the gates in front of the large white mansion, a man standing next to a Yamaha four-wheeler gave

a friendly wave, wanting them to stop. When they slowed, Alicia saw the man dressed in khakis, a blue button-down shirt, and a Chicago Bulls jacket. His grey hair was perfectly groomed, his face was tanned, and he wore sunglasses. Alicia knew she should stop. After all, they hadn't done anything, and she didn't want to appear to be running.

As they pulled up beside the man, Will rolled down the window. The man smiled and said in a friendly voice, "Hello."

"Hello," Alicia said, watching the man closely as Will sat very still, his muscles tensed as though prepared for something bad to happen.

"My name is Phillip Horton," he said, smiling, "I guess *you two* are the trespassers at the lake?"

"I'm afraid so," she replied. "We're high school art students and were painting by your lake." Will relaxed slightly but continued to watch Horton.

"I see. I want to apologize for my men. Sometimes, they take their jobs too seriously protecting this property, especially around the lake. When I bought this place several years ago, people constantly swam, fished, and camped around the lake. They left litter and trash everywhere, so I decided to stop outsiders from using the property. It would be terrible if someone were hurt or drowned back there. We might not find them for weeks. I hope you understand."

Alicia said, "We completely understand, Mr. Horton. We've painted here twice before and never seen anyone. It's very beautiful, but we won't come back if that's what you want."

"So, you're artists?" he said, changing the subject.

“Yes, we attend Centennial High School in Franklin and are often assigned outdoor painting projects by our teacher.”

“By coincidence, I’m trying to buy an art gallery in Leiper’s Fork. If you write down your contact information, I’ll get back to you if the deal goes through.” Horton said, still smiling. “I would love to see some of your paintings of Williamson County.”

Not wanting to appear secretive, Alicia gave him the information he wanted, and they said their goodbyes. As they drove toward a second painting location on the other side of town, Will said, “After we spoke to Mr. Horton, he seemed okay.”

“We’ll never hear from him again,” said Alicia, “That gallery in Leiper’s Fork has beautiful artwork, but it represents professional painters, not beginners.” There was something about Horton that Alicia didn’t like, and she didn’t want any part of his gallery.

Philip Horton was a transplanted “gentleman farmer” from Chicago. He was the most prominent and wealthiest landholder in the area. Since arriving ten years ago, Horton had amassed over 5,000 acres in and around Leiper’s Fork. He owned several commercial buildings in Franklin, but his primary business was a freight transportation company based in Nashville. Some didn’t believe Horton was the fine, upstanding businessman he alleged.

Saturday Morning

The next day, Alicia spent most of the morning preparing for her history exam. In the afternoon, she began a new studio

painting using one of the previous day's sketches as a guide. At dinner with her aunt and uncle, Alicia explained that she was going to study at the library.

The school stayed open late during finals week to accommodate students, and Alicia knew it was a perfect place to be alone with Will. After parking her Jetta behind the school, she entered through a rear stairwell, something she had done many times. After entering, she noticed the ascending staircase was darker than normal. Some of the bulbs were out. Poor maintenance, she thought. She heard the reassuring click-click of the door closing behind her as she climbed the stairs.

At the first landing, she sensed a presence behind her. Before she could turn, a hand was over her mouth and a powerful arm around her body, pulling her back—a knife blade pressing against her throat. Foul breath warmed the back of her neck as the attacker pulled her close. A quiet voice said, “Don’t make a sound, and I’ll let you live.” Alicia barely nodded. Seemingly satisfied, the assailant said, “Slowly back down the steps.”

Like some awkward dance, they started to move backward, one step at a time. He said, “Don’t worry, do what I say, and you’ll be okay.”

It's not me that should be worried, thought Alicia, knowing he was there to kill her. As they took the next step, she pushed her left hand up and inside his arm to keep the blade from her throat, gripped the fingers over her mouth with her right hand, and twisted them backward until they shattered. The injured man, caught off guard by her quickness and strength, screamed and loosened his grip.

Sensing an opening, Alicia dropped straight down, away from her assailant. Holding to the railing, she twisted in the air and delivered a punishing kick to the inside of his knee ... it folded. She immediately stood and unleashed a fist to the stunned attacker's chest that drove him back to the landing below. In a pained rage, he struggled to rise on one leg. Bracing against the handrail, he threw the knife toward Alicia. With a quick, calculated move, she slid sideways. The blade missed and sailed up the stairs. Off balance and badly hurt, the masked man fell back into the shadows, hit his head on the guardrail, and didn't move.

A Few Minutes Earlier

Will had grown anxious as he waited for Alicia. The time he spent with her was magical; lately, she had stronger feelings for him. There were depths to her he could not understand, but despite that, their relationship had become the most important thing in his life.

Alicia had promised to be there by 7:45, and she was always on time. It was almost 8:00, so Will decided to meet her at the rear stairwell. If she weren't there, he would wait.

When Will opened the door, he heard a commotion from below. He started down the first flight of steps, unable to see the bottom clearly because several lights were out, but he could make out two people struggling on the landing. As he moved farther down, he realized one of the people was Alicia. Then, something hit him in the chest. At first, he thought someone had thrown a ball and knocked the wind out of him. Maybe they were playing a game.

Then, a new sensation spread across his body. His knees buckled, and he was racked with pain. As he reached out, his hand missed the rail, and he tumbled down the steps, stopping against the back of Alicia's legs. Startled, she looked around to find him crumpled behind her; the knife plunged into his chest.

"Will!" she screamed. He tried to speak; eyes open. The attacker's knife had missed Alicia, only to strike Will.

Alicia saw his blood gushing out. She knew he was critically injured; to pull the blade out would only increase the bleeding and hasten his death. Sobbing deeply, Alicia lifted and held his head close, pressing her fingers around the blade, but in a few seconds, he was gone.

The attacker, still dazed and moaning, lay on the landing behind her. He had not seen Will die or the rage on Alicia's face as she stood and slowly turned toward him. He had broken fingers, a busted knee, and was barely breathing.

Hearing the commotion, a student opened the door at the top of the stairwell.

Alicia yelled, "Get help!"

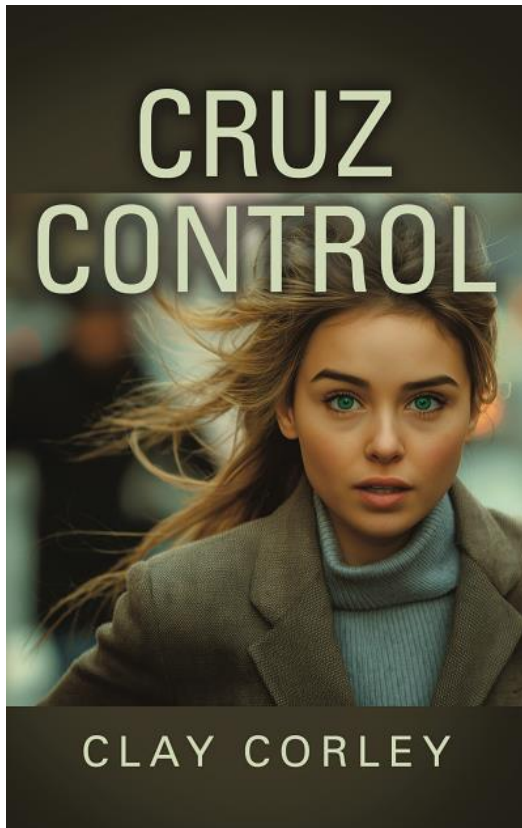
She stood above the dazed attacker, time running out, her anger swelling. Alicia didn't care about doing the right thing. What she cared about was that this man had stolen her friend's life, a beautiful seventeen-year-old boy with a wonderful future, possibly their future. A person she treasured so deeply that for the first time in her life, she could have shared her most intimate thoughts and feelings.

At this point, realizing that the attacker was harmless, most people would have waited for help. The thought never crossed

her mind. Bending over him with a knee on his chest, she drew back her right fist and, with shattering force, drove her knuckles into the attacker's throat, crushing his larynx. He gasped for air; a few seconds later, still looking into Alicia's eyes, he died. For her, it was not a matter of murder but justice for her friend.

Alicia, pulse still pumping, stood and looked one last time at William. Stooping over him, she gently kissed his lips, picked up his left hand, and slowly slid a small gold ring from his finger.

As when her father died, there was nothing she could do beyond taking care of the killer. That done, Alicia, in no mood to face questioning, walked down the stairs and out to her car to grieve in private.



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