



*Larissa (Lara) Crowell was widowed suddenly after her husband collapsed while jogging around their cul-de-sac. Despite the fact that she has four young children, she must return to work to support the family. This is the story of Lara's triumphs as she becomes both breadwinner and parent, and as she finds the second great love of her life.*

## **Westward: The Novel**

by Jane-Alexandra Krehbiel

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# *Westward*

*The Novel*



JANE-ALEXANDRA KREHBIEL

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## Chapter One: Ferns and Lillies

Larissa Crowell sat in the upholstered Wedgwood blue loveseat holding her youngest son Luke, aged three, tightly. If she were to let him go, he would likely run, collide with, and knock over all the tall white wicker plant stands in the funeral home. The stands were filled either with large green ferns or with tall white lilies. She knew it was a lot to ask of him to be there, for what had now been hours. Still, there had been no time to plan this. Her eldest son, Eric, aged eight, was eating a roll, along with some chicken salad, someone had brought so that their family would have food throughout the visitation. Her daughters' Caron, aged six, and Sarah, aged four, both in pretty dresses, were sitting on the oak floors below her, combing the hair of their small animal toys with tiny pink and purple combs. They both loved *Littlest Pet Shop*, Lara thought. I'm glad I let them bring those toys.

"Lara, shall I take Luke for a minute so that you can walk around, get some soda, or perhaps talk to someone?" asked Mary.

"Thank you. That would be great," answered Lara, whose arms were a little numb from holding Luke tightly for so long.

Lara was clearly on autopilot, and she knew it. It had only been three days ago that a neighbor she hadn't known, had come to her front door to call for help. Lara's husband of ten years, Jeff, had collapsed while either jogging or running in their cul-de-sac. While her next door neighbor, Mary Conyer, watched the kids and kept them busy inside, Lara had done CPR until the ambulance and paramedics had arrived. There had been no response, not while Lara did CPR, and not after the paramedics arrived with their own gear. The local Emergency Room had been fine with pronouncing it a heart attack, and the local officials had no plans to do an autopsy. This was not okay with Lara. Jeff had no known medical issues, and she knew, as a registered nurse, that the true cause of his death could have future implications for their four children as they grew. Despite the fact that Lara had no idea how she would pay for it, she had requested an autopsy herself, even though she knew it would now be at her own expense. The clear result of the autopsy, received late the following day, had been a brain aneurysm. This alone had been an incredible shock. Jeff had never complained of a headache. He never complained of nausea or had vomiting. He didn't have high blood pressure. No one in his family had ever had an aneurysm. He could run all day, keep up with his job, and the kids. Lara was in shock. The best way to survive, she thought, was simply to get through the visitation today, and the funeral tomorrow. She knew only that she had to get

the kids through the funeral. She had not yet broken down and cried, and neither had they. The children seemed not really to understand. Lara wondered if she didn't either. She was afraid to break down. Once she did, would she ever be able to stop crying, or would she just die too?

While Mary Conyer expertly and gently distracted Luke, who was tired, Lara poured and spilled some Sprite, and talked to people who'd come to the visitation. Many of their neighbors came. Lara didn't know a number of them, but she was gracious and thanked them for the kind words and for their taking the time to visit. One of the senior partners from Jeff's law firm was there also. Jeff, who was Jefferson John Crowell, had started life after high school, and some college, as a county police officer, and within a year knew that he wanted to go to law school. He worked as a police officer, and had attended more college, and then law school at night. During Jeff's years in law school, Lara had worked as a registered nurse. Jeff graduated, passed the bar exam in Virginia, and went to work for the family law practice of *Stall and Hedges*. It was supposed to have been Lara's turn to stay home with the kids, perhaps even to homeschool them. Jeff had worked so hard to attain his goals and now that he had, he was gone. Lara wasn't ready to think too hard about his student loans, the bill for the funeral, the bill for the autopsy and how she was going to pay them, along with their mortgage. Even then, she would need to support herself and their children afterward.

Death and funerals were not something new for Lara. Her own parents had been killed in a car crash the year she and Jeff had been married. Only five years before, Jeff's father and mother had died when their new and possibly incorrectly installed gas hot water heater produced enough carbon monoxide to kill them as they slept. Lara and Jeff had both been bound even tighter by being one of those rare people who lost their mother and their father at the same time, long before their loss would have ordinarily been expected. She and Jeff had weathered those storms, but this nightmare was something new. How would she raise their children without him?

Within forty minutes or so, the visitation of friends, co-workers, and neighbors was over, and Lara took the children home. Tomorrow afternoon, would be the funeral, for which she hoped she had the endurance remaining.



## **Chapter Two: If There is Anything That We Can Do...**

The morning of the funeral, Lara and the children overslept. Finally, the children got up and ran into the master bedroom and jumped into bed with their mother. It was as if they had forgotten, as if Daddy had simply gone to work. The bright sunlight came in through the two large bedroom windows in spite of the fact that their father was gone. Lara hugged them and talked to them. She told them that she needed to put clothes out for them because there is one more gathering they need to attend in the afternoon.

“Is Daddy coming, too?” asked Sarah.

“No, not really”, said Lara, who wasn’t really up to explaining life, death and the world beyond this one, even in such a teachable moment.

She had told each of the children that their father had died, but none of them had yet seemed to absorb it, and she wasn’t sure she had either.

They were fortunate in the small way that she and Jeff had recently purchased nice clothing for church for the children that, for the moment, actually fit them all. They were therefore ready with both clothes and shoes for the funeral that afternoon. Lara made their beds and set out their clothing there, with their shoes nearby. The only thing she needed to hunt for, were clean and matching socks for the boys. For herself, she put out a short sleeve black dress that fell just above the knee, panty hose, low black pumps, and a string of pearls that Jeff had given her for Christmas. She found a pair of dark sunglasses in a basket on the shelf, in their walk-in closet, that she chose to wear also. She had never imagined that the first, and possibly the last time, she would wear the pearls would be for Jeff’s funeral.

By eleven that morning, the Hallohans, who also lived on their cul-de-sac, dropped off food. It was cold fried chicken, with cole slaw and biscuits. They sent paper plates and plastic utensils also, along with a jug of lemonade, and big red solo cups. The children, who hadn’t yet begun to dress for the funeral, gathered at the kitchen table.

“I am so sorry, Lara” said Cherie Hallohan. “Jeff was a great man and a terrific neighbor. I just don’t know how you are holding together”.

“The funeral is at two,” said Lara. “It’s going to be difficult”, she said without going into much detail.

“Well, I had better go then”, said Cherie.

“Thank you so much for the food”, said Lara.

“It’s the least we can do”, said Cherie.

The kids ate their chicken, their biscuits and two of them actually ate the cole slaw also. Lara managed a piece of fried chicken as she didn’t want to feel faint at the funeral.

After Lara and the kids were dressed and their hair was combed, it was time to go to the church where the funeral would be held. *Saint James Episcopal Church* had a congregation that primarily consisted of older families. Jeff, Lara, and their family, had been one of the seven families at the church who had young children. The church was nearby, and it seemed as if it took longer to strap all four kids into the child car seats in her Escort, than it did to drive them there.

Had Lara felt anything even approaching normal that day, she would have been touched by the turn out of virtually every church member, every neighbor, and those who had worked with Jeff not only in his days as a police officer, but as a junior law partner as well. Instead though, the loss of Jeff had been so unexpected and so cataclysmic, that she saw the funeral not as a vehicle for a meaningful place for goodbye, but as a simple exercise of endurance, or perhaps even as torture for someone who has just lost their mate and now had to appear in public with her children. Somehow, she had to get her children through this funeral without screaming, tantrums or anything else, and this was true for herself, as well.

The service was quite lovely, and every once in a while, Lara drifted into thinking or even wishing that the funeral was for someone else other than her husband. The children were fidgety, and also seemed to be disconnected from the fact that this was no ordinary church service. She watched quietly as four people eulogized Jeff, while concentrating on how nicely they were dressed, rather than focusing their words or the stories they were relating. The last man to speak was one of the founders and senior partners at the law firm where Jeff had worked. She sat and listened in a bit of a fog, with sunglasses intact.

Somehow, Lara, Eric, Caron, Sarah and Luke made it through the actual service, and followed as pallbearers carried the coffin outside, to a deep and freshly dug clay lined rectangle. Her son Eric walked up close to it to check out

its depth. He said something about it looking deeper than six feet. Lara tried to hold the hands of the children, but she was two hands short. She remembers neighbor Mary Conyer, and her sister Grace, reaching out to hold the hands of the other children, so that no one made a jump, even in play, into their father's grave, before the coffin did. With that, the Episcopal priest said final words and prayed asking our Heavenly Father to protect and see this man's widow and his children through his untimely loss from earth. With that, Lara had a lump in her throat, and cleared her throat, trying not to cry. By then, the children were also restless.

The next thing Lara recalled were the church women's group telling her that there was a small reception with food and drinks for the people who had attended. Lara really wanted to go home, but these people had gone to so much trouble.

While at the reception, one of the senior partners at Jeff's law firm, Paul Hedges, approached her. He had been the last to elegize Jeff.

"Lara, I am so sorry for your loss. Jeff was such a good man. Listen, if there is ever anything we can do for you, please don't hesitate to contact us. Next week, I would like to come see you, at the house. The firm has a life insurance policy for Jeff which was equivalent to about a year's salary. I want to bring you the claim information. Of course, you will need to have his death certificate to provide to the life insurance company in order to make the claim."

"Thank you, Mr. Hedges", she said.

"Oh, it's Paul", he corrected. "If there is anything else we can do, please call".

She nodded.

Then, about fifteen people hugged her and said the words,

"If there is anything we can do"...

## Chapter Three: It's Like Living in a Flower Shop

In the days that followed the funeral, Lara let the children wear play clothes. They stayed home and for a few days, she didn't check the workbooks in which Eric had been doing his homeschool curriculum. They needed time. Now that the children had not seen their father come home in days, they asked her again what had happened. This time, with all of them present, she told them, that Daddy had a little bubble in his brain, like a little red balloon, that no one had known about. She also told them that when Daddy was running, it burst, and he died right away.

"It didn't hurt?" asked Eric.

"No. It was very quick. He went to Heaven to see God right away." Lara said, trying to put as positive a spin as possible on what had happened. Many might have thought this was too graphic an explanation, but Lara knew that a simple, clear explanation is what it would take for her children to understand why they would not see their father again, while on this earth.

With that, all of the children cried, as did she. Eventually, they all held each other in a group hug. During that hug, Lara made a silent prayer to God to help her in this difficult time, with the needs of her children.

Despite the fact that there had been plenty of flowers at the funeral, flowers continued to be delivered to their home. Their house had been a *neat as a pin* three bedroom colonial with the bedrooms and main bathroom upstairs. It was adorable, and it was adequate, but it didn't have room for thirty bouquets and wreaths, some of which came from people Jeff must have known, but whose names she did not recognize. The girls played "flower shop" with them, and she noticed that a few of the flowers were actually potted in soil. Lara took the boys and the potted flowers outside with a spade, and they planted them in a flower bed in the back yard. It certainly helped to be busy. I suppose she could have taken a few of the flowers at a time to the grave itself, but there had been enough flowers at the gravesite, and so it never occurred to her.

Four days later, Paul Hedges called and came as he'd promised. *Stall and Hedges* had a sixty-five thousand dollar life insurance policy for Jeff, which had been his base salary, as a junior partner. He gave Lara the paperwork on the policy and explained that she needed to fill out the claim paperwork and include

an original copy of Jeff's death certificate, which would likely be ready within about two more weeks.

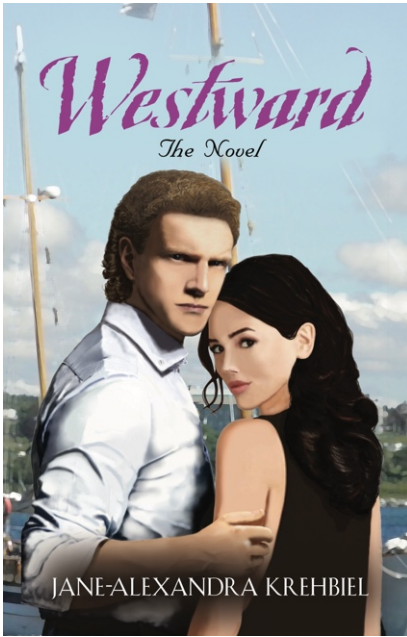
"If you would like", Paul Hedges said, "I will get a number of the death certificates for you, and I will bring them to you here."

"Thank you," said Lara. "That would really be helpful. It's hard to go places with the kids, especially right now."

"Oh, I almost forgot" he said. "The office took up a collection for you, toward the funeral or anything else you need. I have the envelope in my pocket, and it is cash."

"Thank you," she said again.

As Paul Hedges left, a white van with red roses painted on it from yet another flower shop, pulled into the driveway, and dropped off a large elephant ear plant with a white bow.



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