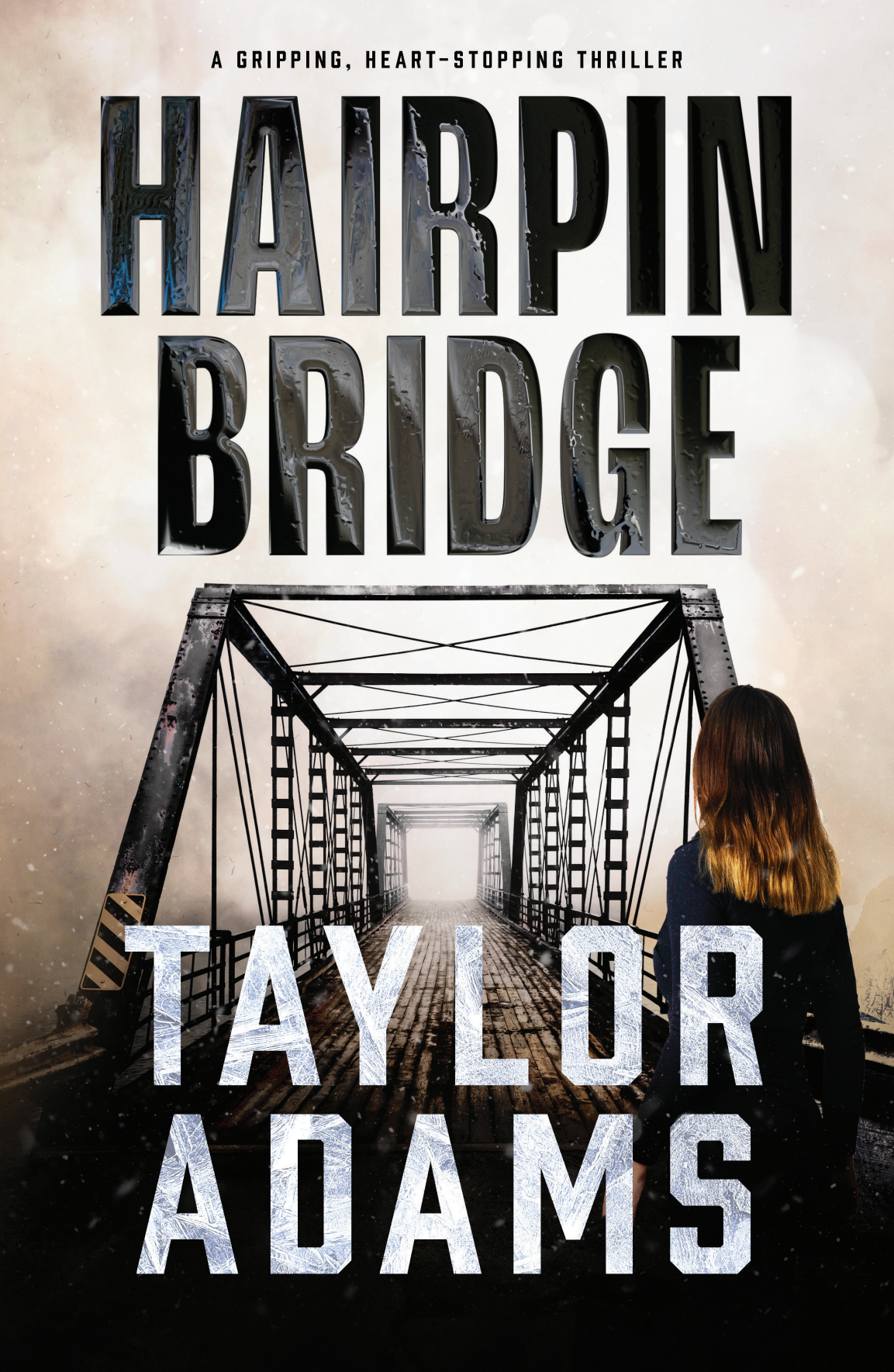


A GRIPPING, HEART-STOPPING THRILLER

# HAIRPIN BRIDGE



TAYLOR  
ADAMS

**HAIRPIN  
BRIDGE**

**TAYLOR  
ADAMS**

# **PART 1**

## **FOUR SMALL FIRES**

# CHAPTER 1

## LENA

“YOU LOOK . . . *EXACTLY* LIKE HER.”

Lena Nguyen had heard this, many times before. It never got any less upsetting, being someone else’s walking, talking ghost.

“And you were twins?”

She nodded.

“Identical, right?”

She nodded again.

Something changed behind the state trooper’s eyes, and he looked regretful. Like he’d already committed an offense by not starting with this: “I’m . . . I should say, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Another greatest hit. Lena made polite eye contact.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose a sibling.”

No one ever could.

“Just try to take it one day at a time.”

The oldies kept coming.

“You’ll never get over it. But someday you will get *past* it.”

*That’s a new one*, Lena thought. She’d add it to the list.

Corporal Raymond Raycevic had agreed to meet her here in a

gravel parking lot shared by the Magma Springs Diner and a Shell station, sixty miles outside of Missoula. An exodus of wildfire evacuees fed a constant stream of passing traffic, and the highway hit a dangerous junction here under two blind corners and no stoplight.

Corporal Raycevic himself was a gorilla-like man stuffed into a tan-brown highway patrol uniform pulled taut to contain him. All shoulders and biceps and a gentle smile. He'd shaken Lena's hand with earnest delicacy. He had bags under his eyes, the soft color of bruises.

"Thank you for doing this," she said.

"Of course."

"I really appreciate it . . . you know. With you being on the clock and all—"

He half smiled. "My shift is over."

He studied her again for a long moment, still transfixed, and Lena felt a familiar impatience. Discussing her sister with strangers always felt like this; a choose-your-own-adventure book she'd memorized ages ago. She knew exactly what Raycevic was thinking before he said it, his words arriving right on schedule: "I'm sorry. I just . . . I can't get over how much you look *just like her*."

*You should try it*, she thought sourly. *It's awful, grieving for someone while seeing her face in the mirror every single morning.*

"It must be awful, seeing her face in the mirror every morning. Every day, anything with a reflection, even a car mirror, can just . . . blindside you."

She looked at him.

"You have my sympathy, Lena."

*Yeah? And maybe I underestimated you, Ray.*

A squealing hiss startled her. She turned—an eighteen-wheeler had taken the turn too fast. For a stomach-fluttery moment, ten tons of rolling cargo skidded directly at them on locked tires. Then the

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truck swerved back into its lane, and Corporal Raycevic watched the tinted windows pass, as if expecting the driver to apologize.

He didn't. The engine throttled up and the rig thundered on, a wash of displaced air tugging their clothes. Lena swept her bangs from her face and watched the trailer's stenciled letters hurtle past like film in a projector: SIDEWINDER. In another moment, gone. Just a ring in her ears and the gritty taste of dust.

"Idiot," the cop muttered.

*I'm really here, she thought. I'm really here, doing this.*

The dust in her teeth made it real. After months of waiting, twenty-four-year-old Lena was finally here in Montana. Miles from home. Moving forward. Making progress. Another voice, just a faint whisper in her mind: *Don't get comfortable. Don't let your guard down.*

*Not even for a second.*

She caught herself twirling a lock of her hair with her index finger and tugging—a tic she'd had since elementary school—and stopped herself. It made her look nervous.

Raycevic didn't notice. He was squinting into the distance. "Hairpin Bridge isn't far from here, but there's zero shade once you're up there. The sun becomes a spotlight. Saps your energy. Before we go, do you need anything from the diner? Water, maybe?"

"I'll buy something."

"All right." He pointed. "I'll start my vehicle. Follow me."

She hurried back inside the air-conditioned Magma Springs Diner. She'd already waited there for hours today, sipping black coffee as groups of firefighters talked shop over plates of greasy eggs. She pretended to waver at the mini-fridge stocked with energy drinks and bottled water, and once she was certain Corporal Raycevic was occupied inside his cruiser and not watching her through the front windows, she returned to her booth.

There, she had a laptop on the table. She triple-checked the power cable, the Sony unit, and the connection to the restaurant's router. All good.

"Thanks again," she said to the lady at the long counter. "I'll be back soon."

"Is that a college project you're downloading?"

"Something like that."

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SHE FOLLOWED THE COP CAR EAST ON HIGHWAY 200, FIFTEEN minutes of fresh asphalt under a horizon banded with smoke. Then Raycevic veered sharply right, crossing two lanes, as if the turnoff had surprised him. Lena had to stomp on her brakes, grinding rubber.

He waved out his window: *Sorry*.

This new road hadn't been maintained for decades. Weeds sprouted through fissures in sun-bleached concrete. The lines were faded. Over a locked metal gate, an equally faded signboard read: PUBLIC USE PROHIBITED. Corporal Raycevic had the code memorized. After relocking it behind them, he drove on at seventy-five, fifteen over the speed limit. She wondered if he was testing her, trying to goad her into a ticket. That would be a dick move.

She matched his speed. She would test him, too.

She drove in silence. No music or podcasts since she'd left Seattle this morning because she didn't have the correct dongle to connect to the speakers. She was afraid to touch the CD player or radio presets because the car wasn't hers.

It was Cambry's.

*Had been* Cambry's.

Driving your dead twin's car is a jarring experience. Their father

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had urged Lena through teary eyes to accept the vehicle, insisted that this lived-in 2007 Toyota Corolla was one of her sister's few remaining possessions and it would be wrong to sell it. Maybe so. But today's journey to the dry foothills of Howard County, Montana, was the longest Lena had ever driven it.

She hadn't altered anything. Every detail was a freeze-frame. The empty thirty-two-ounce fountain drink in the cup holder was Cambry's, sporting a superhero who'd already come and gone at the box office. The red cooler full of rotten food. The backup battery, the air compressor, the dirty tool bag. The minimalist living quarters in the back seat—a duffel bag of folded clothes that still had her scent, separate Ziploc bags containing deodorant, toothpaste, and mouthwash. In the trunk, a two-person tent, an electric grill, and a perfectly rolled sleeping bag. Lena could never roll a sleeping bag that tight. Ever.

*I'm not just driving her car,* she'd realized with a hollow pang, somewhere between Spokane and Coeur d'Alene. *I'm driving her house.*

City girl that she was, Lena couldn't help but marvel at her twin's spartan lifestyle. The duct tape on the steering wheel. The exposed wires betraying the handmade repairs to the cigarette-lighter adapter. The scattered dryer sheets (to fight odors, Lena guessed). To change or discard anything here, in this intimate space where her sister had lived capably for over nine months, felt like a profound insult.

So it all remained.

Even the moldy food in the cooler. Even the fountain drink at her side, sweet-smelling in the sunlight. Cambry's lips had touched it three months ago. Maybe her DNA was still on it.

*You look exactly like her.*

She was surprised Corporal Raycevic hadn't recognized Cambry's



car. He'd found it the same night he found her body. Wouldn't he remember it?

His patrol car was still forging ahead—approaching eighty now—so Lena pushed the gas and matched his speed as the road climbed into the foothills. Tires jostled over rough concrete. The land dropped away in places to an alarming vastness on her right, and for a moment Lena considered how close you are to death on most roads. The buffers are mostly imaginary. You're only a swerve away from an oncoming lane or a ravine. She tried not to think about it.

The lodgepole pines grew taller up here—sixty, seventy feet. Frayed branches cooked brittle in the sun, standing over floors of brown needles and crunchy juniper. A million acres of tinder waiting for a spark. And beyond the changing terrain, rising in the distance . . .

She felt a knot tighten in her throat.

There it was. The structure was already taking shape over the sloping hills, jagged and unwelcome and thoroughly man-made. An ancient fossil emerging from the land.

*Oh, Jesus, there it is.*

She felt her chest tense up as the rust-brown form came into clarity, rivets and girders drawn toothpick-sharp in the sunlight. Becoming real before her eyes as the cracked road pulled her closer. She knew she was committed now, that her and Corporal Raycevic's fates were entwined here. She couldn't possibly turn back.

As it drew closer, momentarily obscured by another hump of dry pines, she tried to calm her nerves. No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy, right?

Still . . .

*It looks so much bigger than in the photos.*

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BEFORE I GO

*Posted 9/20/19 by LNguyen*

It starts with a bridge.

A precarious steel monster with a fierce turn on its south ramp, spanning six hundred feet across an obscure valley on the fringes of a bankrupt silver-mining town, all rendered perfectly obsolete by the interstate. Seventy miles from Missoula. As far as bridges go, it's a total fuckup, and it knows it.

It's also where my sister died.

Allegedly.

Sorry to be heavy, dear readers. I know this blog post isn't my usual writing for *Lights and Sounds*, and that may upset some of you. And I appreciate the kind words and FB/Insta well-wishes over the past few months I've been AWOL (obvious reasons). Yes, I'm back in the blogging saddle, but not quite how you may expect. And I have a doozy of a post here, so buckle up.

But before you read further:

This is not my normal blog. This is not a book, movie, or video game review. This is not a political rant (God knows this has been a great year for that). Nor is this poetry, humor, photography, or the long-awaited part eleven of JustRetailThings. This—whatever THIS is—is something I need to post here, on *Lights and Sounds*, to my modest but engaged readership (that's you) for reasons that will soon become clear. By the time you finish reading this, depending on your time zone, I might just be national news. So, sorry in advance if this ruins your whole day. Good? Good.

Here we go.

I'm spending my Saturday at Hairpin Bridge. Tomorrow morning at the ass-crack of dawn I'm driving Cambry's car seven hours east to the

town of Magma Springs, Montana, and meeting up with a local highway patrolman named Raymond R. Raycevic. Yes, that's really his name (apparently R's were on sale the day his parents named him). Via email he's kindly agreed to show me, the grieving sister, the exact spot where he discovered Cambry's body three months ago.

As for Hairpin Bridge . . . well, dear readers, did that name sound familiar? You might have heard of it. It's a bit of an architectural anomaly, given its odd shape (the valley walls necessitate that the road take a funny corkscrew turn on the south ramp before looping back over itself, like driving over a giant metal hairpin). It has another name I won't repeat, because honestly, I don't like the associations it now has with Cambry, and I don't like how her name has become forever linked with it on the search engines. So I won't use it.

Hairpin Bridge is haunted.

*Allegedly* (get used to that word).

It's a hot spot for paranormal activity. They say space and time are malleable around the hallowed bones of Hairpin Bridge, and as you cross it, past and present can intertwine a bit. The way light refracts through a dirty lens.

I know. I'm not seriously suggesting my sister was murdered by ghosts. But I had a phase in July when I considered it. For a time, I devoured all the user-submitted accounts of corrupted time and glimpsed apparitions. I listened to every EVP audio recording where people claimed to have captured disembodied whispers: *Help me* or *Leave this place*. I even read the self-published book written by the Rupley guy who spent the night camping under it (spoiler: he lived).

It's ridiculous, but that's the hole I fell into after my sister's abrupt death. In the terror of free fall, you're not yourself for a while. You grasp for explanations, no matter how far-fetched. They can be myths, criminal conspiracies, **anything** to assign sense to the senseless. Any answer is better than nothing.

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And now I think I finally have one.

(No, it doesn't involve ghosts.)

So that's where I'm going, dear readers. That's why this latte-sipping Seattleite is setting out tomorrow to a butt-ugly bridge in God's Country. That's why I'm writing this. And that's why I won't accept anything less than the truth from Corporal Raycevic. I'll pay any price for it. I have to know.

*What happened to you, Cambry?*

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HE WAS WAITING FOR HER ON THE BRIDGE. HE'D PARKED HIS black cruiser on the right, alongside a low and blistered guardrail, but Lena knew it didn't matter where they parked. Hairpin Bridge served a dead highway. There was no traffic to block.

At the south ramp, just past the bridge's eponymous hairpin twist, a sun-bleached sign stated something illegible about the structure being unsound or uninspected. It had failed to discourage scores of amateur ghost hunters. More recently, someone had spray-painted in black: ALL OF YOUR ROADS LEAD HERE.

Strangely apt, to Lena.

She parked a few yards ahead of the cop car to allow herself a quick escape route. She left the Corolla's engine idling for a moment, took a breath and held it. The drive from Magma Springs hadn't taken nearly as long as she'd planned. Now she was here. She felt unprepared.

*I'm here, Cambry.*

She studied her sister's bent eyeglasses on the dashboard. The hairline scratches on the lenses.

*Oh, God, I'm really here.*

In her side-view mirror, Corporal Raycevic stood by his car, elbow on the door, pretending he was picking at a scab on his wrist

and not waiting on her. Considerate of him. He'd surprised her with his sensitivity already. On one hand, it was his job—he'd certainly delivered his share of bad news to grieving families—but Lena suspected there was more to it. He had lost someone, too. He wore the mark like she did, another member of that terrible unspoken club. A wife? A young kid?

Her lungs ached. She realized she'd been holding her breath.

She cut the engine and immediately regretted it. She could have delayed longer, and wished she had. Raycevic wouldn't have minded. Now he was staring toward her through his jetblack sunglasses, noticing—yes, this was Cambry's blue Toyota Corolla that Lena had driven out here. The victim's twin sister, driving the victim's car. Arriving at the site where the victim perished, like a ghoulish doppelganger.

If it disturbed him, he didn't show it. He gave her a gentle nod—*This is the place.*

*Obviously.*

She climbed out. The sun blazed hotter up here. Mirages shimmered off the bridge's cement roadway in watery ripples. The air was windless.

"You can see the fire from here." Raycevic pointed north. "Four thousand acres at Black Lake, still growing, still uncontained—"

"Is it coming toward us?"

"Not unless the wind changes."

Lena didn't care, then. She had enough on her mind. But the mile-high thunderhead of smoke was commanding. The world seemed to end on the horizon, a slow-motion apocalypse.

"You know, I never understood why it's called Hairpin Bridge," he said thoughtfully. "I see the sharp turn over there, I guess, but it reminds me more of those Marbleworks toys kids play with. You know what I'm talking about?"

"Yeah."

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“The straight piece with the curved hook on the end.” He pointed. “Right? That’s what it looks like to me. Not a hairpin.”

*Marbleworks Bridge.* Somehow it just didn’t have the same mystique.

“You play with Marbleworks a lot?”

“Everyone needs a hobby.”

For a moment, he was a normal person. It was nice. It was also completely false.

He finally said it. “You . . . drove her vehicle.”

“Yeah.”

He studied the taillights wistfully. “I recognize it.”

“Do you mind if I record you?”

“I’m sorry?”

She’d waited until now to ask, because she suspected it might be harder for him to say no on the spot. She pointed to the car. “I brought a tape recorder with me. An old clunky thing, you’ll laugh. But my counselor recommended that I . . . I record everything significant.”

He said nothing. Thinking.

“Not just this.” She flashed a wounded smile. “I filmed her funeral, too.”

“Did you watch it?”

“A few times.”

He made a sour face. *Why?*

“You don’t really die when your heart stops. You die when you’re forgotten. My sister isn’t a person anymore—she’s an *idea*. I carry her. So every trace I have left of her, every word and smell and sound, needs to be preserved.”

“Even the negative things?”

“Yes.”

“Even her funeral?”

“I feel close to her. Like she only just left.” *It’s like picking a scab,* she wanted to add. *Soon you start to feel nothing, and that’s terrifying. The pain brings her back.*

*It keeps her real.*

Raycevic sighed. Then he nodded once. “Go ahead.”

She retreated to the Corolla, worrying she’d already blown her cover by using the word *counselor*. Was it *therapist*? What’s the difference between a therapist and a grief counselor? She didn’t know, but Raycevic probably did. She leaned into her sister’s car and pulled it out—a chunky black Shoebox recorder.

She inserted a cassette tape. Clicked the shoulder button. “Testing.”

“They still make those?”

“It was Cambry’s. When we were kids.”

That shut him up. He watched her set the gadget on the Corolla’s hood. Through the plastic cover, the cassette’s spokes turned. “Thank you,” she said, louder for the mic: “Corporal Raycevic.”

“Call me Ray.”

“Thank you, Ray.” She looked at him. “Start with how you found her body, please.”

“I was responding. Someone took bolt cutters to the chain on that gate we passed.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Happens a couple times a year. Truckers use this route to shave an hour off their runs. This was the night of June seventh. Around eleven. And I came up on that bend there, approaching the bridge, and I saw a blue Toyota parked here.”

“Parked where? Can you be exact?”

“Actually . . .” He paused. “Exactly where you have it parked right now.”

She felt a tug in her stomach, but quickly dismissed it: *Coincidence*.

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"I almost rear-ended it," the cop said. "I slammed my brakes, splashed coffee all over my radio. You can see the skid marks still."

Sure enough, faded markings on the pavement, right where he pointed. Ropy, licorice-black.

"At 11:44, I approached Cambry's—*your*—Toyota Corolla on foot. It was abandoned. No occupant. No signs of disturbance. Driver door was left wide open. Dead battery. Empty tank." Raycevic wavered, as if he felt foolish. "But you're aware of all this—"

"Every detail. Please."

"I checked the rest of the bridge, scanned the trees for campfires or flashlights. Then I sat back in my vehicle and called in the plates. Eleven fifty-one, now."

*He knows the times too well*, Lena noted. He'd studied up.

"I remember standing by while Dispatch ran the plates, gathering my thoughts. Wiping coffee off my slacks with a napkin, looking up at the starry black sky, and being struck with a terrible feeling of . . . wrongness, I guess. I don't know how else to describe it. Like being here, on this bridge, was the equivalent of sticking your right hand into a garbage disposal while feathering the on switch with your left. Does that make sense?"

No—but Lena nodded anyway.

*It's not just past and present that get scrambled in Hairpin Bridge's prism, she remembered reading. So, too, are life and death.*

"Somehow I just . . ." He chewed his lip. "Cop's intuition, I guess. Something told me I should step back out into the cold air, cold for June, and look down over the railing. That the woman who abandoned this Corolla would be . . . down there."

"The Suicide Bridge," Lena whispered.

"What?"

"Hairpin Bridge's other name."

"I don't understand."



“According to the ghost stories, I mean.” She twisted her hair, embarrassed to have brought the word *ghost* into this. “People on the internet, paranormal nuts . . . they say drivers used to jump to their deaths off this bridge. Five or six suicides back in the eighties. Enough that it became semifamous as a place where solitary, troubled people are drawn from all over to end their lives.”

“Huh.” The cop shrugged. “Never heard of that.”

“Like the forest in Japan.”

“Never heard of that, either.” He walked to the railing, and Lena followed. He put both palms on the guardrail. His big hands were knobbed with calluses. “I was standing exactly here,” he said, “when I saw Cambry.”

This gave Lena a shiver.

He pointed straight down, to the mosaic of pale boulders far below. The arroyo was a bed of loose rocks tilled by the turbulent seasons of Silver Creek. Flash floods in March, drought in July.

“Where?”

“Right there.”

She joined him at the railing and tried to visualize Cambry’s body down there as part of the mosaic. Crumpled, limp, doll-like from two hundred feet up. But she’d been trying for months. She wanted, needed more details: “Was she on her back? Or her stomach?”

“On her side.”

“Right or left?”

“Left.”

“Was there any blood?”

He turned. “Excuse me?”

“Did you see any blood on her?”

“How is this helpful?”

“I want to know everything.” Lena tried not to blink. “All the upsetting, nasty details. If I don’t have details, what I imagine at

night when I can't sleep is far, *far* worse. It's unfinished, and I can't stand unfinished things. It's a problem I have. My brain works relentlessly to fill in blanks."

She wasn't sure he was buying it.

"It's . . ." She tried this: "It's like a monster in a movie. When you can't see it, it's terrifying. But seeing the monster plainly, in full daylight, takes away its power. Makes it known."

"Depends on the monster," he said finally.

"I've got a hell of an imagination, Ray."

"And your . . ." He squinted. "Your *counselor* signed off on this?"

"I know what I'm asking."

"You're sure?" "I'm certain."

"A hundred percent?"

"A million."

He sighed and looked away. "You're making me uncomfortable."

"*You're* uncomfortable?"

"The fall killed Cambry," he said abruptly. His voice rang in the thin air, and Lena instinctively shrank back. Hearing men raise their voices had always frightened her. "I don't have any gory details to share about the state of her body after her suicide, because I don't think it's appropriate. Is that okay?"

She felt like she was being scolded. Her eyes watered, despite herself. *Hold it together.*

"After I saw your sister's body, I called EMS and descended on foot to render aid, if possible. As I expected, I found she had no pulse. No breathing. Her body had been down there for at least a day."

*Don't cry.* She bit her lip.

"Dying in that way . . . it's fast. Faster than the brain can experience pain. It's like an off switch inside you, flipped in a microsecond. Whatever her problems were on June sixth . . ." He exhaled and

glanced back at her, softening. “Your sister didn’t suffer, Lena.”

She bristled, like an icy fingertip had stroked between her shoulder blades. This was the first time Corporal Raycevic had used her first name. She wished he hadn’t.

*She didn’t suffer* was a new one, too. Because when someone decides to jump off a bridge, no one has the audacity to claim they weren’t suffering.

She tried to focus on the moment. On here, now, herself and Raycevic. But to be here and stand where it happened was to be plugged into a strange energy, and her restless mind kept whipping back to it, trying to reconstruct details: *It’s June 6. After dusk. The air shivers with electricity. Cambry Lynne Nguyen is driving alone on this closed road. And after driving an unknown distance, from an unknown origin, she reaches this bridge. And she stops her car here.*

Right where Lena had unwittingly parked it, in an eerie co-ncidence.

*And she steps out into the cooling night, nine o’clock now, leaving her engine running, her door ajar. And she walks to the bridge’s edge, right here—*Lena gripped the guardrail with both hands, perhaps in the same places Cambry had three months ago—*and my sister hoists herself over this railing one leg at a time. Then she steps off, or maybe she hangs by her fingers before letting go, or maybe she takes a reckless running leap into the void, like how she seemed to leap into everything.*

*She plunges two hundred feet.*

*She impacts the rock floor at the speed of—*

“Fuck,” Lena whispered.

What else can you say? Raycevic had stepped back to give her space.

And now the questions. Endless questions in Lena’s mind, racing, scratching, clawing, begging to be let free: *What were you doing out here? Where were you driving? Why did you stop? Why did you get out*

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*of your car here, of all places, on this remote bridge?*

And of course, the old classic, a terrible refrain: *Why did you kill yourself?*

*Why did you do it?*

“I’m sorry,” Raycevic whispered behind her. But his voice sounded oddly tinny, as if filtered through a distant phone line. All Lena saw was the voided space beneath her feet, the ravine far below, the vast gravel bed of Silver Creek littered with fallen white trees.

*Cambry . . .*

In your final hours, what was going through your mind?

# CHAPTER 2

## CAMBRY'S STORY

I swear to God, *Cambry thinks*, I better not die today.

*Seeing an owl in daylight is a dire omen. She can't remember where she learned this.*

*He's perched in the branches like a brown lawn gnome. A great horned owl. His tufted feathers, the eponymous horns, form a devilish silhouette against the blue sky. These horns are the hardest to draw without overdoing. She's using ink, not pencil, and it's already botched—this poor guy looks like Batman. She wants to tear off the page and restart.*

If you weren't the harbinger of my death before, *she thinks*, you probably are now.

*Downhill, the campground is silent.*

*Or it was—until thirty seconds ago, when the couple in the Ford Explorer arrived. Now she hears the crinkle of nylon, zippers, car doors opening and shutting, murmured voices. She tries to focus on her sketch. The owl cocks its head, perhaps equally annoyed.*

*The couple is arguing. From Cambry's spot in the sagebrush fifty yards uphill, she can't discern words, but she recognizes the tempo of*

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*their voices. The rises and falls, the whispered cuts, the reflexive snaps. The music of conflict. She knows every note.*

*The man slides a cooler out of the Explorer and lets it hit the dirt with an emphatic thud.*

*Cambry sticks out her tongue as she draws—habit, since age five—and keeps shading the owl’s outline, Batman ears and all. Sometimes you can rescue a sketch. With enough crosshatching, she makes the exaggeration look intentional. Her subject has lost interest in the couple and now stares back down at her with bright yellow eyes. Unsettling in their alertness.*

*The Explorer’s cargo door slams. The couple is leaving now for their campsite. Their voices fading into the pines.*

*Now she remembers—an eighth-grade museum trip, where a curator told the class that Native Americans considered owls to be harbingers of death. Guardians of the afterlife, venturing into daytime hours to meet the souls of the soon to be departed. Sure enough, this one is still studying her with those binocular eyes, a strange and powerful attention.*

*Silence again. The couple is gone.*

*Finally.*

*Cambry claps her notepad shut and quietly hurries down to the road. She unslings her backpack beside the couple’s Explorer, pulls out a three-gallon fuel can, and gently pries the vehicle’s gas cover open so she can feed in several feet of plastic tubing.*

*The owl watches her the entire time.*

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*When we were kids, I always promised Cambry I would write a book about her adventures. This—what you’re reading now—is not what I had in mind.*

*Obviously.*

*But there's some painful catharsis in telling my sister's story. Reconstructing the facts of her final hours feels like setting a million fractured bones. Every word hurts, but my parents deserve to know what really happened to their daughter on June 6. And I'll be up-front: I've taken liberties in imagining certain details, as no one can claim to know a dead woman's thoughts.*

*But who better to try than her twin?*

*And before we proceed, a special note to Cambry: Here's your book, sis. At long last. I'm so, so sorry that it's fifteen years late. And that you die at the end.*

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*Cambry's spiral notebooks are a hand-drawn history of her past nine months.*

*September is Oregon. Through the concrete and chain link of Portland to the watery evergreens of Crater Lake. Then Medford, home brews and couch surfing with one of her boyfriend Blake's friends—an easygoing guy who shared a potent hallucinogen he'd grown in a shoebox. Hairy tarantulas had dropped down on her like paratroopers for the next three hours. Eventually they stopped being frightening and she just swatted them away.*

*October is California. Highway 101 down past Eureka to Glass Beach. The neighboring residents of Fort Bragg used to dump their trash into the ocean for decades, unintentionally creating the world's largest reserve of sea glass. Blue and green glittered wetly among the dark stones. Pencil and ink couldn't do it justice. She took a handful and stored them in her console.*

*November is foggy coasts, slick docks, and bridges. The biggest: Golden Gate.*

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*December and January are New Mexico, Arizona, Texas. Things were still good between her and Blake, the money lasting on pace. They played Frisbee in an apocalyptic expanse of bleached desert called White Sands. Pale waves whipped into fifty-foot ripples. One night under a galaxy of stars, Blake asked her what she'd do when this grand pilgrimage was over and they'd finally looped back to Seattle.*

*Her answer: Kill myself.*

*He laughed uncomfortably.*

*February and March are Louisiana, Georgia, Florida. She drew white mansions with half-mile driveways, lightbulbs in trees, scaly alligator heads. She and Blake fought more frequently, their arguments coming as fast and fierce as the storms. Around Fort Myers, hailstones cracked the Corolla's windshield like gunfire. Things were souring now. At the repair shop, Blake sullenly told her he was walking to the gas station to buy cigarettes. She waited thirty minutes, then went after him—and the 7-Eleven clerk said he saw a man matching Blake's description meet a friend and drive away. He'd stolen four thousand dollars and their palm-size .25-caliber pistol. Cambry had seventeen dollars in her purse and a freshly repaired windshield.*

*She kept going.*

*Why not?*

*She would find her way back to Seattle without him. The entire year-long journey had been her idea. Not Blake's. She'd find her way back home—if she even wanted to—and get there on her time.*

*April is the Virginias, and then through the deep green Ozarks, under the decayed smokestacks of rust-eaten paper mills and factories, and northward to the Dakotas. The sketches get more numerous without Blake touching her arm like an impatient child. She downsized without him and sold the trailer. The Corolla's mileage got better. Odd jobs refilled the money. She didn't like to steal, but she did on occasion. Mostly food.*



*Now June. Montana.*

*Her last notebook is almost full. From Magma Springs, Seattle is within a tank or two of gas. Her old life beckons, and she misses its comforts. Running water. Electrical outlets. Her toothache has gotten worse this month. She keeps seeing blood on her toothbrush.*

*But she'll make it to Coeur d'Alene tonight, she estimates. If she leaves now.*

*On the hike back from the Dog's Head campground, she takes the public trail before cutting through thick and hilly forest. Her backpack is heavy now with sloshing gasoline. When she siphons this far into the boonies, she takes only a gallon or two. She doesn't want to strand anyone.*

*The temperature is pleasant in the late evening. The sun orange behind the pines, the sky a bruised purple. No more feuding voices—just the buzz of crickets and the crunch of yellow grass underfoot. She likes the quiet, the smell of pine needles and berries. She's on the final leg of her hike, maybe five minutes from the highway where she parked, when she notices the column of smoke.*

*My car is on fire, she thinks.*

*Her mind roils lately. Since Florida, she's lost control of her anxieties—her furies, her psychologist used to call them. An owl means impending death. A toothache is cancerous. Smoke means her Corolla is a flaming husk.*

*The smoke, it turns out, originates a short distance off her path. Several plumes rise in smeared trails against the white-capped Rockies. She's curious, so she stops and squints through a screen of branches.*

*A grass fire, maybe?*

*She spots the source a quarter mile downhill: a naked cement foundation, as white as bone. Like a building that never was, now choked by weeds. A trailer and a rusted-out truck. A dried-up well. Heaped lumber and gravel. The soil is raw, dark, freshly churned.*

## Hairpin Bridge

*The smoke trails emanate from four fires. They're arranged in a perfect row across the bare cement floor, and each fire is caged in a pyramid of stacked rocks. Like little hearth ovens. The flames are contained to cracks of trapped orange.*

*A man walks between the fires.*

*Seeing another human gives Cambry a shivery jolt—fires or no fires, she'd been certain she was alone out here—and she adjusts her footing, disturbing loose rocks. At this distance, the stranger is just a pacing speck. He looks shirtless. He crouches by each fire, as if prodding with a stick or poker. When he reaches the end of the row, he turns and checks each fire again.*

*Slow, patient, methodical.*

*She wishes she hadn't left her binoculars in her trunk. She doesn't dare approach any closer. Even a quarter mile feels too close.*

*The obvious explanation is that he's just burning brush, as many landowners do before the summer burn ban. But the fires are too small, and the stone pyramids appear too purposeful. Maybe he's smoking or slow-cooking something. Venison? Salmon?*

*Her furies whisper: Human?*

*She wonders if she's trespassing. Cambry has always taken care never to steal from private property, lest she catch a bullet. Best to make your lifts in public spaces, difficult as it may be. She can't remember passing any sunken fences or signs, but she glances behind herself anyway to check. When she looks back ahead, she realizes the faraway man has stopped pacing. He's standing still now, like a scarecrow, halfway between his two nearest fires.*

*He's staring uphill. At her.*

*Cambry's blood turns to ice water. A tug in her stomach. She doesn't move, either, matching his stance. The distance between them is too far to shout. She could try to wave, maybe. But she doesn't.*

*The man keeps staring.*

*The wind changes direction, a low growl that shifts the trees, and the four smoke trails push leftward, drifting into the man's face. He doesn't seem to react.*

*In this surreal standoff, Cambry squints harder. This isn't her first time being stared at in the nine months she's lived like a refugee. She's been asked to leave more parking lots and campgrounds than she can count. She tries to discern more detail: The sleeveless outline of a wife-beater undershirt. Brown khaki pants. His hands move for something at his waist (Gun, gun, gun, her furies whisper, but it's not the right shape). He raises it with both hands to his face.*

*Time to go.*

*He studies her through his cupped hands. A pinprick of glinted light confirms—yes, he's viewing her through lenses.*

*Go, Cambry. Now.*

*But this surreal moment seems to stretch forever, the air clotting, and she strangely feels like she really should wave now. She almost does. She's self-conscious, spotlighted, feeling his distant eyes crawl up and down her body.*

*Her heartbeat rises. A frenzied rattle against her ribs.*

*Go-go-go-right-now . . .*

*And she turns and calmly retreats from the rise of grassy land, keeping her movements slow and casual in the gaze of this faraway stranger's binoculars.*

*The second she's out of his view, she breaks into a sprint.*

\*\*\*

*Once her parked car is within eyeshot, she stops running and looks back.*

*To her muted terror, he now stands exactly where she'd been just moments ago. He doesn't see her yet. He's pacing on the grassy slope with*

*his hands at his hips, moving loose rocks with his foot, searching the chalky soil for her footprints.*

*She drops to her knees behind the nearest tree, catching her breath.*

*At this closer distance, she can see him better. He's a towering guy. Bulging biceps. Buzz cut. Thirties or forties, with a distinct military look. He must have run, too, to catch up to her so quickly. He's searching the surrounding forest now, shielding his eyes from the sunset.*

*With a chill, she realizes she's being tracked.*

*She unslings her backpack and slinks lower, lower, until she's flat against the packed soil. The thin lodgepole pine barely covers her. Viewed from his angle, she's just an eye and a cheekbone peering from behind a trunk. His vision can't possibly be that good, right?*

*His binoculars probably are.*

*He's unarmed, at least. That makes Cambry feel better. She imagined he'd have a bolt-action slung over his back, or a hatchet in his hand. But he's empty-handed, save for those binoculars, and under the sleeveless wifebeater his flesh is lobster red. A nasty sunburn. His pants are formal-looking slacks. Was he changing his clothes, too? What was he doing?*

*He's still searching the trees for her. His scanning focus approaches Cambry's hiding spot, sweeping left to right—her stomach balls into a tight knot—as his attention passes her tree, studies it briefly, and keeps searching. Thank God.*

*Remaining stone-still and sunken into the yellow grass, she slides her right hand into her back pocket and feels for the reassuring lump of her KA-BAR, a three-inch folding blade. She wishes Blake hadn't stolen the pistol when he left. A gun—even that piddly little mouse gun—would be nice right now. She resents her backpack, too. It slows her down.*

*Only now, crouched behind a tree and catching her gulped breaths in the fading daylight, does Cambry grasp the severity of what just*

*happened. This stranger ran a quarter mile uphill, into the trees, to reach her. Immediately. Without hesitation. He even left his four strange fires unattended. Now, more than ever, she wants to know what purpose they served.*

*She can feel it building. The electricity in her nerves. The whispers in her mind, urging her to pack it out and run, to tear off the page and restart. To be Cambry Nguyen, the cross-country demon with the six-minute mile, the girl who torched every bridge behind her, who barreled from friend to friend, city to city, lover to lover, the way a swarm of locusts devastates a crop and moves on. The woman who found flaws in every good thing and solved them by making them vanish in her rear-view mirror, from the West Coast to the East and nearly back again.*

*Her mouth is dry. She hasn't had a cigarette since January, but she needs one now.*

*It's probably a misunderstanding, she tells herself. For once, she should try facing a problem instead of running. It's no big deal—property lines are blurry out here. On her route back from the campground, she'd probably missed a rust-eaten sign somewhere and trespassed on some guy's private property, which gave him no choice but to follow her and ask her what she's—*

*The sunburned man's head snaps back. He sees her. He doesn't wave. He doesn't raise his binoculars. He just launches into a silent, mechanical sprint toward her, resuming the chase. Cambry runs like hell.*

\*\*\*

*When she reaches her Corolla on the road's shoulder, her heart is slamming in her eardrums and her breaths are hoarse. She's in good shape—she ran a half-marathon last year—but her backpack jostles heavily on her shoulders and the straps rub her skin raw. She's not sure*

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*if the sun-burned man is still following her through the trees, or how close he is.*

*As she throws the door open, she doesn't even glance back to locate her pursuer—that would cost precious seconds. She dives inside, twists the key, stomps on the gas. The engine roars, the tires claw handfuls of grit, and she's off and racing under a billow of dust.*

*She catches her breath for a second time as she drives. Questions now, rising faster than she can think. Who was he? What was he doing? What would he have done, had he caught up to her? And more pressing: Shouldn't you call 911?*

*There's no signal out here, she knows. It's a dead zone.*

*When you get into town, though . . . shouldn't you call?*

*A gunshot pierces the air. She flinches hard.*

*A pothole. Just a pothole, slamming underneath the chassis. She rubs her arms, shivery with goose bumps. Even when she does get a 911 dispatcher on the line, she wonders what exactly she'll say: Hello, dispatcher? I just saw a man tending to four small campfires.*

*Weird, yes. But illegal?*

*It all depends on what's in those fires, an unhelpful voice tells her.*

*It's a hell of a leap. She's miles into the sticks, and it could very well be his own property he chased her from. Another rut scrapes the Corolla's undercarriage. She lets off the gas a bit. The last thing she needs is another flat tire.*

*The sun is gone now. The magic hour, photographers call it, because the twilight is shadowless and dreamy, like a blue-tinged painting. And something else—Cambry always swore she could sense this, despite Lena's skepticism—she can feel electricity gathering in the air. The growing divide between positive and negative. Lightning is coming.*

*She passes familiar billboards for the Magma Springs Diner, then a pot shop—its slogan is "It's Surprisingly Easy Being Green"—and she feels better. She got away clean. As the road winds between raised*

*humps of trees, she glimpses blinking red lights on the horizon. Radio towers. The refuge of civilization, not far away. Humans. Cars. Speed limits. Insurance. Rent. Dentists.*

*She exhales—she didn't realize she was holding her breath. She's coming up on Highway 200 now, tapping her brakes at the junction, when she hears the jarring bleat of a siren.*

*She checks her rearview mirror.*

*Oh, thank God.*

*A dust-caked police cruiser races up on her tail with a flashing light bar. She pulls over like an obedient citizen, and the cop parks smoothly behind her. Black and gold paint. Montana Highway Patrol. The siren cuts, but the lights stay up, strobing in her mirrors.*

*Cambry hates cops. And she hates how relieved she is to see one.*

*Even in the rush of the moment, she coolly prepares her story. She makes sure the hose and fuel can are zipped up and hidden in her backpack. It was a nature walk, she'll explain. Just a boondocking girl with a car full of psychological baggage, communing with the guardians of the afterlife, courting a nervous breakdown. Nothing more.*

*The state trooper steps out of his car and leaves his door ajar. As he approaches her Corolla, framed against the cool blue dusk, details sharpen. His tan-brown uniform is half-buttoned, untucked. He's sun-burned underneath. Binoculars swinging from a lanyard around his neck. Still red-faced, because he's sprinted all the way from their first encounter to wherever he'd parked his cruiser.*

*His uniform has a name stitched on the breast, visible now as he reaches her window.*

*CPL. RAYMOND R. RAYCEVIC.*

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# Lena will stop at nothing to find the truth. But first, she needs to stay alive.

Three months ago, Lena Nguyen's estranged twin sister, Cambry, drove to a remote bridge seventy miles outside of Missoula, Montana, and jumped two hundred feet to her death. At least, that is the official police version.

But Lena isn't buying it.

Now she's come to that very bridge, driving her dead twin's car and armed with a cassette recorder, determined to find out what really happened by interviewing the highway patrolman who allegedly discovered her sister's body.

Corporal Raymond Raycevic has agreed to meet Lena at the scene. He is sympathetic, forthright, and professional. But his story still seems a bit off. For one thing, he stopped Cambry for speeding just an hour before she supposedly leaped to her death. Then there are the sixteen attempted 911 calls from her cell phone, made in what was unfortunately a dead zone.

But perhaps most troubling of all, the state trooper is referred to by name in Cambry's final enigmatic text to her sister: *Please Forgive Me*.

As her twin's final hours come into focus, Lena's search turns into a harrowing tooth-and-nail fight for her own survival — one that will test everything she thought she knew about her sister and herself...



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