

Jump from the Bridge

Chapter One

Terrance Collins was sitting on a picnic table in the sand at Reed's Pond, Leighton's town swimming hole. He often went there to eat his lunch on the warm summer days and chose one of the tables in the shade of the oak and elm trees that surrounded the pond. He and several other diners were watching the crowd of children and their moms soaking in the sun, frolicking in the water and chasing each other around in such a carefree way that it made Terrance not want to return to work.

Three boys, about ten years old or more, had gone to the snack shack to buy ice cream and were returning to the beach area. They had to walk by Terry, everyone called him Terry, and as he munched his bologna sandwich he could hear the boys talking excitedly. Terry tuned his hearing to their conversation with little interest other than curiosity.

"I'm going to ride over there this afternoon, you comin' Stan?" Said the tallest of the three boys in blue trunks and a white t-shirt.

"I don't know, I don't think my mom will let me." Replied Stan who was in red trunks. He stopped to quickly look at the bottom of one of his bare feet as he had stepped on something that had caused him pain.

"Come on, Tank's gonna go! Aren't you, Tank?" The tall boy said to Stan referring, no doubt, to the pudgy kid in the black shorts and dark blue t-shirt who was showing more interest in the blue cannon ball he was consuming. Tank merely nodded absent mindedly as if he was listening intently to the conversation but was really more interested in getting to the bottom of the plastic cup where a blue gumball awaited.

"Bobby, I can't go. Why is it so important that you need me there with you?" Stan asked the tall boy now known as Bobby.

"Cause I'm gonna jump the bridge and I want as many witnesses as I can get." Bobby said.

"You're jumping the bridge?" Stan seemed incredulous.

"That's right; I'm going right off the top rail like Superfly Snooka!" Bobby replied holding his arms wide like a plane ready for take off. "Just tell your mom that you're going to my house and we'll ride our bike's over."

"I hate lying." Stan said.

"Stop being a baby, Stan." Bobby replied.

They were now past Terry and their backs were to him so the conversation faded away. They were talking about the Plain Street Bridge that ran over the Namtuxet River that fed Reed's Pond. Jumping from the bridge was a Leighton townie right of passage that many boys, and even some girls, who had enough spirit would dare themselves to do. After the first jump it seemed like such a minor thing that it was hard to fathom being intimidated by it at all. The first jump, however, was harrowing and the youngster goaded into making it was surely as apprehensive as Terry had been twelve years earlier when he made his own plunge.

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The bridge was only about a quarter of a mile away from where he was finishing his lunch. Terry made a mental note to himself to drive over it on his way back to his office in the plaza at Cobb's Corner. Terry looked around as he began to clean up after himself and saw familiar scenes with the other bathers. He was reminded of his own childhood at this very swimming hole and how he and his friends would be taken here by their mothers for swimming lessons and lazy days at the beach. Later, he and his friends would be old enough to ride their bikes to the beach and later still, they would drive. Terry noticed that there weren't many teenaged swimmers that day and wondered where they could be.

The ride was pleasant and Terry couldn't help but smile. He drove with the windows down and breathed in the warm, sticky air as if enjoying his last summer day. He left the radio off so he could listen to the wind rush past and catch the occasional cry of a bird or the buzz of the heat bugs singing their summer song. He was quickly at the Plain Street Bridge and he pulled into the parking area that had been worn out by many cars over many years. The parking area was unpaved and carved from the trees that lined each side of the road. It was only large enough for a few cars and was used mostly by people who would often stop to fish from the bridge.

The river below was about fifteen feet wide and deep enough for the plunge of about twelve or thirteen feet. The water moved quickly as it was draining several inlets upstream on its way to Reed's Pond. There was another car parked in the dirt just off the road and a lone fisherman standing on the bridge which Terry assumed was the car's owner. Terry pulled in behind the car; it was a Buick Grand National dressed in sinister black from head to toe. Terry had always wanted one of those but could never afford one.

He left the Taurus and walked over to the man fishing from bridge on the opposite side of the street. He walked right up to him and asked, "How are they biting today?" "I had a couple but they were only sun fish." The man said. He was tall, about six foot two and he had a familiar face; no doubt a townie that had lived here forever like Terry had.

"I can only catch turtles and old rubber boots every time I'm out here." Terry said. The other man snickered and looked at Terry square on as if sizing him up. "Maybe it's the tie." The other man said. Terry looked down at his clothes and back again to the man with a look of embarrassment. "I'm on my lunch break." Terry said apologetically. "Me too." Said the other man. Terry noticed that he was in shorts and sandals and wondered what he did for a living that he could dress that way for work. Without anything else to say Terry looked around then at his watch. "I gotta get back to the office." Terry said.

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“So soon? You just got here.” The other man said.

“Yeah, I know.” Terry replied.

“Then why did you stop if you were only going to stay a minute?” the other man asked.

Terry had been wondering that to himself the whole time he was there but had no answer.

“I don’t know. Just remembering stuff, I guess.”

“Ah, memory lane. Gotcha.” The other man said then stuck out his large hand. “John Cannon.”

Terry took it and said, “Terry Collins.”

“You work around here?” John said.

“I’m in accounts payable Standard Medical down Cobb’s Corner.”

“Steady work.”

“Yeah, it is. What do you do that you can take a long lunch break and wear shorts?”

“I’m a writer.”

“Very nice, anything I’ve heard of?”

“Maybe.” John replied but never really answered the question.

Terry waited a moment for more but when it wasn’t coming he returned his gaze to the water burbling beneath them. He was still thinking about the boys at the beach daring each other to make the jump from the bridge where he was standing as he had done so long before. He closed his eyes and found that the past was not too far away.

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Chapter Two

It was twelve years before and Terry was with Joe Resilsky and Mark Blancoor standing on the Plain Street Bridge. Twelve year old Terry had already agreed to jump if either Joe or Mark jumped first; one thing for certain was that Terry had not planned to go first. There he was on the second railing of the bridge without prompting, the third railing against his knees keeping him upright. There was a strong breeze to the summer day and he needed to brace himself so that he did not fall forward into the water unintentionally.

Terry crouched slightly and tensed the muscles in his legs and torso then pushed with all of his might. He was then flying with arms outstretched as if he was a bird, as if he was the first human to take flight in any way in recorded history. He felt the air brush against him in his arc and the wind picked up speed as he descended into the cold, rushing water below. His hands struck the surface and broke it as if breaking through a glass window pane making a large enough entrance for the rest of him.

The water was shockingly cold but all that seemed to do was give Terry focus. He flipped into a leg first pose so that he could spring off of the bottom if he actually reached it. His foot finally touched something; the slimy rocks submerged below and before his toes could gain purchase he felt his legs spring forward pushing him upwards. He opened his eyes and the water was dark but he could see the lighted surface above him.

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The current was swift and he was quickly under the bridge but still rising towards the surface. His leg brushed something soft and slimy and that very thing seemed to be alive and hungry for it grabbed his leg and seemed to pull him back into the darkness that was the deep water below the bridge. Already his young lungs begged for air as he did not take a big enough breath and with the thick vegetation clamping down on his leg he knew his time was short. He made large, strong strokes to reach the surface but he seemed to stay in place, the vegetation acting as an anchor keeping him in the deep.

He began to flail under the water and air escaped his lungs in large, white plumes of bubbles that were unhindered heading to the surface. He kicked violently and burned the oxygen in his bloodstream at an accelerated rate until his lungs seemed to scream at him that he needed air only ten feet from his head on the surface of the water. His panic took away his thinking and he was simply an animal thrashing and pulling wildly without thought or planning, without hope for survival. Terry soon found himself praying and pleading in his thoughts that the thing gripping his leg would release him so that he could surface for air but his prayers remained unanswered.

His lungs were burning with the need for air and very soon, seconds really, he would reflexively breathe and that would be when he would drown. His lungs would suck in cold, dark and murky water instead of the life giving, sweet air that he needed. Moments remained yet his struggle continued.

Then a large, strong hand grabbed him and his head broke the surface of the water; warm summer air was again filling his lungs in great gasps, his body was unappeased with every breath so the next was larger and deeper than the one before. There was a big, strong arm around his neck and he felt his body being tugged towards the embankment on the other side of the bridge. There was a large and strong person pulling him, holding him; this was the reason he had survived.

They were at the steep embankment and partially out of the water when he heard in his ears, "You're OK now, kid. You'll be fine."

Young Terry went into a coughing fit as if his lungs were determined to leave his body through his throat. Soon he was out of the water altogether and his buddies were surrounding him.

"Man, you almost drowned." Mark said seeming so close to his face.

"You're lucky that cop was there." Joe said.

"What cop?" Terry found himself asking.

"I don't know his name; he appeared out of nowhere and jumped into the water after you didn't come up. He's up on the road by his cruiser over there, you see him?" Joe asked. Terry tried to crane his head but the underside of the bridge was all he could see.

"No, I can't see him." Terry said.

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“Doesn’t matter, you must’ve broken the record for staying under water, dude!” Mark said excitedly, he patted Terry with one hand on the shoulder.

“How long was I under?” Terry asked.

“About two minutes, give or take.” Joe answered. Terry was unaware of time, he barely understood what he was being told and only wanted to rest unmoving wherever he was lying. Not long after, he could hear a car accelerate above him and disappear into the distance; Terry assumed it was the police cruiser that had somehow arrived in time to save him. He was thinking about the cop that had jumped into the water after him and hoped to someday learn his identity so that he could thank him properly and profusely.

“I need to rest for a minute” Terry said to no one in particular.

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Terry was standing on the bridge staring at the water in deep thought. The first jump from the bridge for him was memorable but it was only days later when he and his companions returned to fearlessly try again. Over the course of his teenage years he jumped dozens of times but it was the first time that he remembered the most, it was the time he had come so close to death.

“You alright?” John asked him. Terry looked up from the rushing water below to the larger man and shrugged.

“I just needed to rest for a while.” Terry answered.

“You looked lost in thought.” John said.

“Yeah, I was.”

“Anything you want to share?”

“I used to jump from this bridge as a kid with some buddies of mine.”

“Yeah, I think we all did that at one time or another. Kids have been jumping into the water from this spot for as long as the bridge has been here.” John said returning his attention to his line fast approaching with the current.

“How old is the bridge?” Terry asked.

“I’m not sure but I have some friends who would know. I guess there was a covered bridge here before this one, it was all wood. That caught fire one day so they replaced it with this ugly, steel monster.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Now you do. I try to learn something new every day, keeps my mind fresh.”

“Not a bad idea.”

“Nope.” John said then there was an uncomfortable silence. Terry had lingered long enough but found that he was unable to leave just yet.

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“I almost drowned here.” Terry said in a matter of fact tone.

“No kiddin’? What happened?” John asked before casting again.

“I was saved by a cop, though I never really got a good look at him. He dove in after I got stuck somehow and didn’t come up again. I was really lucky he happened to be there but I never got a chance to say ‘thanks’.”

John smiled and said, “Well, now you have.”

“What?”

“You just thanked me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Before I was a writer, I was a town cop. I remember that I once rolled up on some kids standing right here where we are and knew that they were jumping. I was going to scare them off and make sure that they didn’t hurt themselves when the first one went in. I got out of the car and came over but the kid never surfaced so I dove in after him and pulled him out. That must have been you.” John said watching the incredulous look on Terry’s face.

“You saved me? It was you?” Terry said almost shaking.

“Looks that way.” John said. Terry held out his hand and John took it firmly.

“Thank you, thank you very much.” Terry said.

“Don’t mention it.” John said and patted Terry’s shoulder.

“You gonna be OK?” John asked.

“Yes, definitely. Thanks.” Terry answered.

“Here, take this.” John said reaching into his pocket with his free hand, he pulled out a business card and handed it to Terry. “Call me sometime; we’ll have a beer together.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Cannon.” Terry said.

“Just call me John.”

Ok, John. Thanks again.”

“Stop thanking me and get back to work before you get into trouble with your boss.”

John said. Terry looked at the card in his hands then placed it in his own pocket. He turned to leave but turned back after only a couple of steps.

“Why aren’t you a cop anymore?” Terry asked.

“That is a long story. Now get going, Terry.” John answered. Terry accepted that and walked back to his car. He arrived at work but did not remember the drive from the bridge back; his mind was concentrating on the thoughts racing through it.

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Chapter Four

Terry wasn’t sure what it was but he was drawn to the same spot the following day on his lunch break. Terry finished his sandwich and balled up the wrapper then tossed it into the trash can. He started his car determined to drive to the bridge; he was hopeful that he

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would run into John again. Having met John Terry had felt some kind of closure in his life and somehow it had made him feel so much better about himself.

He approached the bridge and found a spot in the well worn dirt parking lot. The black Grand National wasn't there and there were no other cars in sight, even the road was empty. What Terry did see were three kids at the bridge wearing nothing but their bathing trunks in bright blue, red and one wore black. He instantly knew that it was the three kids from the beach he had seen the day before and they were readying themselves for a jump.

Stan was in his red trunks and he was in the process of climbing the railings while Tank and Bobby stood behind and watched. Terry emerged from his car and walked towards them all the while watching the scene play out as it had more than a decade before.

"Come on, Stan. Whatchya waiting for?" Bobby prodded.

"Yeah, hurry up already!" Tank added.

"I don't see either of you two up here!" Stan yelled back at them, obviously irritated and anxious.

Terry continued his walk at a slow pace; the boys did not notice his approach. Terry was in two places at one time; he was watching Stan, Bobby and Tank yet he was also remembering himself, Joe and Mark from his own first jump. Even in the muggy heat of the summer the skin on Terry's arms broke out in goose bumps as he again felt the icy cold of the water on his skin. Terry watched Stan reach the third rung and balance upon it like the professional wrestlers on television.

Then he was gone.

Tank and Bobby were peering over the edge when Terry reached them. Terry joined them and looked into the dark rushing water and only saw the white, foamy bubbles from Stan's entry race under the bridge. Neither of the two boys looked up or acknowledged Terry's appearance. They were instead frozen in place, scanning the water for Stan and secretly praying to themselves that he would emerge.

"Where is he?" Bobby asked still focused on the water.

"I dunno." Tank replied, glued in place.

"He's not coming up." Terry added. The boys ignored him and for an instant Terry wasn't even sure that he was really there. Was it possible this wasn't happening and he was dreaming? Terry was hoping that was the case, hoping that Stan wouldn't really be in the water on the verge of drowning.

Terry slipped off his shoes and removed his keys and wallet from his pocket. He threw the wallet and keys into one of the shoes and removed his tie letting it hit the ground

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without a second thought. He climbed the railing and was quickly at the top rung when suddenly Terry was a young boy again, trapped underwater and moments from drowning when a strong hand pulled him free.

For an instant he did not want to jump, he was frozen in place with the fear of being caught again under the water. This time there would be no Officer Cannon to rescue him, no one to jump in and save him should he become trapped himself. He felt his adrenaline levels jump so much it was like an electrical shock to his system. He shook uncontrollably and was unable to balance, unable to take his hand away from the railing. The world was blurring and he was on the edge of a black out; instead of saving young Stan he would faint and either fall to the deck of the bridge or into the rushing water below.

Instead he willed himself to one last push and sprung himself from an awkward position on the railing out into space. He plummeted gracelessly to the water and broke the surface on his left side with a loud slap. He felt the sting and the cold at the same time and his mind was quickly cleared. He opened his eyes and could see the light of the surface above him; the rest of the water was dark and murky but lit enough to see Stan trapped by the vegetation only a few feet from him.

Stan was flailing against the foil that kept him underwater, Terry could see the panic and knew what Stan was feeling. Terry moved and with each stroke his left side sang out in pain, Terry was sure he had broken something during his landing in the water. Willing himself on, Terry was quickly at Stan and began to pull at the long, ropelike vegetation somehow wrapped around Stan's leg. There were several vines pulling at Stan, Terry snapped each line one by one with both hands.

Stan was freed but he had suddenly stopped moving which alarmed Terry even more. Stan was either in shock or he had taken a breath and filled his lungs with water. Terry wrapped his left hand painfully around Stan's torso and began pulling for the surface with his right. The ascent was only a few feet but it seemed to last far too long; Stan and Terry broke the surface but the current had carried them to the other side of the bridge.

Terry pulled Stan to the embankment and strained to get as much of him out of the water as possible but Terry felt as if they were both trying to move in wet cement. His limbs were heavy and exhausted but Stan was out of the water and breathing; his chest moved steadily up and down. Terry placed his hand on Stan's chest and felt his heart hammering beneath; Stan began to spasm and cough. Terry's own heart was hammering as well so he lay down next to Stan and closed his eyes out of exhaustion.

"Is he alright?" Tank's little voice fell down upon him.
"Give him a minute, Tank! Can't you see he's exhausted?" Bobby scolded Tank.
"What about Stan?" Tank whined.
"Stan's breathing, he'll be alright." Bobby was trying to console Tank.

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Terry could hear Stan moving so he opened his eyes. Stan was sitting up and looking at Terry, studying him. Terry sat up, his left side throbbing with each movement, then rose to his feet. He left Stan and went up the embankment then directly to his car. Terry felt an incredible urge to leave and he gave in to it.

“You OK, Stan?” Bobby shouted from the bridge.

“Yeah, I’m OK.” Stan replied.

“You must’ve broken the record for staying under water, dude!” Tank shouted.

“How long was I under?” Stan asked.

“About two minutes, give or take.” Bobby said.

“I need to rest for a minute.” Stan said.

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Chapter Five

Terry had gone home after pulling Stan from the water to change his clothes and to call his employer. He removed his wet shirt and saw that he was red on the left side of his torso but he doubted that anything was broken. Terry felt off kilter, as if something was out of place or not the way it should be but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

He had become focused solely on speaking with John about his own experience saving him when he was a young officer. Terry wondered if John felt the same way, as if he had done something that didn’t fit or wasn’t supposed to be done. It was a feeling Terry had as soon as he was safely out of the murky water. It was such a strong feeling and he had no idea where it could have come from.

Stan wasn’t supposed to have survived.

If that was the case, Terry thought, then it was possible that John had felt the same way after pulling him out of the water twelve years before. Terry had terrible feelings of dread and guilt and something more, something he wasn’t quite sure what it was.

After telling his boss that he wasn’t returning to work he dialed the phone number on John’s business card that had remained dry and safe after the events of the day.

John answered on the first ring. “Hi Terry.” John said. This caused Terry to pause so John prompted him again. “I know it’s you, Terry. Say hello.”

“Hello.” Terry said as instructed.

“How’s your day going so far?” John asked.

“It’s been eventful.” Terry answered.

“So I hear. Good job saving Stan Moore from the Plain Street Bridge.”

“How did you know about that?”

“I told you that I was once a cop, I still have some contacts over at the station.”

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Terry thought about it for a moment before continuing. "I jumped in after I saw him jump. I somehow knew he was in trouble before he even hit the water."

"Yeah, feels strange. Doesn't it?"

"Did you feel that way when you saved me?" Terry blurted out. He had to know, it was the only thing on his mind. This time it was John that hesitated before he spoke again.

"Yeah, I did." John answered.

"How did you feel afterwards?"

"There were so many things going through my mind, I had to leave after I knew you were safe."

"Did you get the sense that I shouldn't have survived? I wasn't *supposed* to live through that?"

"Yes. Now you have that same feeling about Stan."

"Yes. Where is that coming from?"

"I don't know, kid. I wish I did. I think it's the town."

"The town? What do you mean by that?"

"I think that the town somehow makes things happen and it doesn't like it when it doesn't get its way."

"What the...are you telling me that the town itself can think? Makes things happen?"

Wow, John; that's really incredible. I have no idea how to respond to that."

"Look, Terry; I really don't understand all of this myself. All I can tell you is that there are things happening in this town that cannot be explained. Things that make no sense and that are bigger than we are."

"That's a lot to swallow."

"It sure is."

"You never answered me when I asked you if you jumped from the bridge." Terry asked.

"I said 'maybe' but the real answer is I did; of course I did." John said.

"What happened?"

"I almost drowned. I was twelve and two buddies went with me and I went first. Luckily Stutz Bailey was fishing there with his kid and he dove in and pulled me out. I wanted to thank him but he never spoke to me again. I think he actually avoided me and I never knew why, then I saved you and I put it together by myself."

"You've been avoiding me all this time?" Terry said incredulously.

"Yeah, sort of. I really didn't put much effort into it but it kind of worked out that way."

John answered. There was a brief but uncomfortable silence between them before Terry spoke.

"What should I do about Stan?"

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“Stay away from him now. Hopefully Leighton will forget about him and he’ll get a chance to grow up like you did.”

“Like you did, too.”

“Yeah, like me, too.”

“You know that this all sounds incredibly bizarre.” Terry said.

“Yup, it sure does. If I told you everything I knew then you’d think I was a loony but let’s just leave it where it is. Now that you’re grown up maybe you can come over for a beer some time.” John said.

“OK, John.”

“Stay in touch with me now, I’m at the Historical Society a lot. You can call or stop by anytime.”

“OK, I sure will.”

“Like I said; good job, kid.” John said then hung up. Terry had more questions than answers and he planned on finding them as quickly as he could, as long as the town would let him.