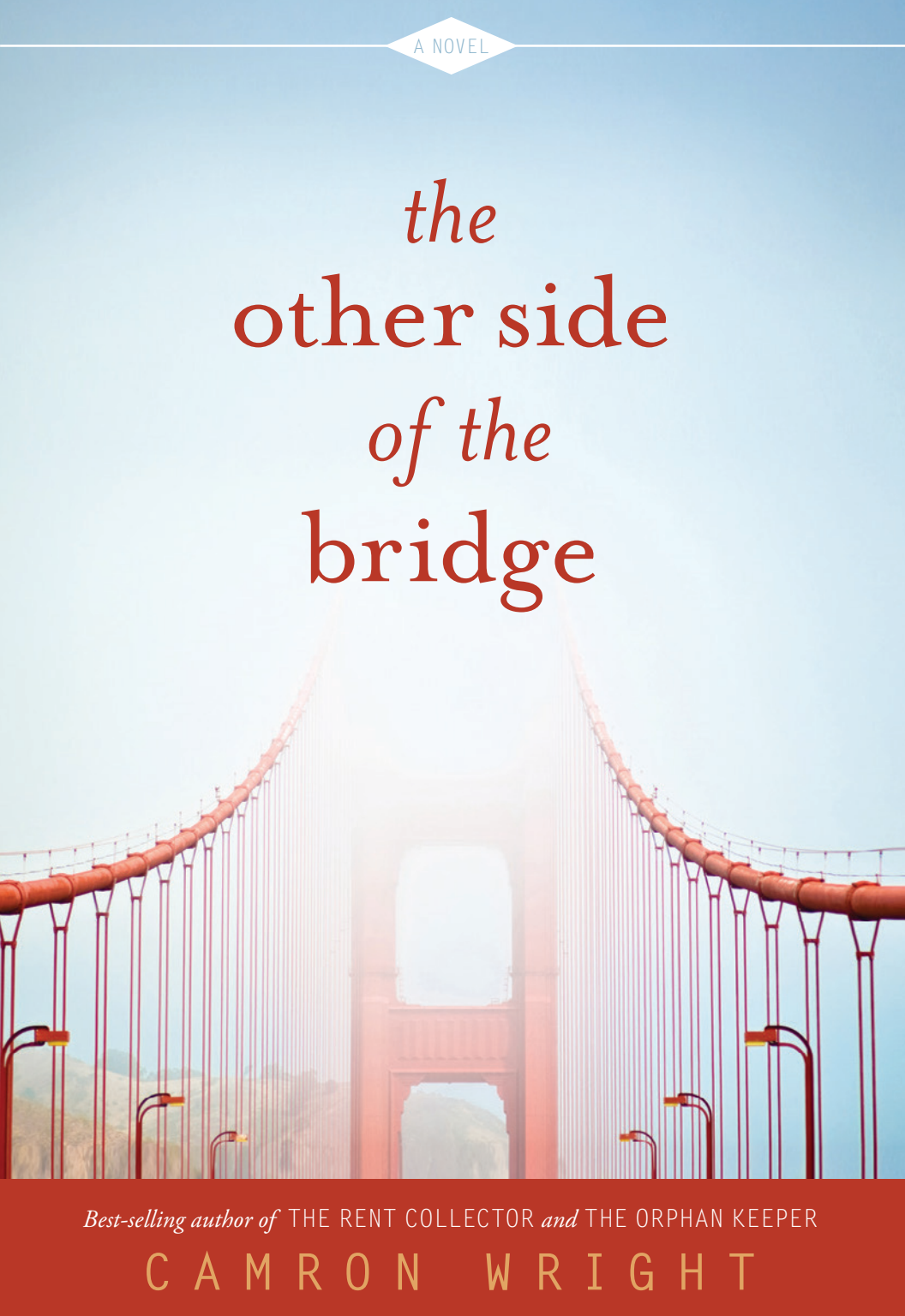


A NOVEL



the
other side
of the
bridge

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CAMRON WRIGHT



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C A M R O N W R I G H T



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*Faith—is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what We see
Unto the Scene that We do not—
Too slender for the eye
It bears the Soul as bold
As it were rocked in Steel
With Arms of Steel at either side—
It joins—behind the Veil
To what, could We presume
The Bridge would cease to be
To Our far, vacillating Feet
A first Necessity.*

—EMILY DICKINSON

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chapter one

San Francisco, California, 2012

The damp metal nudges me forward, the waves open their welcoming fingers, the night's darkness offers to hide my shame. All whisper a single question that reaches up through the fog and catches in my throat. If I, Katie Connelly, were to jump from this bridge tonight, would my death matter?

Father Muldowney, my priest, says life is precious. He quotes a sixteenth-century monk who said, "Midst all our frailty, fault, and sin, shines our heart, a light therein. E'er we must then stay the end, and cherish life to live again." I wonder if when the poet wrote those words, he knew what it was like to lose every person dear to him.

In truth, I didn't come to jump. I came only to glimpse death, to gauge his strength, to know what I can expect when it's my turn. I decide to crawl back over the railing and return home, but as I twist around, the steel beneath my feet trembles and I lose my grip. My feet slide out from under me and I stumble. I flail for

the railing, but it's too late. I collapse into the clouds as the dank sea air rushes past.

I don't fear death—until my father calls from the bridge above.

“Katie, where are you?”

I scream for him as I descend, but the wind swallows my cry. I yell louder, but the sound falls with me.

“Katie?”

When they find my body, he will think that I jumped. I can't have him believe that I jumped!

More than anything, I want to live. I wish to be back with my father, to tell him he's important, to let him know that I love him—but my wishes are worthless.

After hitting the surface, I'll plunge deep into the blackness of the bay. For any hope of survival, I'll need to take a deep breath just before impact. I try to suck in air, but my chest tightens and my lungs freeze. I writhe and struggle. I tumble and fall, desperate for one more breath that never comes.

It's always the same when I awake. My sheets are wet; I shiver and my chest heaves as I gasp for air. It's a terrible dream, a horrendous nightmare, yet I despair every time I awake and it comes to an end.

In my dream . . . my father is still alive.

• • •

My birth name is Katherine Ann Connelly, though most people call me Katie. I work in the history department at San

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Francisco State University as a research assistant. It's a solitary job, but it suits me.

In truth, I should be the one directing the research projects. At twenty-six, I have two undergraduate degrees and a master's degree I finished last spring. I didn't plan to live the life of a professional student. I've just been a tad lost since my father's death two years ago last April. He was a hard man to give up.

My boss, Professor James Winston II, has just handed me a research request. He's a good friend, a second father, and I'm sure he believes this assignment will help me in a therapeutic sort of way. He means well, but he should stick to history.

*It seems the university was asked by the Golden Gate Commemorative Society to prepare a packet of information for the state's school system. Our portion will be a booklet titled *Our Heritage: A History of the Golden Gate Bridge*.*

I'm concerned about this particular assignment because of my father and the memories it will dredge up. You see, my father worked on the bridge for twenty-nine years of his life. Professor Winston says that's why I'd be perfect, because I already know so much about the structure. Of course, he also tells me that I need to date, that I should find a good man.

The professor is full of nonsense.

Speaking of nonsense, I talk to him—my father, I mean. I have conversations with him as if he were still here. Sometimes, I even think I can feel him near. Other times, after I catch myself talking to a dead person, I realize that I may be stepping a bit over the crazy line, and I do my best to jump back. It's been a little

over two years, and I know it's time to get over losing him—it's time I get on with life. I've even considered moving, getting away from the bridge, the university, the city, the memories. But each time I think that I've banked enough courage, I come up wanting.

I don't date much; I don't get asked. I'm sure it's my fault, though don't misunderstand: I look after myself, I watch what I eat and stay fit, and men do seem to find my athletic build and slim features attractive. The fact is, I'm miserable to be around—not in a rude sort of way, but in a lonely sort of way.

Enough about my better traits and back to matters at hand . . . I have until three today to get back to the professor before he assigns the project to another researcher. As I look over the project's notes, as I study the scope, I can see that I'd be perfect for it. I spent my childhood at the bridge. My father's stories about the structure have been ingrained in my head since I could crawl. I said that he worked on the bridge, but more than that, he loved the bridge.

My father also died there.

chapter two

Jamesburg, New Jersey

Megan Riley—hair sopping, bath towel clinging—burst into the kitchen, beckoned by the howling smoke alarm. Her eyes darted around the room. No visible fire. No visible husband. Only Angel, their youngest, a petite child who had recently turned five. She stood peacefully beside the toaster admiring the rising smoke, like steam from the geysers they had visited in Yellowstone Park last summer, except today it was dark and sooty.

“Angel! Where’s Daddy?” Megan hollered, pouncing toward the plug. There was no need. The appliance popped on cue, perhaps in surrender, to give up its burnt offering.

“Don’t know, Mom,” Angel answered with an innocent shrug. “But his toast is done.”

Although the toaster may have ceded, the smoke detector was just getting started.

Megan tugged a chair beneath the alarm, balanced on it like a scantily clad circus performer, and fanned one-handed. The

clamor did more than ignore her: the half-circle vents molded into the detector's puck-shaped face seemed to grin down.

Brad, barely sixteen and dark-haired like his father, turned the corner. He halted. His mother, dripping hair, tippy toes, clad in a tenuous towel, was flapping anxiously at the ceiling.

"Now, there's something you don't see every day," he deadpanned to Angel.

Megan ignored him, reaching instead with a single finger on her free hand toward the one button on the blaring contraption that would silence the racket once and for all—and then she would find Dave.

Just another inch and . . . her chair tipped backwards.

Megan screamed.

• • •

The trash in the kitchen was overflowing—yet again—and running it out to the large can in the garage, *before* Megan had to ask, seemed like a given. The toasting bread had started out frozen, the other children hadn't yet come down, and besides, he'd be back in less than two minutes.

In the garage, Dave straight-armed the can open and dumped, careful not to dirty his pressed shirt and silk tie. He dropped the lid, scooted back around his car, and then paused at the door. It was a beautiful thing, a BMW 650i coupe, purchased seven months earlier. Expensive? Sure, but it was his dream machine, the first sports car he'd ever owned. He was embarrassed at

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the time—to approach forty and buy a red sports car was such a cliché. Lately, he couldn't care less.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sound coming from the kitchen. *Was that the smoke alarm?*

It took only seconds after he'd pushed through the door for his eyes to scrunch, his forehead to furrow, his feet to spread. Light reflecting off the room had already traveled down his optic nerve to deliver the scene to his head, but his brain was having trouble sorting it all out. There was smoke in the kitchen, the smell of burnt toast, a deafening alarm—that all made sense. But why was Megan sitting in the middle of the floor with her knees pulled tightly against her chest, trying frantically to gather herself in a towel?

Brad was the first to speak. “Dad, I . . .” He raised his voice to be heard above the noise, but then the smoke alarm, perhaps growing bored, silenced itself. “Dad,” he repeated, not wasting the moment, “I believe your toast is ready.”

Dave's eyes were still looking for answers. He reached down to help Megan up, but she wouldn't reach back. Dave turned instead to his youngest daughter.

“Angel, I asked you to watch the toaster!” he chided.

Her tiny yet determined voice was adamant. “I did watch it, Daddy! I watched it the whole time!”

Silence swept the room—an eerie stillness, like one might expect in a death chamber. Then Megan, still double-clutching her towel, began to giggle uncontrollably.

• • •

The family had tried to schedule daily breakfasts together, but with people heading in so many different directions, it was not working out. Dinnertime hadn't been much better, with baseball, piano, and dance lessons all making their demands on the family.

While Megan finished getting ready, Dave checked his watch, then quick-stirred a pan of scrambled eggs.

Brittany, their middle child, entered, apparently completely unaware of the morning's fiasco, though Brad would contend she was unaware of *everything* but boys.

Dave scooped eggs onto her plate while Brittany settled into her chair. She was their child who never rushed—despite always being late. After all, it was only school. She had all day.

She tossed back her long brown hair, the color of her mother's, in a gesture that reminded Dave of Megan—and of the fact that his daughter was growing up.

“Did Mom tell you who I like?” Brittany asked.

“No. Should she?”

“I told her not to.”

“So, who *do* you like?” Dave asked, taking the obvious bait.

“Promise not to tell?”

Dave tried to picture anyone who would care. He couldn't. “I promise.”

“Jason Wilson. He's hot!”

“How old are you again?”

“Duh, Dad. I'll be turning thirteen in a year.” Dave opened his mouth, but decided silence was his best ally.

Brad hustled back through the room. “I'm outta here.” He

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bent close to stare into Dave's eyes. "Dad, listen! Don't forget—game tonight—six p.m.—at the field."

"I didn't forget last time," Dave replied, every word protesting. "I was just running late."

Brad ignored the man to holler up the stairs. "Pick me up at three, Mom?"

Megan's voice echoed from a distant corner of the house. "Do you have everything?"

"Yeah. Try not to be late!" He snatched his baseball mitt, backpack, and the three remaining pieces of toast, and, like a tailgating teenager late to a party, he was gone.

Dave's phone alarm beeped. He would be late as well if he didn't leave now. Then, as if she'd been watching, Megan stepped in, dressed for the day and carrying Dave's coaching uniform. She folded it inside his briefcase and clicked the lid closed.

"I've got to run," Dave announced, picking up his suit coat.

"I know, honey. I'll see you at the game?" It was meant as a reminder, not a question. She continued, "We'll grab pizza on the way home after, if that's okay."

She leaned up to kiss him lightly on the lips, though his was a halfhearted kiss in return. He shifted his weight. It appeared he had something to say.

She waited. He remained silent.

"I love you," she added, pointing to his watch.

"Yeah, I know. I love you too." He took a breath, forced a turn, and paraded once again to the garage.

• • •

The car flaunted style, power, and sophistication. Dave let the leather surround him, rescue him, whisper its encouragement. Driving to work was one of the few moments of sanity he would have all day. He checked the car's clock, undecided as to whether he should slow down and savor the moment or press the gas pedal to the floor. He chose the gas.

He glanced in the rearview mirror and then eased his foot down. If he drove fast enough, it was harder for the anxiety to keep up. *Perhaps I'll just keep on going today*, he mused. *I'd miss my wife and family, sure, but at least I'd have my car.* His tease brought a grin.

Megan, on the other hand, was a minivan holdout, a vanishing breed of mothers who refused to join the modern age and trade up to an SUV. Though he appreciated her rebellious stance, what he couldn't grasp was her rationale—she actually liked her van. “It's practical, and I love the color,” she would say.

Dave turned onto the New Jersey Turnpike.

She wasn't much younger than he—three years plus a month. Why was she so happy all the time when life had become so hectic, so crazy? And with burgeoning demands at the office, things were only going to get worse.

Dave was the dad, he was in charge—why, then, did he feel like the captain of the *Hindenburg*? Life was passing fast and it was all he could do to breathe. Some days were fine, but on other days, he felt like the desire had been sucked right out of him.

How could he explain it to Meg? She would retort with, *Life*

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is short, so enjoy it. But she still looked fabulous—he was the one growing old.

Ten more minutes and he'd be at the lot where he'd park his car to catch the train to Manhattan—he and a million other clones. On occasion, he'd brave city traffic and drive the entire way. He considered it today, but finding a place in the company lot this late would be all but impossible.

The train ride was the part of the commute he dreaded the most. It had become necessary when the firm had moved to Manhattan the previous fall—one more thing to complicate his life. He clicked on the stereo and selected his favorite playlist: Billy Joel.

Ironically, the song that played first was “Running on Ice.”

There was always a new account at the office, more activities for the kids, run to this, late to that—and what did he have to show for it? More gray hair. He needed to slow things down, but how?

At times when he was alone in the car, Dave would sing along with the lyrics. Not today. Today he turned up the volume.

“Seriously?” he mumbled as he pulled into the lot. “Am I really going to be forty?”