C H A P T E R 1

# THE BRIDGE

here are no words for this so I don’t know how they found their way *onto* this page. There are no words for this so I don’t know

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how they ended up in your hands.

There are no words for this.

I found him on the thick, pitted, and aged concrete sixth-street bridge near Boyle Heights. This bridge had once been friendlier, a gen- tle beige or maybe a cream. Now it’s only a dirtier yellow, tinted by a deep, carbonized grime thickened through a century of Los Angeles exhaust. This is a bridge, steady and honest, the rebar and cement ris- ing up a hundreds of feet. At one time it did a good job of taking you from here to there. But it didn’t do that for him. This was a bridge with other ideas.

It just took him away.

This is not what a father should see. This is not what a bridge is for. This is not what the architect, welders, engineers, and masons wanted when they rolled out the furled plans registering blue important dots stenciled to yards of drafting paper. This not a bridge built by men so a fourteen-year-old son can step over the rail and fall headlong into a death—and there—See?—somehow the words landed on the page.

The rail on the bridge was supposed to be there so he wouldn’t be there.

But he is.

And he was.

I will not tell you what he looked like. I will tell you that he played little league baseball and he was funny, and girls seemed to like him and maybe he was just finding the power he had in that smile.

It was lovely, it is lovely. The universe now has all of him and will not give him up. Never. It is done.

I look up at the desert night sky and sometimes I think I can see so far beyond the blackness and the stars that I am almost sure I can see where maybe he is. But this is just me putting all the pain into a deep laundry hamper that I keep in what feels like the pit of my stomach. It is my soul. I am sure of that. I remember picking up his dirty clothes and tossing them into that gray, soft rubber plastic hamper. The day he left me, the day he walked out the door. I threw his socks, and t-shirts, and jeans and boxers, and two blue towels littering the floor, and I cursed under my breath that he really needed to start taking responsi- bility for his goddamn room.

I had no idea that his laundry would collect all of me. His dirty clothes would wear me. I would love that smell. It would kill me if I ever lost this fourteen-year-old boy of mine.

Kill me.

The phone rang and the planet continued to spin. It had no time for us. It had no use for our place in the orbit. The planet spun. No matter what I wanted. No matter what I thought I could do. It just did. It just was. The phone rang. Cellular airwaves popped through mole- cules and banged hard off the metallic silver towers stringing words together into our thin atmosphere where we lived as a father and a son.

“It’s me.” He was distant.

“Where the hell are you? You’ve been gone all day.” “LA.”

“Of course you’re in LA…where?” “I don’t want to say.”

“You need to tell me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’ll come and get you, where are you?”

“It’s not important.”

“It’s all important, you’re important.” “You always say that….”

“Because it’s always true, you know that.” “I have to go.”

“Where?”

“Away.”

“I’ll come get you.” Silence. Pause. Breathing. “I can’t do this anymore.”

The call got dropped. I dialed him back and my tremble went straight to voicemail. The automatic one that comes with the phone or the service or fuck, I don’t know or care, but it was the automatic one that gave me his number and told me to leave a message. That one. He had told a friend where he was. A girl called and said she had talked with him. The universe was playing with me. Here you go, Dad: 6th Street Bridge, not a lot of traffic from the Hollywood Hills. You have about thirty minutes. Go. I went.

He was standing there. In the middle of this old bridge over a con- crete viaduct wide and high enough to carry water. I wished there had been deep water down there. A running river of foaming water right down below. I wanted a dangerously high rise of water that would be cool, and blue and deep, and please send me some water.

Now, a few hundred feet below, it was only dry concrete hardened with high slanted sides that guided the water when it poured through, irrigating the orange and lemon groves and maybe the iconic palms people believed could only grow only in dreamy Los Angeles.

I stood. He stood. I walked toward him. He asked me to stop. It sounded more like a command. I stopped. I could only see all of his life in his one body. He was only sixty feet away. I had this memory of our days playing baseball when he pitched. The mound to the plate was sixty feet. I used to give him the thumbs up when he was close to striking out the batter.

Thumbs up meant go get ‘em. Thumbs up meant you got him.