





bsence of aith

Anthony Samuel Policastro

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All of the characters and events in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual events or actual persons living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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For Joann, my loving wife, soul mate and best friend, who has always supported me.

In memory of my father,  
Samuel Anthony Policastro, who gave  
me a hands-on approach to life and  
the inspiration to always reach for the  
stars.

1925-1999

Many thanks to Marion McBride,  
my beloved Mother-in-law  
for her invaluable editing and  
insight.

1933-2006

## The Bridge - Chapter 1



He was tired and looking forward to sleeping late the next morning. He and his wife, Linda, had just left an annual reunion with his fellow classmates from medical school. They had become close and vowed to get together once a year to refresh their friendship no matter how far the winds of their careers had carried them. It seemed like only yesterday that they made that vow and now two years had slipped between that evening before graduation, and the night of this particular get together.

Carson and Linda approached the aging Red River Bridge; a forgotten wooden structure built in the 1920s and scheduled to be torn down in the summer. Carson enjoyed the clanking of the loose boards as the car went over them; Linda hated when he took this way home; she believed the bridge would collapse any day now and most likely it would be their car that caused the collapse. Below them, the river moved steadily marking their passage - a point in time captured like the click of a camera captures a split second of reality. Carson wondered what mysteries lay beneath the escaping, fouled water. He wondered how much history the river had seen - he knew that the river was old, very old. He knew that the river once flourished with crabs and oysters - the older men spoke of those days when they were children and the river teemed with edible sea life. It's hard to look at an old man and imagine that he was once a child - fresh, new and naive to the world he inhabited.

The river could have been here since the early beginnings of the earth, but today no one cared about such meaningless things. They regarded the river as a means to get out to the ocean or illegally dump unwanted chemicals or sewage. No one cared about the river - no one defended the river. His thoughts seemed to melt into others like a dream that progresses with random happenings all unrelated and all illogical.

\* \* \*

The tiny orange light grew brighter as he was pulled downward at an ever-increasing speed. Shadows at the sides of the tunnel came to life and thrust out thin, spiny arms that grabbed at him. When the arms made contact, they were transparent and they transmitted an electrical-like pain through his skin that sliced his arms and legs into shredded raw flesh. He tried to avoid them but he couldn't. He fell faster and fear washed over him like the wind in his face as he thought of his impending doom. Suddenly he stopped falling as if he landed on a pillow of soft air. He was eased down on his back and he felt the back of his head sink into something soft, something familiar. He was in his bedroom lying in his bed, wondering how he got there. The curtains on the window were moving and he could see there was something outside pushing against the glass trying to get in. He tried to get up, but he couldn't feel his arms. The window shattered and a black entity resembling a long black scarf snaked into the room, stopped at the foot of the bed, and metamorphosed into a giant, angry dog with an oversized head and mouth. The dog jumped up on the bed and bit into Carson's left thigh violently shaking its head from side to side ripping the leg from Carson's body. Within seconds, the dog bit into Carson's other leg tearing it off with several quick turns of its violent head. Carson screamed in pain and tried desperately to move away kicking and pushing with a virgin terror that scared him more than the dog. The dog hovered over Carson its long pointy teeth dripping with Carson's blood and pieces of his skin and sinew. The beast opened its mouth wider and thrust its disfigured head towards Carson and Carson knew a new terror more intense, more frightening than all the others. This dog was familiar! Instantly, his mind reeled back to when houses were still being built in his neighborhood and he played in the wooded lot next door. The lot had a narrow dirt path that was well worn by all the neighborhood kids, and on this day, Carson, his friend Georgie, who lived across the street and tiny Sara from the house next door were on an adventure. The threesome walked down the path, Carson in the lead, Georgie behind him and Sara trailing when there was a rustling in the bush ahead. Suddenly, a large black dog appeared on the path with its teeth drawn

and a low growl in its throat. A gold tag hung from its black collar ringed in silver studs. Sara immediately turned and ran screaming; Carson and Georgie stood there paralyzed in fear.

"Nice, doggie," Carson said putting up his hand and slowly backing away.

The growl intensified and turned into a loud bark and then the dog lunged towards Carson knocking him to the ground. Georgie ran as fast as he could, screaming and crying down the path. The dog bit into Carson's thigh and dragged him into the bush where it was hiding earlier. The dog released Carson, then bit into his foot, and violently shook its head back and forth. Carson kicked the dog in the head and the dog released his foot and then moved on top of Carson. He stood there a few seconds growling and spewing its hot, acrid breath onto Carson's face, its eyes filled with hatred and evil. Then the dog opened his mouth wider and moved towards Carson's neck. Carson screamed and pushed the dog's head away.

"Crack!"

The dog's head flew to the left and the dog fell to the ground howling in pain. Carson looked up and saw the angry face of his father holding a baseball bat. The dog got up, shook its head and growled at Carson's dad. Carson's father hit the dog again on top of its head and it slumped down onto the ground whimpering. He hit the dog several times and the whimpering stopped. Carson only remembered riding in an ambulance and then waking up in the hospital, his mom and dad looking down at him his leg and foot in pain.

\* \* \*

Carson could feel the pointy teeth pierce his neck and throat and his warm blood quickly squirt out over his chest. He screamed again, but there was no sound and he sensed his mind melt into the nothingness, into the darkness. He woke up standing in front of a dark figure surrounded by intense and wild fire. The flames burned behind the dark hooded figure so that Carson could not see its face. Then the figure spoke.

"You have been doomed to Hell! Your punishment will go on endlessly and each time you will have no memory that it occurred before."

Carson's throat burned and he couldn't breathe, but he could move again. He was crying, but there were no tears and fear thundered through his body again. He moved farther away from the dark figure and ran, but his legs moved as if they were in a thick sludge. Then he

saw Linda trying to reach for him under water! A golden light washed over them casting warm streams of light into the darkness. It was a light filled with love and familiarity, and it was the most beautiful light he had ever seen. A tiny voice told him to go towards the light, but he didn't want to - he wanted to go with Linda. He began to swim towards her and when he was close enough he grabbed her hand and a coldness he had never known rushed through his body. The cold blackened his mind and there was nothing.

\* \* \*

Linda was jarred out her sleep by the clanking of the loose boards on the Red River Bridge as the car started over the quarter mile structure. She looked over at Carson and noticed his unmoving, glassy eyes.

"Carson!" she screamed as the car drifted towards the bridge's railing.

She lunged toward the wheel, but it was too late - the car crashed through the wood railing and plunged downward into the river about twenty feet below. Instantly, her world went black except for the dim, green hue of the dashboard lights. The car moved downward, scraped on some submerged tree branches, and slowly stopped. She could see a faint outline of the branches pushed against the windshield. She gasped when the icy cold water reached her ankles and numbed her feet.

"*Get out! Get out! Get out now!*" the voice screamed in her head.

She rolled the window down, but stopped after a few inches when the cold water sprayed in like hurricane rain. She gulped in a huge amount of air in anticipation of a scream, but before she could let it out, the cold shock of the water hit and she nearly passed out. She watched in horror as the water filled the car covering her legs, her stomach, and her breasts. She could no longer feel her body.

"*GET OUT! GOTTA GET OUT!*" a voice screamed in her head nonstop like a broken record skipping and playing the same message over and over. Within seconds, the water covered her face and she instantly thrust her head up and saw a large air bubble forming in the ceiling of the car. She tilted her head up, let out her breath of death and gulped the sparse air like a hungry animal. Renewed with the life sustaining air, she put her head under and groped for Carson finding it more difficult as the ethereal light from the dashboard faded into the cold death.

"*GOTTA GET OUT! GOTTA GET CARSON OUT! GET OUT!*" screamed in her head again. She found his limp arm and pulled, but he wouldn't move. She panicked and then as if something was thrust into her brain like a bullet piercing her skull she had a revelation - the seat

belt! Carson still had his seat belt on! She groped again in the icy blackness to what seemed like hours trying to find the belt, and then her hand touched something smooth and long. She thought an hour had passed when only a few seconds had elapsed. Everything was moving in slow motion. She ran her hand down along the belt's length, found the buckling device, and pushed on it. She pulled on the belt to get it off Carson, but it would not give. She panicked again and pushed all over the buckling device trying to find the release button. Her face hurt, her hands were numb and she could not feel her fingers touch the buckling device.

"GOTTA GET OUT! MUST GET OUT BEFORE THE BATTERY GOES DEAD! GOTTA GET OUT!"

Instantly, the belt broke loose and she pulled Carson towards her. Then she went limp. The pain in her chest increased and she tasted death for the first time. It was swallowing her, licking her, consuming her from within. She raised her head and saw a faint outline of what appeared to be a bubble of air. With little energy she had left, she raised her head and sucked in the elixir of life and was born again. She pushed the door open with her right leg, but it only moved several inches. Bubbling sounds filled the darkness as more air escaped from under the roof and rose up to freedom and life.

"OH NO! NO! NO!" screamed in her head. "GET OUT! GET OUT!" The voice seemed to be someone else shouting at her from inside her head - a being motivated only by fear and the will to live. The voice was alien to her as if she were watching everything happen as an observer.

She placed her back against the seat and used her legs to push the door open like a human wedge. The door slowly opened, but only enough for her to squeeze out. She looked up and saw another tiny bubble of air still trapped in the ceiling and thought she should go for it, but decided Carson was more important. She squeezed out of the car holding Carson's hand. Then she realized that she no longer had Carson's hand! She struggled to pull the door open and finally wedged her leg between the door. She could barely see, but Carson was on his back floating across the front seats like a watery corpse. She grabbed his ankle and pulled him towards her. His legs spread apart as she pulled and she reluctantly let go his ankle to grab his other foot. She finally pulled him through the tiny space. Then something touched her leg in the black darkness. "*The tree branches,*" she thought with a new adrenaline fix.

She locked her arms under Carson's and around his chest. The water felt like a giant fist slamming into her body - her skin hurt and her head

ached from the coldness. The darkness swallowed her completely, but she kept moving what she hoped was upward toward the surface. The dim green lights of the dashboard vanished into nothingness, and the pain in her chest grew stronger as she struggled to swim to the surface with Carson. She could not feel her arms or legs, but she knew she had to keep sending signals from her brain to keep her legs kicking and her arms wrapped tightly around Carson.

*"This is too hard, too much trouble - I can't take this anymore," she thought. "It would be easier to stop and rest. Yes, rest would be nice. I need to rest. I need to rest..."*

Her thoughts drifted away, along with the pain in her chest and suddenly images of her life flashed in front of her one right after the other like the slide shows she often had to sit through when her husband was a speaker at one of the medical conferences. Her mom coming to help her when she fell off her bike and skinned her knee; her dad bringing in the large doll house for her eighth birthday; Jeremy picking her up for the prom dressed in a black tuxedo with a pink carnation pinned to his lapel; her friend, Denise from college kissing Tom Sanders on their first double date; her wedding day with her father giving her away to Carson standing at the altar in his white tuxedo. The images stopped there and the one of her wedding began to play out in slow motion. After her father released her arm, Carson turned to face her. He was crying - a terrible sadness oozed out of his face - sadness so intense she felt it squeeze her heart like a vice.

"Carson! Carson! What's wrong! Carson!"

"Don't let me die!" he said. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

Intense fear slammed into her again like a waterfall spilling into her. Suddenly the pain in her chest was very intense, and the images of her life vanished, and she could see a tiny inkling of fused light above. Her head exploded with an intense revelation - she remembered where she was. Fear mixed with adrenaline shot through her like a lightening bolt.

*"I'M NOT GOING TO LET US DIE!"* the voice screamed in her head. *"I CAN'T LET CARSON DIE!"*

She instinctively focused all of her strength and will on getting to the surface. She didn't know how she did it later, but she kicked her legs in one last surge of energy, kicking, kicking, kicking. Seconds later, she felt her face hit the warmer air, and her lungs exploded as she let out the foul air of death and gulped the sweet breath of life. She pulled Carson's head up and swam for the embankment barely visible from a distant

street light on the bridge. The water was like thick sludge and it took all of her remaining strength to move her arm and legs. She reached the shore, grabbed hold of a small tree, and paused there to catch her breath. She dragged Carson out of the water - his body slid well on the mud and swampy grass. She gasped for air and her limbs started to tingle as her life force slowly revived itself. Despite her winded condition, she began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Carson. His forehead and hair immediately turned red with blood from a two-inch gash in his forehead. Moments later, lights appeared on the bridge and then a voice.

"Hello, anyone there?"

"Over here! Over here! Call 911!" Linda yelled between tears.

Minutes later the sky lit up fire red - an ambulance and a police car arrived - their sirens piercing the quiet darkness like a saw blade.

"Over here!" She screamed.

Bright, narrow light beams from several flashlights danced into the darkness below the bridge.

"Over here!" Linda screamed again.

The beams rushed over to her. Bill Watkins immediately grabbed his black bag and rushed down through knee-high brush and small trees to the riverbank. He went to Carson who was lying on his back. His skin was gray and his lips were blue. Linda knelt beside him - she shook violently from the cold fear. Several others swarmed them paramedics, police - it all became a blur to Linda. Someone draped a blanket over Linda.

"I've got no pulse and he's not breathing," one man said. "Ready for CPR?"

The man gave Carson mouth-to-mouth while another stuck a needle into Carson's arm. The paramedic blew into Carson's lungs several times, but Carson did not respond. He placed one hand just under Carson's rib cage and took hold of his wrist. Then he used his weight to push down in the hopes that it would jump-start Carson's heart. He pushed several times and then went back to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

"Don't let him die!" Linda screamed. "He can't die!"

Her screams startled the paramedics. The other man pushed on Carson's chest, but Carson did not respond. The men became frantic in their efforts to save Carson.

The paramedic giving CPR stopped and gasped for air and placed two fingers on Carson's artery. "I think I've got a pulse," he yelled between sucking in gulps of air.

"Let's go! He'll do a lot better in the hospital."

They quickly placed Carson on a stretcher and hurried toward the ambulance. His body was like a giant rubber doll. One man slipped on the muddy bank.

"Oh God! No!" Linda screamed.

The man recovered quickly and moved off the slimy muddy bank.

Linda cried when she entered the ambulance - the reality of what was happening suddenly hit her like a tidal wave. Carson's skin was gray, his hair was soaked with blood, and he looked like a corpse. Within minutes, they arrived at Red Bank Hospital and Carson was wheeled into one of the emergency rooms. Several doctors and nurses followed the gurney into the well-lighted room.

"It's Doctor Hyll!" one of the nurses shouted. "I worked with him when I was at Ocean Village." The others looked at each other and picked up their pace. One nurse attached wires to his forehead, chest and fingers. Another felt along his arm looking for a vein to start an IV. Linda followed the activity - her face a distorted mask of fear. They worked frantically on Carson - mouth-to-mouth, shots of adrenaline and finally electrical shock.

"Clear!" the doctor holding the electrodes yelled.

Carson's body jerked and Linda wailed in fear, as the green line on the EKG monitor remained flat.

"Clear!" the doctor yelled again.

After several more attempts, the energy in the room paled and a shroud of silence overwhelmed everyone.

"We're sorry," said the doctor holding the electrodes.

"Noooooooooooo! You can't stop now! You can't stop now!" Linda screamed. "Try again! Try again! NOW! Pleeeeeeeeeeease!!!!"

A nurse ushered her out of the room and slowly the other nurses and doctors left the room as if they were in a funeral procession - a procession for Carson.

The nurse squeezed Linda's hand and said, "He's gone, Mrs. Hyll. I'm sorry."

## The Awakening - Chapter 2



He could only lift his hand a few inches. Something was all around it. He only had enough space to bring his hand to his chest and feel the cold skin on his ribcage. He began to shiver. He felt along his hips and then down along his right leg. He was naked. He opened his eyes and saw only blackness. He closed his eyes and saw the same blackness and it scared him - black on black. He frantically ran both hands all around him with the slim hope that he could push the blackness away and find the light. The obstruction felt like smooth, cold plastic, and then his hand hit upon a metal object. The metal ran in a straight-line parallel his body and stuck out a bit. He continued to feel it - the metal line was about as thick as a pencil and it had grooves. Carson continued to run his finger along the metal line. It went past his face and over his head, and then stopped. He traced the metal line again with his index finger and found a small square smooth spot along the line above his head. Suddenly, his throat tightened.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" He screamed. The noise swallowed his consciousness, his entire being in a white noise of fear. The scream would not stop and completely controlled him, his thoughts, and his soul.

He knew where he was.

\* \* \*

Dick Harrington, a thin man with a round head covered in closely cut white gray hair, got off the elevator and pushed an empty ER stretcher past the double swing doors into the dark corridor near the morgue. He heard what he thought was a scream. It was 5 am and he had a couple of hours left as the senior orderly on the third shift. *Probably, a patient on one of the upper floors having a nightmare*, he thought. In the past, the sound had moved down along the heating pipes in the ceiling echoing through the dungeon-like halls. It was common. He continued and thought of his granddaughter, Dawinda when one of her braids got caught in the chain on her backyard swing and she began to scream in fear.

"Helpppppp!" a second scream. He stopped and listened more intently. The screams came in a continuous volley. He backed up towards the double doors and pulled the stretcher with him. The screams were louder now, his chest tightened, and his hands shook as he slowly entered the dark, cold room. A strong scent of formaldehyde and disinfectant filled his nose, but he was used to it and hardly noticed. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he felt along the wall for the light switch. The room flooded with white cold light and he looked along the wall of giant silver drawers, each numbered, and each containing a dead person. He walked towards the rear of the room and the screams stopped.

With a shaking hand, Harrington reached down and opened a drawer near the floor. He unzipped the black shiny bag and saw blue-gray face of an old man with his mouth open. He quickly zipped it shut and turned away feeling a rumbling in his stomach. He closed the drawer and walked towards the double doors holding one hand over his mouth and the other on his stomach. His shirt was soaked with sweat. As he reached the doors, the screams started again. He froze - that moment when everything even your consciousness stops consumed by a single powerful force. He turned and stared at the wall of drawers. One door seemed to move slightly. The shrieks overwhelmed everything in the room. Harrington cautiously walked toward the drawer and with his shaking hand pulled on the large handle; the drawer slid towards him effortlessly. The black bag inside was writhing like a snake. He reached for the zipper, missing it several times because he couldn't control the shaking in his hand and because the bag kept moving out of his reach. The howling from inside the bag set every one of his nerves on fire. When he finally pulled the zipper back, two wide eyes filled with terror met his and he screamed, and the body screamed back at him. Then the "corpse" reached out, grabbed his arm, and squeezed it like a vice.

Harrington pulled away yelling, slipped and fell, but the "corpse" held him securely. Now its arms were half out of the drawer holding Harrington's arm with agonizing strength. Tears ran down Harrington's face as he struggled to get free and then the "corpse" let go. Harrington slammed his body against the double doors, bolted down the hallway, and vanished up the stairs screaming the entire way.

## The Revelation - Chapter 3



he light hurt his eyes as he opened them. He couldn't see very clearly - there seemed to be a mist over them.

"Where am I?" he asked.

A man standing near the edge of his bed looked up from a chart and smiled, his blue eyes sparkled.

"You're in Red Bank Hospital. I'm Doctor Westwood. We're glad you're back - you were in a car accident and suffered a concussion. The concussion must have triggered some bad memories," the man explained.

"More like nightmares," Carson said. "What happened?"

"We don't know. All we know is that your car went off the Red River Bridge. Lucky for both of you your wife was not knocked unconscious," he explained.

"Linda? Is she?"

"Oh yeah she's fine. She pulled you out of the car or you would have drowned," the doctor said. "The water is pretty cold at this time of the year and hypothermia sets in in less than fifteen minutes. It's really a miracle that she got both of you out."

Carson moved his arm to brace himself up and then stopped.

"Ouch! Why is my arm burned? Boy, that hurts," he said. "Did the car catch on fire?"

"It's not only your arm, Carson. It's your whole body. We think it's some kind of psychological reaction to the crash or maybe something was in the water and you're having an allergic reaction to it. We're still doing tests. It's not that serious - the burns are like a severe sunburn so you should feel better in a few days," Dr. Westwood explained.

"How could that be?"

"We don't know. We first thought there might be some kind of pollutant in the water and your skin reacted with that, but our tests show that your internals were slightly damaged by...well, some kind of heat. You show all the symptoms of a person who suffered a heat stroke...someone who stayed in the sun for days without water," Dr. Westwood explained.

"The hottest day we've had so far has only been around 50 degrees and I wasn't sun tanning," Carson said.

"We're aware of that and we're still doing tests. Don't worry you're recovering nicely. You should be out of here by Saturday."

"It's probably from waking up in the body bag," Carson said.

Doctor Westwood was silent and looked down at the chart.

"Strange. I don't remember falling asleep while driving," Carson added.

"Well, we'll have one of our staff psychiatrists look in on you if you want. You hit your head pretty hard."

"No, that's okay. I'll be fine," Carson replied. "Why was I in the morgue?"

"I don't know. I wasn't the attending physician."

"Where's Linda?"

"Your wife? I believe she's on her way. Now get some rest. I'll see you again tomorrow."

Carson noticed a foul, burnt odor. He began to smell the sheets, and then he brought his arm up to nose, and discovered the origin of the smell - it was his own skin. The skin smelled burnt, foul and rotted, yet his skin was only damaged to the degree of severe sunburn. *Only burn victims would have such an odor*, he thought. He was puzzled. He thought about it for a moment and then drifted into a peaceful sleep staring at the flickering images of the TV floating above his bed.

\* \* \*

When he opened his eyes, a face stared down at him.

"Linda!" he said.

"Oh, Carson I thought I lost you. I was so scared," she said her eyes watering.

"I love you," Carson said weakly putting his arms around her despite his pain.

"What happened?" Carson asked.

"You fell asleep, the car went off the bridge, and I pulled us out," Linda said between tears.

Her face hardened. "You damn near killed us! You should have let me drive or we should have stayed at Sean's if you were that tired!"

"But, I wasn't tired. I was wide awake and then there was nothing."

"You must have passed out from exhaustion. From now on I'm driving home from any parties."

"I guess so..." he said.

"You were DOA, Carson," she said. "I watched them try to revive you. You were dead."

"DOA? No wonder I can't remember any of it," he said. "I came back...in the morgue." He shuttered at the thought.

"It's a good thing that orderly was there. I would have been pretty damn mad if you left me," Linda said squeezing his hand and smiling.

"All I remember is holding onto your hand. I'm still puzzled how I could have fallen asleep. I was wide-awake and having fun driving on the bridge," he said.

"You remember holding my hand?"

"Yeah and I floated towards you, and grabbed your hand, and together we floated to the surface."

"You didn't grab my hand. You were unconscious the whole time," Linda said. "I remember waking up and staring at you. You were in a daze. The next thing I know the car is drifting towards the railing and then it crashed through. I was thrown forward, and the dashboard seemed to float downward, and my whole body lifted slightly. I screamed as the car fell and I remember the seat belt suddenly getting very tight against my shoulder. The car hit the water, I was thrown