

# Bridge Of Hope

Written by Gary L. Vincent  
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"So Cindy, what are you going to do with *your* life," the question was coming from her brother John. He asked it in an offhand way that was very much like himself. John did not have anything to worry about, but the others did. He took a final drag on the menthol cigarette he was smoking and stubbed it into the ashtray. Without waiting for his sister's reply, he turned and walked across the room.

Cindy and her other two brothers were sitting at the kitchen table. They both just shook their head at John. The past few weeks had been rough on the entire group. This was the last day that they would be in the family home. Their father had been a contractor and always gave them with anything they ever needed. Due to misfortune however, he was killed in a construction accident. Even though his insurance paid well, it didn't cover all of the debts that had piled up. Now Cindy and her brothers were waiting around because in a few hours a bank representative would be coming to finish up the repossessions.

With all things considered, their meeting here today really amounted to nothing. The three brothers were pouting and cursing, for the most part unaware of their own condition. Cindy was apart from the others, her beauty suppressed by the feelings of sadness. She was the only woman in the household so she kept her emotions to herself. Her life and her feelings weren't like her brothers'. They always treated her badly and with the death of their father, she was more or less pushed aside from the family's pressing decisions.

Though she was truly attractive, her lifestyle was very busy and she did not have a steady boyfriend. The brothers boasted that the reason that she did not have a "man in her life" was that she looked like a hag. Cindy, somehow believed them because she was, after all, twenty-eight years old and had never really loved before.

Outside there was a large barn, currently housing all of their father's heavy equipment. Those very instruments could have earned the money to keep the family's assets but were now uselessly sitting in the barn. The bulldozers, the tractors, the smaller items were all part of the entire lot that would soon be gone. There was no doubt that all of them had thought about this and of course, they were all frightened. The brothers felt that this was just plain bad luck. Their comeback was that his death was a way out from under his wing, but to Cindy the real truth was that there *was* no freedom, not outer, not inner.

The family never really knew hardship. John, who had took out another cigarette, had a good job with a local factory. He worked in shipping, where he met a girl named Arlene, who he promised to marry some day. Frank, who was sitting across from Cindy at the kitchen table, was a waiter at a well-to-do restaurant across town. He had already located an apartment and things would level out in a matter of time. The other brother, Brian, was the only one in the room who was younger than Cindy. He was twenty and he was going to college on an R.O.T.C. basis. For him the uncertainty of the moment was still not a total loss.

John had finished his cigarette and walked over to Cindy. "The state will probably have to take care of you. You're too lazy to even go out and get a job." He looked at her with a coldness which chilled Cindy to the core. He added, "You lost mom and now with dad gone, you'll have to get off your ass and work a little."

"John, you're a bastard!," Cindy cried. She jumped up and ran out of the room with tears streaming down her face.

"Serves her right," John replied to the others. "She will have to learn sooner or later what life is about." He paused, pulled out another cigarette and continued, "I just wish she didn't have to learn this way." The other brothers nodded in agreement.

Cindy looked back at the scene in the kitchen. It could have very well been three strangers in there talking. They could have once worked with her father on a construction

team somewhere, for this was not a family setting. Those people could not have been her brothers.

The entire house was bare of all furniture except for the table in the kitchen. Cindy took out a small tissue from her purse and wiped her eyes. The place looked so solemn, so bare. This house held many memories, but all she could think about was the desperate look it had now. Because there was no other furniture in the house except what was in the kitchen, she went outside and set on the porch swing to collect her thoughts.

Cindy looked out upon the driveway. There was four vehicles all together, two pickup trucks, one hot-rod Fury, which belonged to John, and a small Colt which belonged to Cindy. The car had been a birthday gift from her father.

While she was gazing down the driveway, she noticed a van approaching. "Paul's Landscaping" was flare-painted on the side in neon green and country music was blaring from its stereo. Paul was a groundskeeper for a local cemetery and every month, he would come to the house cut the grass and trim the weeds. The father wanted it that way. Paul had always did a nice job at the cemetery and when the wealthy contractor offered him a job, Paul gladly accepted. Because of all the family trouble, he hadn't been around lately, but sure enough he was coming today.

"Well I'll be!," Brian exclaimed. He had came out on the porch to greet the visitor. "So what brings you up here Paulie?"

Paul got out of the van and shook hands with Brian. He was a man of twenty five and his profession had kept him well in shape. Cindy noticed this as he approached.

"Howdy Brian, howdy miss," he nodded to Cindy who politely spoke back. "Your dad had paid me to keep up the lawn for the entire summer. I felt as if I owed him one last lawn job."

"You're a good man Paul," Brian said, "but the bank's coming today to take back the farm and if you cut the grass, you would only be cutting it for them."

"I know, but I wish I could help out in some way. Your father was a very

generous man and I feel that I owe him something."

"Forget it," Brian replied, "But since you're here, why not come in and have a beer. We brought a few with us in a cooler."

"Sure," Paul and Brian went into the house. Cindy decided to take one final walk around the estate before she left. She didn't say goodbye. There was no one like her here. She was the only woman in the household and lived in the memory of her mother. Though she was sad over her father's death, it was her mother whom she loved dearly. Her mother had died three years ago of a heart attack which had left the responsibility of keeping up the household to her father. She respected her dad, but now her feelings toward him were of anger, for he had died and left the entire family hopelessly in debt.

She had suffered badly during the last couple of months. It seemed that nothing could change the feelings of stubborn pride that controlled each member of the family. For Cindy, it seemed as if the end had come. Even before he died she knew deep down that she could not stay under her father's wing all of her life, and the rest of the family seemed so far, so distant. She realized that she could never ask anything of her brothers, she was a proud girl and could take care of herself. But now it seemed that there really was no way out, at least not for Cindy. Very strangely this thought did not make her feel as bad as it might seem, instead she welcomed it with a dark and somewhat erotic fever. Maybe she would meet her mother and father, for they had no worries where they were at.

After driving around for most of the afternoon, Cindy decided to make a visit. Summer was over for the most part and as evening drew near, the temperature began to drop rapidly. All around the trees had started to turn their autumn colors and leaves held a mystical quality about them. The sky was gray, and the wintry wind had picked up as Cindy drove to the graveyard.

While Cindy drove around the winding road of the cemetery, she could see Paul's van parked near the caretaker's shed. She wasn't sure where he was but she really didn't care. She had come to pay a final visit to her mother and father.

She walked to the tombstone, rose in one hand, clippers and a wire brush in the other. For some reason that she could not explain, she always felt at peace here. The truly cold world was far away, far beyond the walls of the cemetery. She felt reserved and somewhat happy here.

Thoughtfully she clipped some weeds away from the grave and laid the rose upon the ground beside it. She then took the wire brush and cleaned the weather stains that had collected on the granite headstone.

She felt gratification in doing this. Here, she felt in pure harmony with her mother and the heavenly world where she was at. She took a stroll around the grounds, breathing the cold but fresh air and feeling a richness inside. She had reasoned that the world which she was in was far more painful than the world that death had shown to her mother and father.

Leaves had already begun to fall and Paul was raking them when he saw Cindy walking through the garden on the far side of the cemetery. She looked somewhat sexy and a far more beautiful than when Paul had seen her earlier today. Her long, flowing blond hair waved freely in the wind. Her walk was like a mystic dance and her boots moved with a hypnotic rhythm all their own. She seemed content and looking at her was like looking into another world. She was like a model out of a fantasy, walking before his very eyes. Something magical had touched him and he had completely forgotten about the work at hand.

She slowly turned, sensing him watching. Their eyes met and for a moment, time stood still. Each could read the other's thoughts, each were touched by a deep and rich emotion neither had felt before. Though at a distance, her eyes seemed to weigh him as a person, both in mind, body, and even in soul. There was power with uncertainty in those eyes and it was as if both were standing there heavily intoxicated, not knowing what to do next. Paul dropped his eyes, feeling ashamed of his starrng. He quickly went back to raking the leaves and when he looked back up, she was gone.

He finished up the yard work and took his tools back to the shed. It had been a busy day and soon it would be dark. The temperature had fallen so quickly that it was uncomfortable to stand outside for too long. Paul hurried and got in his van, turning the heater on medium. He made his routine lap around the cemetery to make sure that no one was left in the grounds and locked the gate. He then started down Crestmont Hill, where he would pass through town on his way home.

Paul thought about his life as he was driving. For the most part, it had been nothing but work and hard work at that. He enjoyed the outdoors, but many looked down upon him, claiming that he was a man doing a kid's job. He did not mind the remarks though, but he did worry if maybe he was wasting his life away. The seasons would come and go, the jobs would change, and with all things considered it really was monotonous. Paul drove on into the twilight.

At the bottom of Crestmont Hill was a bridge leading into town. The bridge crossed a large river. Lights of the city reflected coldly off the dark water as Paul's van approached to cross the bridge. On the side of the road was a small green Colt. Paul had seen that car before, but where? As he got closer, it really looked to be the car that had belonged to Brian's sister, was Cindy her name? The same girl that he had seen in the cemetery.

He wondered why she was parked on the side of the road. Was she broke down? He pulled off his van and noticed the car to be empty. Faintly in the glow of his headlights he saw a figure leap from the bridge and into the cold water below. Surely he didn't see what he just did! For a brief moment he thought of jumping back in his van and driving away as fast as he could, but what just happened could not be ignored. If he would have gone he knew that he would surly have lost her forever.

He rushed down a slick embankment, falling about halfway down. He somehow cut his leg, but he didn't care. He got to his feet and ran to the water's edge. It was tough for him to see anything in the dark shadows under the bridge, but he did notice the

displacement of the water about a third of the way out.

For a moment he stood motionless, unsure of what to do next. Paul had never really been a good swimmer and he realized that the water was very, very cold to be in. What was the old saying, "Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey," Paul let the thought cross his mind and continued. Summoning the little bits of energy that he had left in him, Paul stepped slowly into the icy water. Forcing himself to put one foot in front of the next, he waded out into its murky depths. With each step, he could feel the thick mud beneath his feet like suction cups as he pushed forward. He was scared.

As he approached the point where she entered the water, Paul stepped in over his head. The water chilled his face and his entire body felt as if it were freezing. He grabbed blindly until he felt what he was looking for. He found her shoulder and pulled with all of his might.

With some struggle he managed to get her back to shore. Like a drunken madman he carried the limp body back up the steep embankment, nearly falling down a couple of times. He could tell she was still alive, but she was shaking from the cold. He had to get her somewhere warm.

The hospital was in the city about forty miles out of the small town. It seemed an unthinkable far distance to drive because Paul needed to get her warm fast. With the van flooded, he rushed quickly to his house.

Paul lived in a nice cottage on the edge of town. He carried Cindy's limp body into the house and set her gently on the couch. He grabbed some wood and placed it in the stone fireplace. After lighting the fire, he went for some dry towels.

Paul felt that it wouldn't be necessary to call 911 because it looked like Cindy would make it once she warmed up. Kneeling to attend to her he noticed her eyes. They were wide open, but she was still not conscious of her surroundings. Though she was breathing normally, she was still shivering from the cold. He got her out of the wet clothes that she was wearing and wrapped her in a blanket. The wood fire was starting to

heat up the room now and Paul went to the kitchen to put on a pot of tea.

What a day it had been. Paul now wondered if he was doing the right thing. In his heart he felt he was. Deep down, it really was the right thing. When the tea finished brewing he poured a cup and added a small touch of Jack Daniels to the drink. He walked back into the living room and tilted Cindy's head up to take a sip.

The warm mixture revived her instantly. She looked deeply into his eyes, as if she had known him for ages, but only now had she become aware of his existence.

"You're Paul aren't you?," she asked.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Stay calm and drink this tea. I put a little whiskey in it to help you out."

"What?," she said in a dreamy voice.

"Relax, I need to go upstairs and get some clean clothes." He stood up and held his hands out, "Just look at me. I smell horrid and look like something that the cat dragged in off the street. I'll be right back." He was vaguely aware that his own health might be in danger after the river incident.

"Wait. Please tell me what happened?"

"You're name is Cindy, right?"

"Yes."

He gently touched her cheek and brushed some stray hairs away from her face. "Dear girl, you tried to kill yourself this evening."

"No . . . did I really?"

"Cindy, I don't know what you were trying to prove, but you jumped off a bridge and I had to swim out after you." He felt so small and really did not know how to continue this type of conversation. Her gentle eyes remained fixed on his and he could not help but glance down, unsure of what to do next.

"Was I crazy?," she asked, her eyes still on him all the while.

"Well, you did a very stupid thing." Paul hesitated a moment and continued,

"You're a beautiful girl and you have such a bright future to go and throw it away."

"Do you think I'm beautiful?," she asked.

"Yes, I do."

"I'm sorry, it really was a stupid thing to do." Tears began to swell in her eyes and she went on, "It was crazy, it was. Paul, am I still crazy now?" The sadness and tone of her voice were pleading to Paul for an answer.

He ran a finger across her forehead. "No, you're not crazy, just sad." The truth which Paul expressed and the intimacy of the moment seemed to scare him a little. He looked down at her breasts. The blanket had slipped down, but not to the point where they were totally revealed. In a weird way, he felt that she had more control over the situation than he did, but he would let the moment progress at its own pace. "Stay here, I need to get changed," he finally said.

"Did you dive off the bridge after me?," she asked.

"Well, it probably would have been easier. I climbed down the hill and fell before I reached the bottom. I waded out to get you."

The room was very quiet. The burning wood crackled and the moment was there, the moment was right. He really wanted to get out of the soggy clothes that he was wearing and put on something more comfortable. But there was something he wanted more. Though he was damp, a desire ripped through him, a passion, a hunger which he could not deny. He wanted Cindy very badly. He longed for her embrace.

"Why did you bother Paul?"

"Because people do not go swimming this time of year." He smiled and softly said, "and I had to let you know somehow."

"Although it is out of focus now, it seemed to be the right thing to do then." She was still looking at him from her comfortable position on the sofa. "Paul, I wanted to die."

"Listen, I really need to change these wet clothes. I'll be right back." He still was

unsure if he could move. Her control was very powerful.

"No, let me help you." As she set up she became aware that she had no clothes on, that she was wrapped in a blanket and nothing more. She quickly glanced around the room and saw a heap of her clothing piled up on the floor. She also noticed Paul standing there with a very scared look on his face.

Looking deep into Paul's soul she asked, "Was it you that undressed me?"

"Yes, it was necessary . . . you were shivering in the cold and you needed something dry."

The look that Paul read on Cindy's face said that she was on the verge of being very upset, then a slight grin crossed her lips. "So tell me," she said, "do you find me attractive?"

"Very much. I said you were beautiful."

"How much?"

"A lot." Paul paused for a moment and added, "Cindy, I was just looking out for you. I . . . I didn't want you getting yourself hurt."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"No, but I think I might be falling."

"I realize that we don't know each other very well, but do you love me?"

Paul could only look at her, totally spellbound. He could not hold back. They both knew it was so.

She leaped to her feet and grabbed hold of him tightly. The blanket dropped, but it did not matter. As he stood there, she hugged him ever so sweetly, pressing her breasts against his. He hugged her back and there, at that very moment, the truth was exposed and neither could hide it. Tears poured down her eyes and they shared a French kiss which seemed to last an eternity. "You do love me," she finally said.

She began pulling off his wet, musty smelling clothes as they began kissing each other madly. He ran his fingers through her sticky, wet hair and caressed her smooth,

naked shoulders. He was astonished, dazed, and scared for he had never done this before. He really never thought of loving her, but right now it didn't seem to matter. At the cemetery, he was a caretaker and when he went into the water as well as right now, he was taking care of her. Thoughts against loving her were pushed madly to the side, for he had no desire to break away.

She looked at him with a liquid light of passion in her eyes. Her silhouette shined with gentle radiance in the glow of the firelight. Paul really did not know what to think. She held the beams of an angel and he knew he could not look away. He wanted her more than ever now.

"You do love me," she said in a deep, seductive voice.

Her hands held his as she drew him down upon the sofa. Paul was scared, and scared very badly. Buried in the back of his mind was something telling him to leave, but a more powerful force was drawing his body towards her. It seemed so wonderful to feel her shoulders, to touch her breasts, to taste her lips, to see the beauty in her shining face. He was giving in to her. He now longed to do so.

He tried to stare at the fire away from her, but he kept coming back to those blue, seductive eyes. She had noticed him glance away and her eyes questioned his integrity. "I'm just afraid, that's all," he said. Her eyes held sadness and behind the sadness was the dark look of death, which Paul did not want to see.

With the last of his will gone, he let the remainder of his essence flow towards her. A peaceful, kind smile spread across his face. He noticed her eyes were overflowing with tears. He watched the tears flow from her eyes and stream down her cheeks. He felt his chest bleeding with desire for her.

Paul pulled her closer. She was very still in his arms. Locked in the chains of love, neither could move. He felt her warm tears run against his neck and he realized now that he could never bear to let her go again. He clutched her tightly and placed another kiss on her forehead.

As if reality came crashing back into focus, he could smell the damp, dirty smell of stale water lingering between them, but especially in her hair. Though the smell was bad, he didn't care, he slowly went to his knees and began kissing all over her body. He was unsure of what he was doing or if it was the right thing, but it felt right.

When he looked back into her eyes again, there was a delicate hue around her face, highlighted once again by the fire. The look of happiness was back in her eyes and though he was still scared, he feared the look of desperation even more.

In an unsteady voice she asked once again, "Do you love me?"

"Yes," he moaned. He did not know how it sounded, but it was true. He had never loved another before and the newness of 'love' was painful to say. The word ripped through his chest and he wondered how deep he was letting himself go.

She touched his face and brought it back up to her. They kissed each other on the mouth ever so gently with a kiss that seemed to last forever. The past was over now. Nothing up to this point in time seemed to matter now. He had reached out for her and she was there to accept. Only the present was real.

She was still crying, even after they kissed. He felt very sorry for her, sitting there with such beauty -- engulfed in such sorrow. "Why the tears?," he had to ask.

She shook her head as if trying to express herself. "Paul, I'm not crying." She smiled, "Silly me, I have never let my emotions out like this before."

"I love you sweetheart, I really do," he said in a shaky, whispering voice.

They began to make love . . . Adam and Eve, Paul and Cindy. It was destiny and it was proper. There would be rough times ahead, but nothing too harsh that they could not handle. A society is dead without love and though he did not realize it at the time, Paul did not only save Cindy on this night, he also saved himself.