

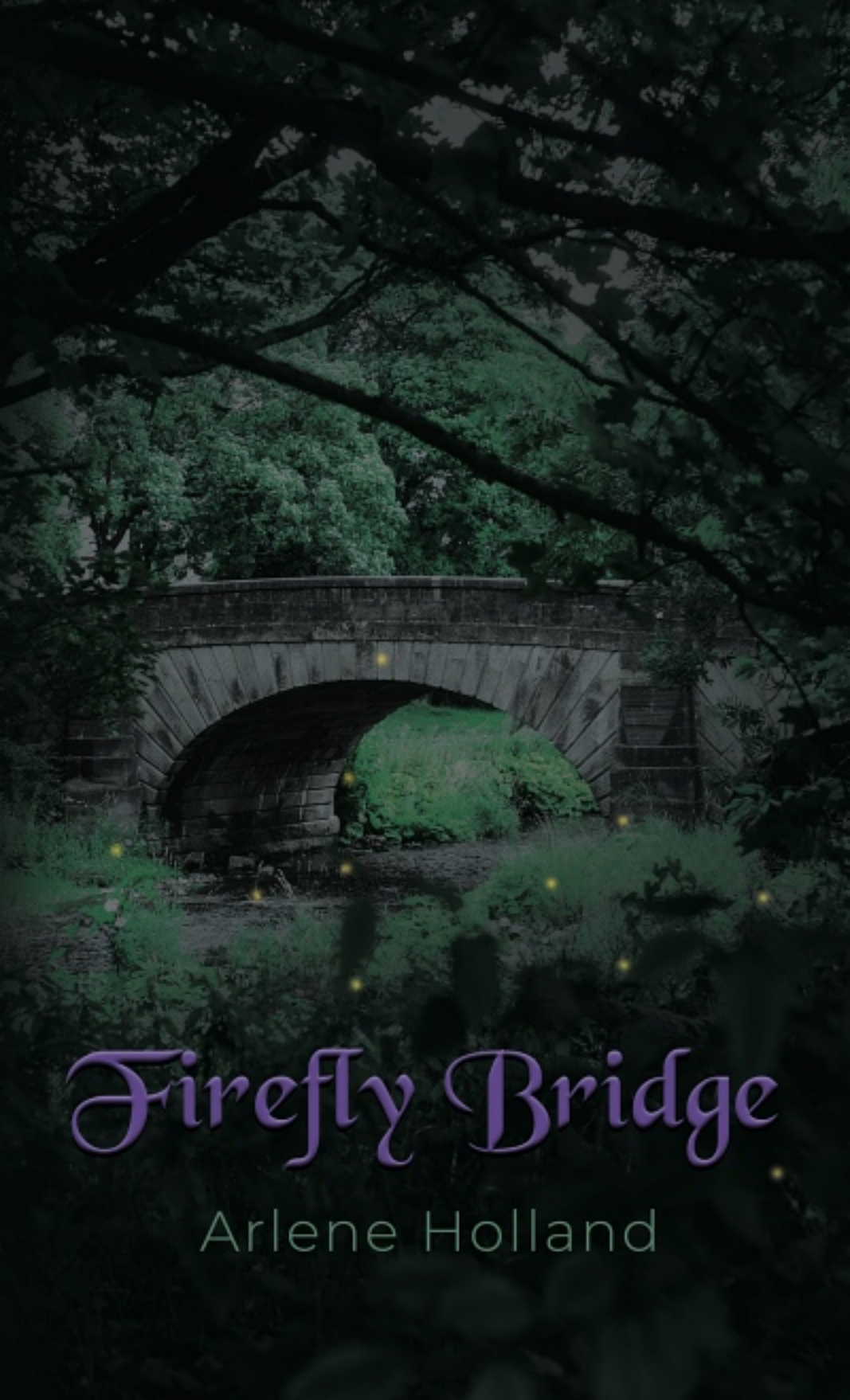
How far would you go or what lengths would you take to make your wish come true? Friendship is pushed to the brink of destruction when Sophia, Dana and Vivian try to make their wish come true.

Firefly Bridge
By Arlene Holland

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Firefly Bridge

Arlene Holland

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CHAPTER 1

Dana Cain looked at Coach Hatcher with a blank stare. He could be speaking in Latin for all she knew or cared. Her mind was on other things...nothing specific...but *anything* other than calculus. She turned her head to glance out the classroom window. Nothing going on outside either, she thought as she gazed at the American and Texas flags flapping in the wind above the high school courtyard square. It was a beautiful day. Too beautiful to be stuck inside listening to a teacher rattle on and on about a boring subject she wasn't ever going to use in real life....

“Ms. Cain!”

Hearing her name announced startled Dana out of her daydream. She jerked her head around. “Yes, Coach Hatcher?” she asked as she fidgeted with the corners of her notebook and cleared her throat. Oh, no! What was he talking about? She thought. Her face, neck, and ears felt impossibly hot.

“I’m about to show the class something that’s going to be on the test. I want to eliminate any argument that I didn’t make *everyone* aware of it by *extending* a special invitation.” He unfolded a hand in her direction. “Would you like to join us?”

Dana glanced around the classroom. All eyes were on her; even her best friend, Sophia Fairburn, had turned around in her seat to stare. The distant rumble of the

building's air conditioner was the only sound to be heard as an awkward silence filled the room. Dana slumped in her chair and ducked her chin. "Yes. Thank you, Coach."

Gritting her teeth, she refused to make eye contact with any of her classmates. She sat up straight and stared at the projection on the whiteboard in front of her.

Coach Hatcher clasped his hands together. "Now, as I was saying..." he continued as he turned toward the screen and pointed to his notes.

Dana's focus drifted to the back of Coach Hatcher's head, and once again, her mind was on anything other than calculus....

Coach Dale Hatcher was one of those teachers everyone liked. He was young enough to remember what it was like to be young, yet old enough to be revered and respected. As an assistant football coach and a calculus teacher, Coach Hatcher had the unique opportunity to connect with most of the seniors at Millman High.

As Dana stared at the back of Coach Hatcher's head, she realized his light brown hair covered his shirt collar—a violation of the school dress code....

The loud clanging of the bell indicating that class was over brought Dana out of her trance. She gathered her things and stood.

“The test is going to be hard,” Sophia said with a moan. She clutched her books to her chest. “I’m dreading it so much.”

“I don’t know why *you’re* dreading it,” Dana replied. “At least you understand it. I was lost two minutes after I sat down.” She met Sophia’s gaze. “You have to help me. If I bomb another calculus test, I’ll be kicked off the track team.”

“Let’s get together tomorrow night and study,” Sophia suggested as she strolled out of the classroom and into the hallway.

Dana was on Sophia’s heels and touched her arm. “Thank you,” Dana said with a sigh as her hand slid to her side. “Sounds good to me.” She stopped short as a thought occurred to her. “Hey, Sophia, do you need a ride to work after school?”

Sophia nodded. “As always, but are you sure you don’t mind? I could call my dad, but I’d rather catch a ride with you.” They strolled down the crowded hallway together until Sophia reached her locker. She turned and began to work the padlock’s combination.

“Of course not, Sophia,” Dana insisted. “I’ll meet you at my car after school. I’m parked in the small parking lot behind the gym. I’m supposed to meet Colt there.” She giggled. “I’m going to steal a kiss before he goes to football practice.”

“Oh fabulous, I get to watch you and Colt grope each other.” Sophia mumbled as she opened her locker and placed her books inside.

“C’mon, Sophia—don’t be salty,” Dana giggled. “You’d do it too if you had a boyfriend.”

Sophia pushed a loose strand of black hair off her face and smiled. “You’d better believe it.”

Dana laughed. “I’ve got to get to my next class. See you at lunch.” She didn’t wait for Sophia to reply and took off for her locker located further down the hall.

Sophia watched Dana walk away before retrieving a book for her next class.

Vivian Fairburn, Sophia’s cousin, sat on a picnic table in the courtyard and tore into her bean burrito. She should have waited for Sophia and Dana, but she was starving. She had slept late and skipped breakfast.

Her long black hair blew across her face just as she took a bite. She spat out hair and food. “Dang it,” she said under her breath as she grabbed a paper napkin out of the metal dispenser sitting on the picnic table. She wiped her mouth and pushed the hair out of her face. Looking around to make sure no one was watching Vivian took another, more careful bite.

Dana spotted Vivian first, and without speaking, sat down and played with the stem on an apple.

Firefly Bridge

“Is that all you’re going to eat?” Vivian asked as she pointed to the red apple. Another lock of hair blew in front of her eyes. Impatiently, she grazed a hand over her head, shoving the strand out of her eyes.

Dana shrugged without taking her eyes off the apple. “I’m not hungry.” She met Vivian’s gaze. “I’m too worried about my grades—mainly calculus.” She sighed and ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. “I just don’t get it.” She shook her head. “I’ll never get it.”

“What is it you don’t get?” Sophia asked as she plopped her tray of food on the table and sat down to join them.

Dana looked up and met Sophia’s gaze. “You know...calculus.” She took a deep breath and pushed it out through her mouth.

An unexpected breeze caught the paper wrapping of Vivian’s burrito, and she tucked it under her soda can before it blew away.

Sophia rolled her eyes. “Oh that. Stop obsessing over the calculus test. We’re going to study tomorrow night and you’ll get it. I promise.” She pulled a purple hairband from her wrist and wrapped it around her hair at the base of her neck.

Vivian heaved a heavy sigh and brushed a hand over her face. I should’ve brought a hairband today, she thought. This wind is terrible.

Sophia took a bite of her burger and looked at the apple in Dana's hand. "Want some of my fries?" she asked with a full mouth and pushed her tray toward Dana.

"Sure," Dana answered without enthusiasm. She took a French fry, dipped it in ketchup, and popped it in her mouth.

"Are y'all studying calculus tomorrow night?" Vivian asked. She didn't wait for a reply. "Can I join?" She didn't need to be tutored in calculus, but she wanted to be included in the study group.

Sophia swallowed and stared at Vivian. "Of course, you don't have to ask. You're family. You come over almost every night anyways."

Vivian laughed. "Still, it would be nice to be invited."

Without another word to Vivian, Sophia turned toward Dana. "How about the two of you spend the night? It's Friday night. Do you have plans with Colt?"

Dana took a bite of the apple and shook her head. She swallowed. "No, we don't have any plans until Saturday." She grinned. "Of course, it sounds great to me. Are you sure your dad won't mind?"

Sophia smiled. "My dad loves a full house." She shrugged. "It keeps him busy, you know, distracted and stuff."

CHAPTER 2

Bob Fairburn finished installing the electrical meter on a new house on the west side of town and gathered up his tools. As a lineman for Millman Electric, he was responsible for maintaining and installing high-powered electrical lines, systems, and meters. He glanced at his watch. Sophia, his daughter, was expecting him to pick her up from work at five-thirty.

He placed his tools in the truck toolbox and climbed inside his company truck. As he took off his ball cap with one hand, he ran the other hand through his jet-black hair and secured the cap back onto his head. He drove through town with the window down and his arm perched on the doorframe. A warm breeze rushed through the open window.

His wife, Claire, had passed away six years ago when Sophia was just eleven years old. It had been difficult for both of them at first, but he and Sophia had managed to become even closer than ever before. When Sophia turned seventeen, he had had hopes of getting a car for her, but money was tight. For a little while longer, Sophia was dependent on him to pick her up from work in the evenings and take her to school in the mornings. He was thankful that her friend, Dana, usually took her from school to work.

Sophia worked at Brown's Food and General, a mom-and-pop store. The store sold everything from apples to zippers and was crammed full of merchandise.

A person could easily lose track of time looking at everything. The vintage store had a pleasant odor—a mixture of baked goods and assorted old spills. The ancient wooden floors creaked and groaned with customers' footfalls, and conversations drifted throughout the store and helped spread the town's gossip. Everyone in Millman loved Mr. and Mrs. Brown and preferred their store over the Super Grocery located a half-mile out of town.

Bob pulled his company truck along the curbside in front of Brown's Food and General and turned off the ignition. He glanced at his watch before peering into the store's plate-glass window. His daughter was at her usual post at the cash register with her back to the big window.

Recognizing the sound of his truck behind her, Sophia finished sacking up her customer's items before turning around and giving her dad a wave and a smile.

Dana slammed the front door with her foot and strolled into the kitchen. Her arms were wrapped around books, notebooks, and her purse. She dumped everything on the kitchen table and sighed.

"Looks like you have your work cut out for you this evening," her mother said as she glanced at the pile in front of Dana. She returned her gaze to the carrots she was slicing for dinner.

The sleek, modern kitchen lights hung low over the table and cast a blue-grey hue across Dana's things. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the items on the table. She had planned on diving right in immediately, but now, she was tired and very bored with the idea.

"Oh Mom, you have no idea the work I have to do tonight," Dana groaned as she raised her eyebrows. "I wish I was smarter. I suck at *everything* except sports." She looked up at her mother. "You were smart in school. What happened to *me*? Why didn't I inherit your brains?"

Molly Cain looked at her daughter and decided to ignore the language. "Oh Dana, you're smart. You're just not applying yourself because you don't *like* those other subjects." Her mother dumped the chopped carrots into a colander and took them to the sink. "You don't have to like something to understand it. You're making school too hard." She turned the faucet on and washed the carrots. "Are you hungry?" she asked as she turned around and dried her hands on a towel. "Would you like a sandwich?"

"Yes! I'm starving," Dana brightened. "I haven't eaten much all day."

"I figured. I know my daughter well." Molly waved a hand toward the table. "While I make your sandwich, you can pick all this up, so I can set the table for dinner. Go study in your room, and I'll bring your sandwich to you."

“Okay Mom,” Dana agreed as she gathered her books and things. “Thanks.”

Amy Fairburn turned around and looked at her youngest daughter sitting in the backseat. “Cassie, if your sister doesn’t come out in a minute, you may have to go in and get her. I don’t understand what takes her so long after the bell rings.”

“Maybe she has a boyfriend,” Cassie replied without looking up from her cell phone. She wasn’t texting anyone. Her mind was engrossed in playing a game.

Amy’s lips parted slightly. “Really?” she asked. Her eyes widened as she touched her throat. “What has she told you?” If her oldest daughter had a boyfriend, Amy hoped he was respectful and smart.

Cassie sighed as she looked up from her phone. “Nothing Mom, it’s just what I think. You know, I *am* capable of independent thoughts.” Her facial muscles tensed as she pressed the buttons on her phone harder.

Amy’s jaw tightened as she stared out the open car window. A soft breeze ruffled her stylish brown hair. “Of course, you are. I just thought that Vivian might have said something to you.”

“Well, if she did, I wouldn’t tell *you*,” Cassie snapped as she glared at the back of her mother’s head. “It would be betraying her trust and that’s something I would never do,” she said as she turned her head to look

out the window. She breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s Vivian, thank goodness. I’d be so embarrassed if I had to go in there and get her.”

Vivian opened the front passenger door. “Sorry I’m late, Mom,” she said as she slid in the seat and buckled up. “I left my economics book in class and had to go back and get it.” She turned around and glanced at Cassie. “Hey, Sis how was your day?” she asked.

Cassie smiled. “Well, it’s better now since I don’t have to go looking for you and drag you out of the building in front of all your friends.”

As Amy pulled away from the curb, she turned the air conditioner on high. “How about I pick up some fried chicken for dinner?” she asked. She glanced at Vivian and then at Cassie in the rearview mirror. “I’m so tired from being on my feet all day at the salon. I’m not going to stand in front of a stove and cook.” She rolled up the window and felt cooler in an instant.

When neither daughter spoke, Amy asked. “Okay...do either of you have any suggestions?”

Vivian wrinkled her nose. “I guess chicken is okay, but can you get a salad for me? I really don’t want anything fried. I’ve had enough junk food today.”

“Salad sounds good to me too,” said Cassie. She rolled her eyes. “Guess it would be too much trouble to cook a healthy meal,” she mumbled. She gathered her red hair and twirled it into a bun at the base of her neck.

Everyone was quiet for a long moment. Amy stared at the road ahead. Vivian looked at her hands clasped in her lap.

Amy's nostrils flared. She sighed loudly, "No Cassie, it wouldn't be too much trouble if I wasn't tired, and had the time to cook a healthy meal. You seem to be forgetting that I have spin class this evening." She mentally adjusted her tone before continuing. "I have a great idea." She glanced in the rearview mirror. "Why don't you cook a healthy dinner, Cassie?"

"Sorry I said anything," Cassie huffed. She fanned her face. "Would it be possible to get some air back here? I'm hot."

Amy didn't bother with answering her youngest daughter's question. She had already turned the air conditioner on as high as it would go and knew it would take a bit to cool the backseat. It was a moot subject.

"No, really, Cassie, you're almost fifteen; plenty old enough to cook for yourself. And while you're at it, you can cook something for your dad. He says salads are for rabbits, so think of something for him, too." Amy gritted her teeth and focused her eyes on the road while both hands gripped the wheel.

Cassie opened her mouth to say something, and then thought better of it. She turned her head and stared out the window.

Amy stopped at a stop sign and looked both ways before driving through the intersection. She

immediately flicked on the left blinker and pulled into the driveway. She put the car in park before turning around in the seat and glaring at Cassie. “Don’t you have a smart comeback remark?”

“No ma’am,” Cassie replied before stepping out of the car and slamming the door.

Vivian got out of the car and looked across the street. Sophia and her dad weren’t home yet. Like it or not, she was trapped at her house for at least another hour. She turned and looked at her sister. “Cassie, why don’t you and I cook dinner? We don’t have anything else to do.”

Cassie thought for a moment. She puckered her lips. “Sure, I guess so.” She shrugged and started for the house.

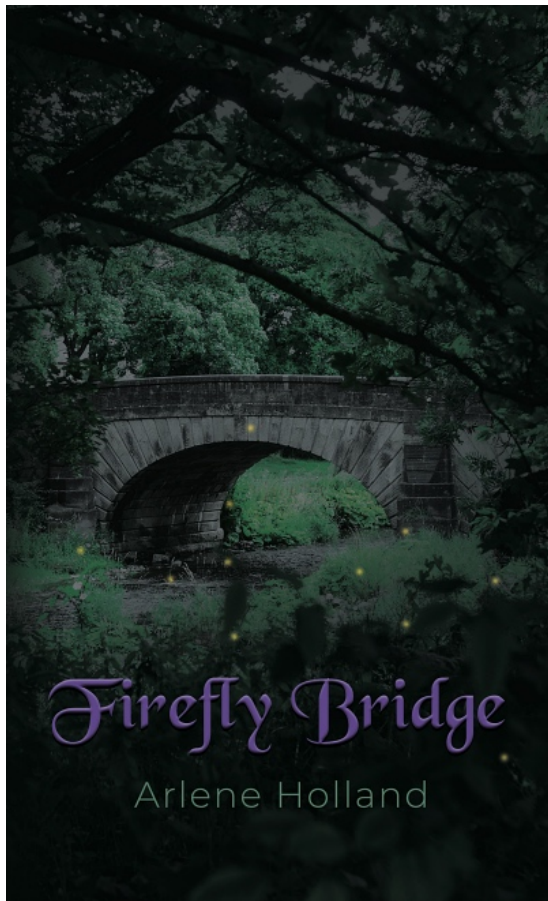
Vivian nodded. “It’s settled then. We can make a big salad for us and something else for Dad.” She looked at her mother from across the roof of the car. “Is salad okay for you, Mom?” she asked.

Amy’s shoulders slumped. “Thanks, Vivian. A salad sounds great.” She gave a weak smile and nodded as she closed the car door. “I know there’s hamburger meat in the fridge. You and Cassie can make Dad a meatloaf. He’ll like that.”

“After dinner can I go over to Sophia’s?” Vivian asked as she walked around the car and joined her mother on the porch.

“Sure,” Amy said as she opened the front door and followed Cassie inside. “You spend most evenings over there anyway. I’ll be back from spin class around eight. I want you home by then, okay?”

“Okay, Mom,” Vivian said, grateful that the dinner argument was resolved.



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