

† CHAPTER 2: BRIDGE TO NOWHERE †

Over the next two hours, I observed while personnel from almost every agency in the area assembled to the east of the bridge in the dirt parking area normally used by tourists. The first to arrive, a patrolman in a black and white from the New Mexico State Police, closed the bridge. Sheriff's deputies set up road blocks. A crew from the Taos Fire Department assisted, turning around tourists and through-traffic sending everyone eleven miles south to Pilar, where they could cross the river and drive through the village to the highway. A Taos Pueblo Police detective joined the task force because the east wall of the Rio Grande Gorge is Taos Pueblo land. County Search and Rescue dispatched a team.

Unfortunately, this was not an unfamiliar scenario for any of the agencies involved, as I was well aware. Beyond its allure for extreme sport jumpers, the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is a magnet for suicides. One, two, even three times a year, rescue agencies can count on a challenging rescue/retrieval incident here. In fact, in a recent seminar, the state emergency services director referred to the structure as "The Bridge to Nowhere" because dispirited souls came from all over the country to fling themselves over its sides.

Scientists calculated all the known and variable stats and estimated that a two-hundred pound person would achieve a velocity of approximately one-hundred-thirty-five miles per hour and make the perilous drop in around six seconds. All this is to say that rescuers never bring a survivor out. Occasionally a jumper will miss the full ride to the bottom and splay herself on one of the basalt shelves along the cliff wall, but this is no less certain a means of demise than the descent to the river. One time, a newlywed couple joined hands just hours after giving their wedding vows and began their honeymoon by climbing onto the rail and diving over the side. The two landed on opposite shores of the rushing river, making double the work for the rescue teams.

Sometimes a jumper secretly makes the plunge and he is not discovered for days, until his bloated corpse surfaces downriver, caught in the eddies. Or a fresh suicide might land in the rapids and get swept along and be discovered soon, but miles from the jump point. I once had an encounter with one of these; but that seemed like a long time ago today, as I waited to give my account of what I had witnessed just hours before.

When the incident initiator and senior crime scene investigator, New Mexico State Police agent Lou Ebert, arrived, we walked onto the bridge together. "Show me where it happened," he said.

I walked toward the center viewing balcony, pointing. "I think it was here."

We stepped up the high curb onto the narrow sidewalk. "Let's stay off the viewing platform. Don't touch anything. Forensics wants to do another sweep of the bridge." He

arched his upper body carefully so as not to touch the rail as he looked over the side. "Oh, yeah," he said. "There's your guy."

I moved closer to the rail and looked down. Although the sun now illuminated a wide patch along the upper west rim, the gorge was so narrow and deep here that the remainder of the chasm lay steeped in shadow. From this distance, the scene below appeared in miniature, making it seem all the more unreal. On the bank of the river, a tiny figure lay crucified, his blue-white flesh as pale as the water. Ropes bound his ankles, wrists, and his torso under his arms to a large wooden cross. "Does he have a ...what is...is something on his head?"

Agent Ebert raised his binoculars and peered through them. He handed them to me. "It looks like cloth, maybe a black bag of some kind. It appears to be tied at the neck."

I looked through the field glasses. "A black cloth bag? Oh, no." I focused in tight and swept the corpse from head to toe. "Well, that's definitely a male."

"Yep. I'm guessing that white cloth strung out to the side was probably tied or wrapped around his lower abdomen. It's come completely off, all but that little bit tucked under his left buttock. Probably came undone from the velocity of the fall. We see that with suicides, too. Sometimes their clothes, even their shoes are ripped off. I'm surprised he didn't come off that cross."

"Well, this was no suicide." I handed the binoculars back to Agent Ebert.

"No, definitely not." He focused the glasses again on the figure below us. "This is going to be one hell of a retrieval," he said. "Have you ever been on one of these incidents?"

"Not like this. They don't usually call the BLM for things like this. Besides, I work in the high country. But when we had a river ranger go missing last year, I did work the search and rescue on that one, although we were mostly looking downriver."

"Well, this is a real tricky place. The gorge is too narrow here to get a chopper in. And besides, we don't have a winch on our State Police helicopter so there has to be a place to set it down nearby, and there's no place like that for miles. Those cliff walls are so steep, they're almost straight up and down, and the rock face is too slick here to send a foot crew in or even have them rappel. It looks like our best bet is to send the Medical Investigator and a forensics team on a raft down the river. The water is high enough from snowmelt. They'll probably want to transport the body still tied to that cross if they possibly can."

"Really?"

"You bet. Potential evidence in the knots, for one thing. But also underneath the ropes, under the body next to the wood. Even in the wood."

"It's going to take some real river rats to navigate down through the Taos box with cargo like that. What is it? Five or six hours of whitewater from here to Pilar?"

"You're right. Plus it's almost two hours from where they put in upriver to here. So that's seven, eight hours just to raft the river, and that's with no time to document and photograph the body and collect evidence at the scene." He shook his head. "About the soonest I could get everybody up to the John Dunn Bridge to put in is maybe two hours.

And even if the retrieval went amazingly quick, they could run out of daylight down in that canyon before they got to Pilar. Maybe it's better to have them start out first thing tomorrow morning." Lou Ebert used the mike clipped to the epaulette on his shirt to give the dispatcher detailed orders for the retrieval raft crew.

I looked down again at the body on the cross. The base of the wooden member, below the feet of the deceased, extended into the river. I thought I saw the cross move.

Agent Ebert released the transmit button on his radio mike and turned to me as I continued to study the scene below. "So you saw a light-colored vehicle? Have to be a pretty big one to get a guy on a cross in it. Unless they had him sticking out the back of a pickup bed or something."

I met Lou Ebert's eyes, then pointed across to the rim trail on the west side of the gorge. "I was clear over there past the trailhead, on the rim. It happened pretty fast. And it was still dark. It could have been a truck, maybe a cargo truck. It wasn't a flatbed. The back was covered. Like a camper shell or a van or whatever."

"That cross looks too wide and too long to fit in a van. I'll ask the raft crew to get some measurements on it. That will give us some idea what size vehicle at a minimum. You say you saw two people get out?"

"I didn't actually see them get out. By the time I noticed the vehicle on the bridge, it had already stopped, and there were two people outside of it, moving around."

"Moving around? How?"

"I think one of them might have looked over the rail. I'm not sure. But then they both went to the back and it took them a while to get the...the cross with the guy on it out and up to the rail."

"These two people—what were they wearing?"

"Hooded coats. Something with hoods. Everything looked grey. It was dark."

"Were they male? Female?"

"I don't know. I couldn't tell."

"Height? Weight? Build?"

"I don't know. Nothing too extraordinary. I think I would have noticed, even from that distance."

"And you didn't hear anything?"

"No. I didn't even hear the vehicle drive onto the bridge. I just looked back when I was running and saw it parked there."

"Headed which direction?"

"East. Toward Taos."

"And after they pushed the cross over the rail, then what?"

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I don't even remember seeing the vehicle leave the bridge."

He looked at me and narrowed his eyes. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." I took another look down into the gorge. "Wait, did you see that? The water is starting to cause the cross to pitch a little."

Agent Ebert looked over the rail again, careful not to touch the metal surface.

The cross lurched, spinning almost a quarter turn counter-clockwise, the tip of the base shifting more downriver, from three o'clock to midnight. Again, the water surged against the base of the cross, stealing the tail of white fabric from beneath the body and pulling it into the flow, where it waved on the surface like a white flag of surrender on its way south. Within moments, the wooden form rocked again and then slowly separated from the slender stony banks and began to float downriver, bearing its naked cargo on top, spray rising around it as if it were a raft riding the wake of wild water.

The agent thumbed his radio mike. "Be advised, we have a package on the move. Raft retrieval is now raft search and rescue. Repeat, we are search and rescue again."

I watched the strange craft as it floated farther and farther away, growing more miniscule with each second. "Just when I thought this day couldn't get any stranger," I said.

Agent Ebert brought a hand to his jaw and rubbed it, his fingers stroking the shadow of daily stubble as he studied my face. "Do you have any idea what this whole thing might be about?"

"Why would I know anything about this? I just happened to be running on the rim when it came down."

"When I told you it looked like that was a black bag over his head, you said, 'Oh, no,' like that meant something to you."

I shook my head. "Yeah, that...that does. I mean, not to me, but I know who...it couldn't be them, but it looks like someone is trying to make this appear as if it was done by Penitentes."

"Penitentes? The guys who whip themselves?"

I sighed. "That's not all they do, but yes, Los Penitentes. They used to do ritual reenactment of the crucifixion, too, around this time of year, although the last confirmed one was decades ago. But some people say they still do it in the dark of night in some of the more remote mountain villages. When they did, the man playing Christ wore a breech cloth and they would put a black bag called a *venga* over his head before tying him to the cross."

Ebert drew in a breath. "Wow. I had heard some stories, but I didn't know all the particulars. I thought they were a secret sect. How do you know so much about them?"

"I've sort of been studying Los Penitentes. I've been drawing some of their shrines—I see a lot of them in the high country where I work. After I had done a number of sketches, I wanted to know more about them. I started doing research and taking notes."

The agent pursed his lips. "So you're a resource protection agent? What got you interested in doing this sketchbook thing about the Penitentes?"

"It started last year when I saw a procession over by the Chama. I was really intrigued. But it's hard to get any information about them, other than what's written, and that's not much."

He nodded. "Well, good luck getting the facts about those guys. I hear they don't talk too much about it."

"That's true, they don't. It's taken me months, but I've finally found a pretty good source. I just met with him last week. It's the first breakthrough I've had in a while."

"Okay, well, from what you know, maybe you can tell me a little something about it—like, why they do this stuff? Why would anyone flagellate himself or volunteer to get crucified?"

"It's penance. To emulate the suffering they believe Christ endured. Penance is the main sacrament of their faith."

Agent Ebert raised his binoculars and looked down the gorge at the diminutive dark dot that was quickly disappearing into the rapids. "Man, if that's what this is, it's some wild penance."