

*The Bridge to Somewhere*

Sample chapter.

The officer stood in front of Carolyn. She watched his lips move, knew he was speaking, but could not hear him. What was the matter with the fool? What did he want?

“I can’t hear you,” Carolyn said. “Speak up. I cannot hear you.”

Sam Stanton had committed suicide at 11:33 that morning, had jumped from the bridge in full view of an electrician working high above the scene. She knew he was saying these things, but never heard him. The words simply came into her mind. She screamed for her housekeeper.

Not long afterward, S. J. and Norman arrived, her mother came, the whole world appeared. Someone had called Clete Johnson, and he was offering Carolyn a sedative. A television crew and newspaper reporters were on the front lawn and in the driveway, but Carolyn did not see them.

“No, Clete, no,” she told their doctor, their good friend.

“Carolyn, let us help!”

“Get my father. I want my father. Is mother with the children?”

“She left a few minutes ago. They don’t know what’s happened. She’ll take them back to her house.”

There was great confusion, and Carolyn watched it from an eerie distance, floating near the ceiling, unable to communicate part of the time, unwilling to most of the time. Ever the lawyer, Norman took command, insisting that Mrs. Burton refuse to admit anyone else to the house, except police officers. When the *Mercury News* called, and then the San Francisco newspapers, it was Norman who took the calls. And it was Norman who insisted, after a while,

that Carolyn must go upstairs. When she did not move, he simply swept her up into his arms and carried her to her room.

“Clete,” he called. “Give her something. Now.”

When she wakened, it was nearly midnight. There were voices speaking quietly in other parts of the house. Carolyn turned on her side and reached for Sam. She screamed, and her father came into the room. George Atkinson looked down at his daughter, then knelt beside the bed.

“Daddy, find Sam. Please find him.”

“Dear, we can’t find him,” Atkinson choked. “Sam’s gone.”

The strain was showing on his face, a face his University of Colorado graduate students would not see again this summer. He walked out of his classroom early that afternoon, announcing that he would not be back. His family needed him, and so to hell with Shakespeare. Each summer, the eminent Stanford University professor taught a special Shakespeare class in Colorado, and registration was always full. Thus, there was no question that his sudden departure would create significant problems for the university’s administrators. This was of little concern to him now.

On the Denver to San Francisco flight, Atkinson rehearsed all the things he would say to his daughter when he first saw her, but now he couldn’t think of a thing, except that Sam was gone.

Carolyn’s teeth were chattering. “You don’t understand. They’ve *got* to find him! They can’t leave him there in all that water! He’ll be so cold, Daddy, and wet...and...alone...”

He held her close, and she kept pleading with him.

“I’ll call the Coast Guard again, Carolyn. But don’t you see? It doesn’t really matter, not to Sam. Nothing can hurt him now. Carolyn? Baby?”

Her face was white against the pillow. She looked so young and so hurt, and her father suffered real physical pain as he watched her lips move. “He’ll be so cold, Daddy.”

Later, downstairs, after the various detectives and investigators left, and after the news people tired of the front lawn, Norman poured a drink for Carolyn’s father and himself. Sam’s father, the stunned, distraught S. J., had left with his daughter a few minutes earlier, driven by a company chauffeur. No one knew what awful thoughts were raging in the senior Stanton’s mind that evening, for he kept them entirely to himself. As for Ruth, she alternately sobbed in Norman’s arms and insisted that her brother was not dead.

“I know him better than any of you. He would not do this. Sam is *not* dead. You’ve got to believe me.”

George Atkinson sipped his gin and sighed a deep, painful sigh. “God, Norman. Oh, God! Mother’s out in the valley with the kids. I should be there; I should be here, too. I think I’ll stay tonight. I’d better call her. Oh, God!”

“I’ve talked to your wife several times, George. She thinks it’s best to keep the boys out of it as long as possible. Says she’s all right. She wants you to stay here, near Carolyn. I’ll stay, too, if I can help.”

“Would you? You handle this sort of thing so well. Why don’t they give us some space? No doubt they’ll be back. The cops, by whatever name. And the press. Can’t they leave us alone? Not that people...” he hesitated, “jump off the bridge every day.”

“This is not your everyday suicide,” Norman said. “Sam was successful, wealthy, well-known.”

“I guess.” Atkinson pulled himself from his chair, paused, and asked, “Do you suppose the designer of that beautiful bridge gave any thought to its danger? To the probability that his

great creation, his majestic steel sculpture, would have a fatal attraction to people wanting to give up on life?”

Norman didn't answer, thinking the bridge was an ideal place to give up on life. Arching more than two hundred feet above the churning Golden Gate, where uncaring waters have no regard for human lives, it was perfect for that purpose.

The Stanton truck Sam had driven to the bridge was returned to San Jose, and police carefully went over every inch of it. It was a different matter when the heir to a substantial fortune committed suicide. Was there foul play? Perhaps a kidnapping? Was the suicide a hoax? Hardly, most of them thought, for an electrician had witnessed the tragedy. Coast Guard cutters and police launches kept up the search for Sam's body. They found nothing.

Two days after Sam drove onto the bridge, the investigation took a different turn. Paul Mason, chief of detectives, stared in disbelief at the old man seated across from him.

“What do you mean you can't sign it?”

“I can't sign it, I said!”

“But why not? It's exactly as you dictated!”

“Yeah, but it's not true.” Mason's visitor pushed the legal document away.

“What, *precisely*, do you mean—it's not true?”

“I didn't see him jump,” the old man said.

“*Didn't see him jump?* What the hell *did* you see? Anything?”

“Now just a minute. Gimme a minute.”

Detective Mason fell back against his chair. “I can't believe this! What the hell's this about?”

Speaking slowly, the old man said, “I *saw* the truck stop and I *saw* the man get out and walk real slow to the rail, just like I said before. And he limped, kind of. I could tell that, even as high as I was—sort of dragged his foot.”

“And then?”

“And then I *saw* him walk back to the truck and then back to the rail. He was there, sort of leaning forward, sort of looking down. I was watching him, you know, when I got this cramp in my hand, and it distracted me. But only for a couple of seconds. No longer, I’d guess. And then I looked down, at the rail, you know.”

“Then?”

“I couldn’t see him. I figured he musta jumped off. He had to have. The spot where he’d been standing was empty. I didn’t see another car stop, and he wasn’t walking. He was just standing there. And when the police came and found his truck and started asking questions,” he took a deep breath, “I sort of filled in what musta happened. Later, everyone was paying all kinds of mind to me ‘cause I saw it all. This newspaper lady kept saying could she quote me, and then the camera people got there and everything. I figured he jumped,” he pleaded, “so I just said it.” And then, miserably, “He had to’ve jumped. Had to, but I don’t think I can sign that paper.”

Mason groaned. Someday, he hoped, they’d have cameras all along that damned suicide tower, and then they’d have evidence of who jumped and when. But for now, he had to rely on the unreliable. What troubled him most was the witness’s certainty that he had looked away for a matter of only a few seconds. Hell, he thought, it could have been a few minutes or half an hour.

Later, Norman told Carolyn, “Don’t let this twist put any wild thoughts into your head. What the old chap said initially had to be right. Whether or not he actually saw Sam jump from the bridge, we know he did.”

“*We* know he did? *Who* knows?”

“Use your head, Carolyn! I know how difficult this is, but where else could he have gone? Nobody saw him leave the bridge on foot. And several people came forward after all the news coverage to say they had seen the truck stopped on the bridge, but nobody said anything about seeing another car stopped there. The only answer is, nobody picked him up and he didn’t cross the bridge on foot because the electrician would have seen him walking away. So, I repeat—where could he have gone? Don’t harbor foolish hopes, Carolyn. You’ll only suffer over and over again. Face it now and be finished with it.”

“But they didn’t find his body, Norman!”

“Carolyn, sometimes the bodies drift out the gate and into the Pacific. If they don’t find them right away...oh hell, Carolyn!”

The electrician’s admission that he had embroidered the facts changed more than Carolyn’s feelings. The authorities went deeper into Sam’s personal and business life. Murder? A runaway? An insurance investigator joined the multitude of people asking questions. A dead Samuel J. Stanton Jr. was one thing, a *presumed* dead, heavily insured Stanton was a different matter. The issue of kidnapping was raised by a peninsula reporter who suggested that someone somewhere was holding Sam for ransom. It was an interesting twist for the media at a time when little new was happening in the case.

The family’s priest, young Pdraig Kennedy, offered what help he could, but suicide was especially difficult to address for any counselor, let alone a priest. His faith insisted on recognition of God as the sovereign master of life. Suicide was a burning path to hell, the ultimate act of despair—and it made attempts to console especially difficult for those left behind.

“Perhaps Sam said an act of contrition before...before he left us,” the priest told Carolyn. An act of penitence could, just possibly, extinguish flames along the pathway. “Let us pray that he did so.” They also prayed for peace and acceptance for Carolyn. But afterward, she asked the question she’d first asked when Father Kennedy had arrived.

“Is he dead, Father?”

“Someday we’ll learn, my dear. Someday, when God wishes it.”

There was no funeral, of course, not even a memorial service, for no one knew if anyone had died.

