

WILD PENANCE

A WILD MYSTERY

BY

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† CHAPTER 1: SOMETHING FALLING †

It was too quiet, no shrieking. The figure soared downward in silence, the arms stretched out like wings, creating a pale white crucifix form easy to make out even in the frozen grey light of pre-dawn. This jumper did not streamline into a perfect spear for speed like most of them did—rather, this was a swan dive that stretched for seconds before disappearing into the blackness of the chasm.

It was still dark when I'd gotten to the gorge that morning to go for a run on the rim before starting my duty shift. I work at the Bureau of Land Management out of the Taos Field Office as a resource protection agent. My name is Jamaica Wild. Most days, I run at sunset, but on this morning I had awakened early from fitful dreams and couldn't go back to sleep, so I figured I'd get up and get going. I knew every dip and twist of the trail that skirted along the rim of the jagged crack in the earth's crust cradling the Rio Grande—the wild torrent of water that gives life to the high desert. To the east, the sun would soon rise over the Sangre de Cristos, an arm of the Rockies that cupped the Taos valley and sheltered its fragile beauty. And when the butter-colored light was just beginning to melt down the basalt walls of the gorge, I would be returning to my Jeep at the rest area on the west rim, my lungs full of sage-scented oxygen, my body invigorated, my senses satiated with the beauty around me. It seemed like a perfect plan to begin the day.

I had not gone far down the trail when I looked back toward Taos Mountain and noticed activity on the bridge. In the dim light, I saw a lone vehicle stopped in one of the two lanes, next to a small overlook area where pedestrians could step off the sidewalk onto a bumped-out balcony and gaze down into the rift in the earth at the slim silver river below. Two people scurried around, then centered on the back of the vehicle, where they began unloading something with great effort.

I stopped running and jogged in place, watching.

There had been a rash of base and bungee jumping from the bridge lately—extreme sports whose members thrived not only on the rush from the experience, but evidently on the fact that it was illegal to jump here as well. The scoundrels set up under cover of darkness when there was no traffic on the bridge, then waited for first light to take the plunge. The Rio Grande Gorge bridge is the second highest cantilever bridge in

the USA; its depth of six-hundred-fifty feet to the river, remote location, and extremely light traffic made it a dream venue for this kind of thing.

They call it practice for suicide. Rip screaming off the tallest structure around into mid-air and let gravity take over while a tsunami of adrenaline surges through you, producing such a high that you are almost disappointed when the parachute opens or the elastic bungee cord stretches and slows your fall, then springs you back up by your ankle harness.

At first, this was what I thought I was seeing; but this is not what I saw. Sometimes your senses perceive something so incredible that your mind intervenes and tries to cancel out the incoming information with logic, reason, or experience. When I saw the figure falling, so began a struggle between eyes and mind, between senses and sense, until the clash ignited a flash-bomb of recognition and a snapshot crystallized in my brain, the details etched so vividly that I will never forget them. Blue-white stars flowered the field of dark sky above me even as a penumbra of purple light began to quiver at the top of the mountain range more than ten miles away across the mesa, behind the unfolding scene. An icy draft whistled over the rim of the canyon and rustled the brush, the air dry and mean. The smell of sage and red dirt mixed with the lingering scent of shampoo in my hair. My feet pounded a tempo on the trail as I jogged in place, as if what I witnessed might merely be a temporary detour in my day's trajectory. There I was: out on the rim, too far away to do anything to change what was happening.

I saw a body on a cross. Falling into the Rio Grande Gorge. And it did not come back up.