

## Chapter One:

### SHE WAS GOING TO JUMP.

There was no question in his mind, considering her appearance and demeanor.

She looked scared. She must have been intimidated with what she was facing. But there was a certain something, a grim determination, that presented itself in the teenage girl standing at the edge of the bridge.

She held her body rigid. Unyielding. Intent on her actions. Her course was set, and even the occasional gust of wind that blew across the structure was unable to sway her.

He only hoped he had time to intervene before it was too late.

Officer Gerald Dickens was halfway through his morning shift when he turned onto the High Level bridge. The metal and concrete span crossed the Maumee River and connected the city of Toledo with the southern suburbs of East Toledo and, just beyond that, the cities of Oregon and Rossford. He traveled the route daily, all part of his normal routine.

It had been an ordinary shift so far, with nothing more significant than a few minor warnings. Traffic had been congested earlier, during the morning commute. But now things moved at a moderate pace. It was approaching lunchtime, and time to consider where he would stop to eat that afternoon.

Such thoughts deserted him when he reached the center of the bridge.

He nearly missed the young girl as he passed by, his

attention focused on the cars in front of him. But he managed to catch a glimpse of her with his peripheral vision.

He instantly swerved to the side of the road, turned on his flashers, and made a hurried call to dispatch.

“Officer Dickens. Car 3409. On the High Level bridge heading north. Teenage girl, sixteen or seventeen, on the side of the structure. Looks like a possible jumper. I am responding immediately. Back-up and emergency assistance required.”

He stepped from the squad car. Several vehicles approached from the other direction. They failed to yield to the uniformed officer, who swore under his breath as he waited for them to pass. He crossed to her side of the road, pausing for just a moment to take in the sights around them.

The view from the bridge was scenic. On certain days it could have almost been tranquil. Today, with the crisp taste of early autumn in the air and thick gray clouds hanging on the horizon, the moment struck him as ominous.

One side of the structure faced the city proper, with Toledo's skyline encroaching on the banks of the river. The city, as with so many other urban pockets, was attempting to rejuvenate the downtown area. Swanky apartments and local eateries, most catering to the young clientele that frequented the downtown area, predominated. Cars vied for space on the busy thoroughfares of the city.

On the river a few motorboats hugged the coastline, searching for a place to tie-up, adding their nautical congestion to the setting. There were less boats than there had been even a few weeks earlier, when the weather was still balmy and fishermen and pleasure seekers alike crowded the waterway that was the Maumee River. The season was winding down now, and soon the river would be deserted save for the squawking gulls that patrolled the area constantly, regardless of the season.

The other side of the bridge faced the newly developed Middlegrounds Park, an oasis of green in the concrete surrounding it. A picnic fire smoked beneath the wooden pavilion, its wispy tendrils floating on the breeze toward the

river. Several people meandered through the twisted paths of the park, walking their dogs and enjoying the weather.

All seemed unaware of the drama taking place on the bridge above their heads.

The bridge was wide, with two lanes of traffic crossing from each direction. A pedestrian walkway paralleled the roadway, protected from the drop-off along the water's edge with a concrete retaining wall. The wall was low enough to allow a view of the surroundings and the upstream area, as the river twisted its way alongside concrete grain elevators and railroad tracks, middle-income houses and boarded up abandonments. But the abutment was tall enough to prevent a casual walker from making a misstep.

The fact that the young girl was on top of the embankment, sitting on the edge with her legs dangling into space, was a testimony to her intentions.

Officer Dickens sprinted over, decreasing the distance separating the two of them, then slowed to a quick walk as he drew nearer. The girl became aware of his presence and turned to face him.

“Don't come any closer.”

Dickens reduced his pace.

“I mean it.” Her voice cracked, lending it a hysterical lilt. “You come any closer and I'll jump.”

“You don't mean that.”

He kept his voice calm, but came to a halt in difference to her words.

“Why don't we talk about this?” the officer suggested.

She shook her head. It was a violent back and forth motion as she turned away from him. “There's nothing to talk about.”

“At least tell me your name.”

“Why should I?”

“I just want to know who I'm talking to. That's all.”

Her answer was slow in coming. Finally, when the words arrived, they were in a quieter tone.

“Pamela. My name’s Pamela.”

“Hello, Pamela. My name’s Gerald. But my friends call me Gerry.”

There was no reply.

“You can call me Gerry, if you like.”

“Why should I? We’re not friends.”

“But we can be.”

“No.”

More head shaking.

“You want to stop me from jumping. You want to get in my way.”

“Maybe I just want to understand why you’re here? Why you think you need to do this?”

The reply came with no hesitation, delivered with the near-hysterical tone she had exhibited earlier. “Because my life is a mess, that’s why.”

“It can’t be that bad?”

“How would you know? How would anyone know what my life is like?”

“Then why don’t you tell me about it?”

He took another step forward. She failed to notice, so he moved yet again, emboldened by her lack of attention.

“Suicide is a drastic step, Pamela. There’s no turning back from something like this.”

“I don’t care!”

She started to cry then. The tears were slow at first, but as she continued it was as though she finally was allowing herself to break down.

“I hate my life, and all the crap I have to put up with.”

Her words were slurred, garbled due to the increasing flow of her tears, as she continued with her soliloquy, the approaching officer forgotten now.

“I thought things had gotten better. I thought all that trash was behind me. But I was fooling myself. It will never be behind me. I have to live with those memories for the rest of my life.”

Her voice quieted with the last words, as she drifted further into painful recollections.

Dickens kept his voice distinct and clear. “We all have to put up with things, Pamela. That’s part of life.”

The police officer took another step. He was close enough that he could almost touch her now.

Off in the distance a siren blared, the sound growing louder as the emergency vehicle approached. The strident wail of the ambulance permeated everywhere. Traffic had stopped, anticipating its arrival, so all else was quiet.

Maybe there’s still time, Dickens thought. I just need a few more seconds.

The teenager chose that moment to turn and face him again. “You have no idea what my life has been like.”

As she spoke her face became more animated, as she noticed the figure that was almost upon her.

“No!”

She stood abruptly, panic washing over her.

“I told you to stay away from me!”

She shifted position and her foot slipped over the edge, bringing her to her knees. Her scream pierced the stillness of the afternoon.

Dickens lunged, throwing his arms around the girl’s thin waist. She was much smaller than him, but the suddenness of her weight pulling against him caught the officer by surprise. He lost his footing, slammed against the concrete wall. His right knee took the brunt of the blow, tearing his pants and scraping a layer of skin. He gritted his teeth against the shock but managed to retain his grip on the girl.

She was still screaming. Panic gripped her, as she flailed with her hands for any purchase she could find. Her fingernails clawed against the officer’s chest, grabbing hold of his shirt pocket. She refused to let go. Her eyes were tightly closed, shutting out the images around her, while her chest heaved up and down.

Her body shook, the tremors uncontrolled. Her legs

collapsed beneath her. She became a dead weight to the officer, a screaming shaking figure of uncontrolled emotion unleashed.

Dickens heard footsteps. He didn't dare relinquish his grip, even to look around him. But he knew help was at hand. It would only be a few moments more and the girl would be safe.

Seconds later other arms reached out.

Pamela was pulled off the embankment, onto the safety of the pedestrian walkway.

She collapsed to the ground.

Officer Gerald Dickens allowed his heart to start beating again as he breathed a sigh of release.

## Chapter Two:

 ANGELA WATKINS STORMED INTO THE

room like she was looking to start a fight, with a determination of purpose propelling her forward. Her husband Tim followed closely behind. His manner betrayed his aggravation as well – his pensive examination of the environment as well as the stiffness in his demeanor, both denoting how uncomfortable he was with the current situation – though he seemed more composed than his wife.

“I'm looking for Patrick Zimmerly,” Angela announced, addressing the three people gathered around the conference table. They were all nicely dressed in casual business attire. Two of those present were women, so it was hardly surprising when the lone man in the room rose to his feet.

“I’m Patrick. You’re Mrs. Watkins?”

“Yes I am. Now what’s this all about. Where’s my daughter? Where’s Pamela?”

Tim rested his arm lightly on her shoulder. “Now Honey....”

She shrugged the gesture off without even facing him. “Don’t *Now Honey* me! I want to know what’s going on with my daughter.”

“She’s been taken to Toledo Hospital for observation.”

“Observation? I thought she was okay. You said nothing happened to her.”

“She hasn’t been hurt,” Zimmerly assured her. “Physically. But emotionally she’s been through a lot.”

“This is all crazy,” Angela remarked. She paced back and forth as she talked, her nervousness driving her actions. “I just don’t understand what’s happening here.”

One of the women at the table spoke up. “Please sit down, Mrs. Watkins, and we can talk about what’s going on.” Her voice was soothing; intended to calm.

Angela hesitated, unsure what to do. Her husband pulled a chair out from the table, and though she seemed not to notice the gesture she sat down nonetheless. She maintained a steady glare at the woman speaking to her. “And you are?”

“Shantel Monaghan. I’m a Supervisor here at Children’s Services.” Shantel gestured toward Tim. “Please get comfortable, Mr. Watkins.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“As you wish.”

Patrick Zimmerly sat once again, and as papers were shuffled around the table Angela took in the bare adornments of the tiny conference room. She thought back to the phone call she had received that morning, and the conversation that had led to this moment.

The caller had a professional, no-nonsense tone to his delivery. He had identified himself as Patrick Zimmerly, from

Lucas County Children's Services. "I'm calling in regards to your daughter, Pamela," he had announced.

Angela found herself immediately on the defensive.

"What's this about?"

"Have there been any problems in regards to Pamela? Anything going on in her life that would cause her excessive stress?"

"No. Of course not. Pamela's just fine."

"Any recent mood changes? Modifications in her behavior?"

"You're starting to scare me, Mr. Zimmerly."

"I'm sorry. That's certainly not my intention. But there has been an incident."

"What's going on?" Angela practically screamed into the phone. "What happened to Pamela?"

"She was observed on the High Level bridge late this morning. She appeared to be contemplating suicide."

A stunned silence answered, as the connection went dead for the space of several heartbeats while Angela Watkins digested the information.

"No."

Her tone was a cross between disbelief and outrage.

"No. That's ridiculous. Not Pamela. Why would she be thinking about suicide? There must be some mistake. You sure it wasn't somebody else? My daughter's in school right now."

"Pamela told us she couldn't face going to school today, but she didn't mention anything more specific. Have there been any issues lately at school?"

"No. Everything's fine. Pamela's fine."

Then, as an afterthought, she spoke the question she was dreading to hear the answer to.

"Is my daughter okay? Is she hurt?"

"She's fine. Nothing happened, Mrs. Watkins. She's in a safe place and being taken care of."

"I want to see her."

"Of course you do. But there's more we need to talk

about first. Can you and your husband come down to Children's Services so we can discuss some things?"

Angela refused to be persuaded. "I want to see my daughter first."

"I assure you, your daughter is in good hands, Mrs. Watkins. And I promise we won't take up any more of your time than is absolutely necessary. But there are things we need to talk about, and the sooner we can have this discussion the sooner you will be able to see Pamela."

She nearly said more, then realized the futility of arguing. The man on the other end of the line seemed determined to have his way.

So she capitulated.

"I can reach Tim at work and we can be down there right away."

"Good. Give your name at the Security checkpoint. They will contact us and let you know where to come once you get here."

And so here she was, sitting in a cold and empty office, being scrutinized by three people from Children's Services, while her daughter languished at Toledo Hospital.

None of it made sense to her, and the longer things dragged on the more upset Angela felt about the situation.

"This is a waste of time. I want to see my daughter."

Shantel spoke up. "That will have to wait, Mrs. Watkins. Due to the severity of the circumstances, we need to do an investigation, to determine what's going on here."

"Can't we do this later?" Angela's voice was beginning to rise, as if by speaking louder she could sway the trio confronting her. "My daughter needs me, and all you can think of is asking your questions and keeping me away from her. She needs to come home."

"We understand how upset you are," the social worker offered, in an attempt to placate the distraught mother. "But something prompted this action on your daughter's part. Home

may not be the best place for her right now. We need to be certain she's in a safe environment."

"So now you're saying my home isn't a safe environment?"

Tim's hand reached out, rubbing his wife's shoulder in a supportive motion. She shrugged the motion aside.

"Who do you people think you are? I want to see Pamela. My daughter needs me, and I need to be there for her."

"We're only asking for a few minutes of your time. This is important."

"My daughter's well-being is important!"

Angela stood, her chair scraping against the linoleum floor as she pushed herself away from the table. She looked at her husband, speaking in a tone that brooked no discussion.

"We're going to see Pamela. Right now."

Silence greeted her.

"Are you coming with me, Tim?"

He ignored the question as he turned toward the others.

"So what happens now?" His voice was calm and rational, almost soothing with its cadence. "How do we move forward in Pamela's best interest?"

Patrick Zimmerly answered.

"Your daughter will remain in the hospital for the time being. For observation. Most likely it will only be for a day or two. We would like to have her stay with someone else for a while, after she's released, rather than returning home immediately. Can you recommend a relative that could take her in?"

Angela stormed back toward the table.

"You won't even let us take her home?"

Tim, his voice steady, spoke up before a response could be offered. "Brian. My brother Brian."

Angela shot her husband an incredulous look, an expression he chose to ignore. His attention was focused on the business at hand as he continued.

"I can give you his phone number and address. Pamela

knows him. And is comfortable around him. I'm sure he can take her for a while."

"Thank you, Mr. Watkins."

Information was exchanged. A few other details were covered. And the meeting was terminated.

Tim continued to keep his voice calm.

"Can we see our daughter now?"

"Of course."

Angela and Tim walked down the hallway away from the conference room. Her heels clattered unnaturally loud in the vacant corridor, a staccato rhythm that expressed her aggravation and accented her urge to remove herself from the premises. She refused to look at her husband, and not a word was spoken until they reached the elevator. After punching the down button Tim reached his hand out toward his wife.

"I'm sure it's only for a few days."

She shrugged off his gesture.

"I'm not talking to you. After what those people are doing to us. You didn't need to be so nice to them."

"They're concerned about Pamela. And what's best for her."

"And I'm not?"

"Of course you are. I am too. But once you calm down you'll see this is all for the best."

She shook her head, refusing to see the sense in his assessment of the situation.

"This is all just a load of bureaucratic nonsense. That's all it is."

She turned to face the elevator, refusing to look at her husband as she continued.

"And why'd you give them Brian's name?"

"They're going to put her somewhere. At least it's with family."

"She needs to be with us."

"She will be. Just give it some time."