

Chapter 23

A busy night stirred the Redondo County Sheriff's Office in Arroyo Del Rio. Several calls had come in; two were serious. One was an alleged shooting, the other a possible suicide. Deputy Bradford decided to take the suicide and give another deputy the shooting.

A passing motorist out on the High Road north of town had reported seeing a man standing on a bridge railing as if ready to jump off. The bridge spanned the deep Arroyo Del Rio gorge from which the town took its name.

As Bradford approached the scene in the vanishing twilight, several sets of flashing lights marked the place. The flashers blinked in imperfect sync on three cars and a semi parked on the shoulder on the opposite side of the bridge.

Seeing Bradford walking toward him, the trucker pointed at the bridge railing. "One minute he was standing there—then he was gone.

The deputy retrieved a large flashlight from his cruiser and shined it down into the blackness. Although known for its flash floods, the arroyo was powder dry from the area's low humidity which helped drouth renew quickly after a passing rain.

Bradford swept the yawning chasm repeatedly with his light and finally spotted what looked like two legs sticking out from under a bush at the bottom. A voice from down below shouted, "He's down here . . . and I think he's dead."

The deputy radioed for paramedics then made his precarious way, half-sliding to the bottom of the seventy foot abyss. Two men who'd climbed down before him were standing by the body.

Bradford ran up and motioned for them to back away. "Don't touch anything?" he puffed, breathlessly.

"No sir," the older man said. "We just tried to see if he was breathing."

"Phil Thatcher," Bradford half-whispered, reading the man's driver's license as he pulled it out of a wallet lying next to the body. "Did you fellows see what happened?"

"We were driving down the hill toward the bridge and saw him just as he jumped."

"Was there anybody else around?" the deputy asked.

"Not that we could see," the younger man said. "But there's a car parked up there that we figured must be his."

After a laborious climb to the top, Bradford searched the dead man's car and ran the numbers on it. It was indeed registered to a Phil Thatcher who was a traveling salesman for a computer software company located in Arroyo Del Rio. The car was loaded with sales material and samples which made it hard to look in every nook and cranny for evidence. Handily the man had left his keys in the ignition allowing Bradford access to both the locked glove compartment and the trunk.

When he opened the glove compartment, several bottles of pills fell out. They were jammed in, front to back, triggering the deputy's immediate suspicion.

He reached down to pick up a bottle that had rolled under the seat when he felt an object with a familiar configuration. Bradford draped his handkerchief over his hand and gingerly pulled out a 45 automatic pistol followed by a box of shells. The action of the gun was in the open position and the magazine was empty indicating it might have been fired until out of ammunition. The barrel had a strong odor of gunpowder and looked dirty when held up to the light, indicating a recent firing.

After the ambulance had taken the body of Thatcher away, Bradford was sitting in his cruiser finishing his report on the incident when he heard a startling message on his radio. "Find Burt and send him over here ASAP. We've got a homicide at Mesa Software, 2350 Cotulla Drive."

Bradford looked at a piece of sales material he'd taken from Thatcher's car. Printed at the bottom was *Mesa Software, 2350 Cotulla Drive*, and it had a small map showing how to get there.

He didn't have to look for the number as he turned onto Cotulla and saw the blinking jumble of colored lights in the middle of the block. Leaving his cruiser, Bradford recognized Burt Nieto talking to rookie Deputy Sheriff John Culpepper at the building entrance. Nieto was an Apache Indian who was the crime scene expert for three adjacent counties and was considered to be one of the best in the business.

After greetings were exchanged, it was Bradford's turn to startle. "How many victims?" he asked.

"Only one. The business owner, a Mr. Roland Terry," Culpepper said.

Bradford looked at each man with a wry expression. "I think I've got both the murder weapon and the killer. But there's one problem . . . the killer won't be talking either—at least with words."

"What do you mean?" both men asked at once.

"He's headed for the morgue at Montaña Del Rey. Jumped from the dead center of the Arroyo Gorge bridge." Nieto and Culpepper glanced at each other open-mouthed.

"Burt, I have a couple of things for you to check out." Bradford went to his car and came back with a box he handed to Nieto. "I don't know if this has anything to do with what happened, but I think we need to take a look at it." Nieto glanced in the box at what looked like twenty-five to thirty bottles of small green pills.

"These fell out of the glove box, and I was rounding them up when I found this." Bradford handed Nieto the plastic-bagged pistol. Later, as Nieto and his crew went over the crime scene, they confirmed that the death of Roland Terry was indeed from multiple gunshot wounds inflicted by a 45 caliber semi-automatic pistol.

Bradford kept one of the bottles of pills, thinking he would get another lab to corroborate whatever Burt Nieto's technician came up with. While gathering them, Bradford had noticed that each bottle had a label that said "Nexus Wellness Clinic" and a prescription designated to Phil Thatcher by a Dr. Miles.

Bradford turned to Deputy Culpepper. "John, we've got to notify next of kin. I'll track down Thatcher's family and you contact Terry's. But first I want to talk to Terry's secretary if she's able now."

Roland Terry's secretary, Myra Boren, was distraught from the trauma of the shooting which took place only a few feet from her desk. The paramedics had given her a sedative.

"Ms. Boren, do feel like talking to me for a moment?" Bradford asked gently, leaning down to her. She nodded slowly.

"Can you tell me what happened and who shot Mr. Terry?"

She nodded again. She was quiet for a moment as if trying to gather her thoughts. "It was Phil."

"You mean Phil Thatcher?"

"Yes. "He came in, walked right by me without saying a word, into Mr. Terry's office and shut the door. The next thing I heard were several loud explosions. I knew they were gunshots, but I was so scared I couldn't move. I just sat there, frozen. I don't even remember when Phil left."

"Was there an argument or did Mr. Thatcher look upset when he came in?"

"No that's what's so strange. I had no idea he would do anything like this," Myra whimpered, as tears started to erode the makeup on her face."

"It's okay. I just have a few more questions." Bradford handed her a box of tissues from her desk. "Let me ask you this: Had you known Mr. Thatcher for very long?"

"Yes, he's been here two years."

"Worked for this company?"

"Yes."

"Have you noticed any change in him, in his personality, lately."

Myra put her head in her hands and looked at the floor. "Well, we've always had a friendly relationship ever since he came to work here. We even used to talk about some personal aspects of our lives. He told me about being so scared and nervous when he went on sales calls that a lot of times

he would get sick at his stomach. He said he wished there was a pill or something he could take to give him confidence.

“One day about a month ago he came in with a huge smile and said he thought he’d solved his problem. I didn’t know what he was talking about at first. Then about a week later, he said he found his magic pill at a place in town. I think he went to that new clinic.”

“The Nexus Clinic?”

“Yeah, I think that was it. He said that now when he went on sales calls he was totally confident and would be able to make his prospects place orders, no matter what. I thought that sounded strange. But when his sales figures started to climb, he and Mr. Terry were both very happy.

“At first everything was fine. But it didn’t last. He got very depressed after the pills wore off and would have to take more and more for the same benefit. His personality changed. He started getting extremely wired and hyper.

“One day he came in late in the afternoon looking pale and shaking, saying he saw something fierce like a monster or devil on his way back to the office. He said he saw it on the High Road floating in the middle of the bridge over the Arroyo Gorge as he approached it in his car. It made a motion like it wanted him to drive off into the ravine. He said he just stood on the gas and tore across the bridge as fast as he could, running right through the thing. When he looked in his rearview mirrors, there was nothing there.

“I was afraid he might be having an hallucination or something from taking too many of those pills and told him so. He agreed but said he was to a point where he couldn’t afford to stop but would try to cut back a little.”

She began to cry softly. “But I don’t think he ever did.”

To Sheriff Cecil Green it was a simple case. An emotionally distraught man murdered his boss then committed suicide. Case closed. He declined any interest in the little green pills. Deputy Bradford was told to go on to other cases. The report that Burt Nieto had sent over from his crime lab had mysteriously been misplaced. Bradford checked his mail daily for the report from the independent lab and was becoming more curious and frustrated with each passing day waiting for it to arrive.

He started to call Nieto and ask for a duplicate report but decided it might be better to go talk to him in person away from the sheriff's office. They met early on a Saturday morning in a back booth of Smokin' Sam's restaurant.

"Whatcha got, Burt?" Bradford asked.

Nieto handed him a folder. "Here's a copy of the report. First of all, it *was* the gun you found that killed Roland Terry which, of course, connects Thatcher to the murder. Now, about the pills. The chemist said that at first glance they looked like some kind of garden variety MAO inhibitor which, as he explained it, is a type of antidepressant. MAO stands for monoamine oxidase. A MAO inhibitor blocks the enzyme monoamine oxidase, allowing certain neurotransmitters to be built up in the brain. These neurotransmitters are called norepinephrine and serotonin.

"These are the biochemical messengers through which the nerve cells talk to each other. When someone gets real depressed, these chemicals in the brain somehow get out of balance, and taking an antidepressant medication is supposed to restore that balance.

"Okay, as I said, the chemist, at first, thought this was a run-of-the-mill product, but after taking a closer look, he saw that the stuff in this pill was much more powerful than in the usual medications of this type. Plus, he saw other things there that he couldn't readily identify. He also noticed a certain configuration of molecules in it that made him think the pill might be real addictive.

"One side effect of this medication is agitation, and Thatcher must have been agitated to the max to have killed his boss for no apparent

reason. We haven't gotten the coroner's report yet which should tell us how much of that stuff he had in his system. Have you guys come across any motives?"

"Nope," Bradford said with a long sigh. "Thatcher was doing well in his career; Terry was pleased with his sales. No money problem. No woman problem. Everything checked out."

Bradford pulled a small notepad out of his shirt pocket and opened it. "Do you know anything about this Nexus Clinic or a Dr. Miles who wrote the prescription for those pills?"

"Nothing specific, but I've been in on a couple of cases of late that had to do with folks who'd been treated there. And as I recall, both cases had some weird elements. There's a sort of New Age, cultish-type church out in Montaña Del Rey called the Omni Church. The preacher there got upset with his wife because she'd started reading the Bible and praying with some other women who were not of that church. Somehow he got her committed to this Nexus Clinic for 'observation and treatment'.

"When she got out of there, it was like she'd been brainwashed and did a one-eighty from her previous ideas. The only problem was, they gave her husband these pills and told him he had to make sure she took them or she could revert back to the way she was, Bible reading and all." Nieto noticed Bradford's expression. "Hey, don't look at me like that—I'm not making this up.

"I came into the picture after he mysteriously died in his chair one night while they were watching TV. Some members of the church and of his staff tried to trump up charges that she'd killed him with poison or something. They came up with nada on the autopsy, though, so they had to rule it 'death by natural causes'.

"Oh, and by the way, when the pills wore off, she went back to the Bible reading and prayer with her friends. And she found herself a new church, being pretty much persona non grata at the old one.

"The other case was about a guy who went to that clinic for counseling. He'd gotten the idea from a radio show that he could go there

and get therapy that would help him get along better with his fellow employees. They prescribed medication for him that was supposed to, somehow, change his personality.

“Things went okay for awhile until the day he decided he wanted to make a play for a good-looking girl in his office, but didn’t have the guts. He figured if one pill was good then two must be twice as good. But any idiot knows better than that; you don’t double up even with regular medicine.

“Anyhow, after he started taking the extra pills, he became very aggressive. When the girl snubbed him, he went after her with a knife—waited for her in the bushes by her apartment. She bled to death while driving herself to the hospital.

“The thing that bothers me is that there could be other time bombs out there that we won’t know about until it’s too late.”

Bradford nodded. “I think it’s time to visit our friends at this Nexus Clinic.”

The door to the former bar in the back room of Smokin’ Sam’s opened suddenly. A noisy group of men piled out. They were taking a break from their Saturday morning prayer session. Smokin’ Sam walked over to the booth where Bradford and Nieto sat.

He smiled broadly. “Mornin’ fellas. Why don’t you guys join us. We could use some spiritual giants in there to help us get through to the Lord.”