



LOU TORTOLA

**A BRIDGE
OF TIME**

A NOVEL

"The pages fly by as quickly as time travels in this novel that will do for Virginia's Natural Bridge what Robert James Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* did for covered bridges in Madison County, Iowa and abroad."

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Author of *Quicksand* (HarperCollins, 2001)

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"A terrific story! Lou Tortola's wonderful imagination keeps each scene moving, always leaving the reader wanting to turn the page."

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Tony Frassrand
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Cheryl Vigh,
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ISBN 88-900945-0-8



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Published by arrangement with the author by:

Sigmastudio Publishing

Via Pio La Torre #23

Isernia, IS 86170 MOLISE

ITALIA

Printed in Italy

October 2002

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ISBN: 88-900945-0-8

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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In memory of my dear friend Cosmo Fasano

“When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds; your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction, and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world. Dormant forces, faculties and talents become alive, and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be.”

Patanjali (c. 1st to 3rd century BC)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Linda, Tiffany, Tina and Felicia Tortola
Peter Naccarato
Gabriella Petrino
Mary Anne Janisse
Eileen Kraatz
Lise Jolie
Elisa Brian
Ellen Singer
Nicola Hetherington
Cheryl Vigh
Tony Frassrand

*...Your encouragement greatly influenced my desire to
complete this novel.*

With thanks, Lou.

1

Sarah was drawn to the Natural Bridge as intensely as her horses were drawn to the cold Cedar Creek that ran beneath it. Her fascination had nothing to do with its history. She couldn't care less that Thomas Jefferson had been its first American owner and that George Washington had scrawled his initials in one of its limestone walls. Nor did she feel dumbfounded by the sheer magnificence of the place, as the rock bridge spanned two hundred feet above the blanket on which she was sitting. Rather, Sarah sought, and had always found, peace here. With a three-month old baby, a difficult husband and a painful secret, Sarah needed solace now more than ever.

Here, deep in the canyon, as she set out the picnic lunch she had promised for her four friends, she listened to the sounds of water and birds. Tucked between the steep cliffs, lush with heavy vegetation, she felt blissfully apart from her everyday existence and, in ways she didn't understand, she also felt somehow linked to worlds not her own.

"Clarence, can you please stay close to Daniel?" Carrying both the bassinet and the food across the twenty feet to where her brother was attempting to doze in the soft grass directly under the span of the bridge, Sarah added, "I think Daniel may be inclined to rest better here with you."

Clarence, who had been feeling more unsociable than sleepy when he'd distanced himself from the others, smiled for the first time that afternoon and proudly em-

braced the bassinet.

“Yes, the two of us will have a nice nap together. You relax and enjoy yourself with the others.”

“Thank you, and Clarence... thank you for coming today. I know it’s difficult for you, given your feelings for Matthew, but your presence means a great deal to me.”

“You mean the ogre...” Clarence fell silent. He couldn’t discuss his disdain for Sarah’s husband without getting angry. Shaking his head to free his mind of such thoughts, Clarence tipped his hat toward his sister and started to put it back over his face as a shield from the sun. Then, changing his mind, he set it next to his body instead, deciding to keep at least one eye open to watch Daniel.

A caressing warm breeze and the gentle noise of the flowing water in the stream beckoned Daniel to sleep. Holding the wicker bassinet snugly against him, Clarence’s face twitched from time to time as the voices of the others nearby rang out, disrespectful of his need for tranquility.

The day was warm, with the wind blowing gently over the sleeping baby. Clarence labored to stay awake to monitor Daniel’s soft gasps.

Above them, the underside of the bridge released droplets of moisture ever so slowly. These droplets represented the rainwater that migrates through the mass of stone and earth, making up the thickness of the Natural Bridge. Clarence could not know that the water dripping from the bridge contained only minute traces of minerals. It had been filtered clear and cleansed of all human contact. The droplets seemed mystical, appearing ever so sporadically out of nowhere on the underside of the bridge, only to drop to the ground and stream 215 feet below.

Droplets, perhaps blown in the wind, seemed to approach closer to baby Daniel. Clarence noticed the

droplets without concern, watching them in an almost hypnotized fashion. He focused on the origins of the droplets on the underside of the bridge and followed an individual bead of water down to his elevated knee. As the droplet approached, he positioned his knee in its path allowing the moisture to soak into the cloth of his outerwear. For Clarence, this concentration became a game. Soon droplets seemed to approach the edge of the bassinet.

It wasn't long before the droplets were falling on Daniel; first his forehead, then cheeks, and chin. He woke up, opening one eye widely, the other seeming to resist opening, not wanting release from its dream state. His open eye focused on a single bead of water from its origin on the underside of the bridge and followed it as it reached the eye itself. Opening his mouth wide, Daniel cried loudly as the next droplet fell dead center into his throat. Suddenly his crying stopped. The bottom of the bassinet had splashed out an amount of water, its volume equal to what a baby the size of Daniel would displace if fully immersed in a tub filled to its rim. Clarence jumped up in horror; his left side was soaked with the wetness from the bassinet's sudden outburst. He let out a terrifying scream.

The nearby group exploded from their sedentary positions unable to comprehend what was happening. Clarence was shaking like a leaf, his complexion white, and he appeared to be chilled solid. Sarah stared dumbfounded at the drenched empty bassinet, but only for a split second and then screamed horrifically at the top of her lungs.

“Where is my baby?!”

The others reacted frantically. Sarah fell to the ground. She pulled at her own hair, dislodging some of it from her scalp. Her husband, Matthew, scrambled in the ankle-

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