

ONE TO GO

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To Anne, my rock

CHAPTER 1

Tom Booker watched the numbers descend, his confidence growing with each passing floor that no one else would board before he reached the garage. 8—7—He tugged the collar of his green polo under his blazer, and smoothed down his unruly hair. He wanted to look good for Janie. 6—5—*Ding*.

The elevator stopped, the doors opened, and Robert “Bat” Masterson entered. Tom’s heart leapt to his throat. Masterson was the third named partner in Smith, Hale and Masterson, one of the most prestigious law firms in the nation’s capital and, at over 500 lawyers, one of the largest.

Approaching sixty, Masterson—tall, tan, with patrician features—looked at least ten years younger. Except for silver tinges over each temple, his hair remained as thick and black as it appeared on campaign billboards lining the roads of Fort Worth twenty years earlier. Masterson’s nickname derived from the renowned Dodge City gunfighter who at one point served as Wyatt Earp’s deputy, and was popularized by a ’50s TV show. Masterson, who claimed Bat was his ancestor, loved the image of the tough lawman, and didn’t discourage the press from referring to him as a gunslinger when defending his white-collar clients.

Since Smith had died decades earlier and Hale recently retired, Masterson was the most senior of senior partners.

“Good morning,” said Masterson. “Mr. Hooker, is it not?”

“It’s Booker, sir.” He’d only spoken to the man once before,

during the reception for new associates held shortly after he'd joined the firm.

He saw Masterson was wearing the official SHM Saturday casual uniform: tan slacks, loafers, polo shirt, and navy-blue blazer. When Tom dressed that morning, he'd briefly considered foregoing the uniform for more comfortable jeans, but thankfully hadn't succumbed.

"Yes, of course," said Masterson. "And in which department do you now find yourself, Mr. Booker?"

"Corporate, sir." The firm's policy required new associates to rotate through four or five legal specialties during the first two years, the theory being the rotation would allow both the new lawyer and the firm to find the best fit. The newbies also had to do a pro bono stint so the firm could meet its bar obligations to the poor and downtrodden without pulling time away from attorneys billing at much higher rates.

"Maybe we'll see you in WC soon."

WC was shorthand for white-collar litigation. Most in Washington considered Masterson, a former US attorney general and Texas governor, the best white-collar defense counsel in town, if not the whole country. The voters had booted Bat's former boss out of the Oval Office two years earlier, and Bat's name was on the shortlist of potential challengers for his party's presidential nomination to take on the new incumbent two years hence.

"Heading for the library?" asked Masterson. He was about to touch the button for the second floor.

Tom could easily lie—the chances of Masterson missing a lowly associate over the next several hours were virtually nil. But the key word was "virtually." "No, sir. Got to pick up my daughter for a short field trip." He added quickly, "But I'll be back in a couple of hours to make up the time."

"Family's important, of course." His expression left no doubt that Masterson believed time spent by an associate on a Saturday morning doing anything other than cranking out billable hours

cost the most senior partner money, and therefore was by definition not important.

The elevator reached the lobby, and Masterson exited. "See you this afternoon, Mr. Booker."

"Of course, sir."

The doors closed. Tom took a deep breath, then punched the already-lit *G* button, willing the elevator to drop the last two floors before anyone else came aboard.

Once in the garage, he jogged to the silver Lexus GS 430. Almost five years old, it had been his one extravagant purchase when he'd been hired by SHM out of Georgetown Law.

He started the engine and drove quickly up the ramp and out of the garage, almost hitting two young men in suits and ties. Both gave him the finger. Lobbyists, thought Tom. They still wore ties on Saturdays.

The annoying warning chime began as soon as he turned onto M Street, and he buckled his seat belt with one hand as he turned south onto New Hampshire. He glanced at the dashboard clock. *Shit*. Gayle was going to kill him.

After catching the fourth red light, he reluctantly pulled out his phone. Talking on a cell while driving was technically against the law in the District, but everyone knew if the law were strictly enforced, the federal government and the businesses of all those who made a living off it would screech to a halt. Besides, he was stopped at a light so he wasn't technically driving.

When he heard the connection, he grimaced, knowing what was coming next.

"Where the hell are you? Janie, Angie, and two other seven-year-olds are standing here in my kitchen, waiting for you."

"Sorry, I—"

"Just how do you expect to drive here, pick them up, and get them back to the Air and Space Museum in less than forty-five minutes?"

"O'Neal needed the buy-sell agreement before—"

"I don't care! It's always something. Always putting your work and yourself before family."

The response shot from his mouth before he could stop it. "One might consider sleeping with our daughter's pediatrician putting yourself before family." *Damn. Remember, pause, then speak. Pause, then speak.*

"You son of a bitch."

Tom took a deep breath. Excellent chance Janie was within ear-shot, and the last thing she needed now after seven months of dealing with her parents' break-up was another fight. He lowered his voice. "Look, I'm almost to the Roosevelt Bridge. Can you take her? I can meet you at the museum entrance and take the handoff."

"My daughter's not a football. Besides, David and I have plans. If you're not here in fifteen minutes, maybe I can persuade Rosie to take them." She ended the call.

My daughter. The change from *our* daughter to *my* daughter several months earlier had not gone unnoticed. Gayle, Janie, and Dr. Dave—he insisted his patients and their moms call him Dr. Dave—lived in Tom's former house in Arlington, while Tom now called a cramped, one-bedroom apartment in the Adams Morgan area of the city home. Adams Morgan was known for its eclectic charm, a string of the best Latino restaurants in the city, and the violent drug culture along its borders.

Rosie was Rosie Battaglia, Gayle's sister. She, her husband, Gino, and their young daughter, Angie, lived east of Connecticut Avenue in upper Northwest DC near the Maryland line, the fancy-schmantzy part of the city.

The previous evening, Janie had invited Angie for a sleepover. Tom wished the sleepover had occurred at Angie's; it would've made his trip from downtown much shorter.

The last light before the bridge. One car in front of him, an ancient beige Buick with Ohio plates. The light turned yellow.

"Go, go!" But instead of speeding up, the sedan slowed down, then stopped at the intersection. Tom pounded the steering wheel

with his fist. He checked the dashboard clock again. No way was he going to make it in time.

He could feel his face flush as his frustration escalated. He glanced at the glove compartment. *Just a sip to take the edge off?*

The light changed. He hit the gas, tailgating the Buick, barely avoiding knocking up against its bumper.

When he rounded the curve, he saw flashing lights on the bridge, an accident backing up traffic to a standstill. *Shit.* His deadline only a few minutes off, he considered abandoning the drive to Arlington, calling back, and begging Rosie to take the girls. He could intercept them at the museum.

Or, he could try the Memorial. What the hell? Maybe Gayle would give him a grace period.

He pulled around the Buick and drove south along the river, then made the turn onto the bridge and headed west across the Potomac, quickly sliding into the passing lane where a single yellow line separated him from oncoming eastbound traffic.

In the far distance, he saw a green Dodge minivan heading toward him from the western entrance to the bridge. Rosie had a green minivan. Could Gayle have sent the kids off with Rosie early? Why didn't she call him?

He dug out his cell, glanced down, and scrolled to her number. He'd developed a system where he held the phone up at eye level with his right hand so he could still keep his eyes on the road.

He punched in the text: *on Mem bridge. Did they leave?* He hit "Send."

The minivan was getting closer. He remembered Rosie had tied an orange ribbon on her antenna so she could spot her car in a parking lot. A red Ford pickup truck in front of the minivan wove back and forth in its lane, making it difficult for Tom to see the Dodge's aerial.

He heard the *chime*, and glanced down to read Gayle's message.

Yes. Couldn't wait. R not happy. Meet at A & S.

Great. Why couldn't she—?

His thoughts were interrupted by screeching tires and and blaring horns.

He looked up and saw he'd drifted into the oncoming lane, heading straight for the green minivan.

He jammed his foot on the brakes and cut hard right.

Instead of responding, the Lexus spun like a Frisbee across the pavement, first crashing head-on into the front of the minivan, then ricocheting into the rear of the red truck. The truck hit the curb hard at an odd angle. It flipped up into the air, appeared to hover for a long moment before landing upside down in the middle of the road. The impact of the collision knocked the minivan up onto the sidewalk where it glanced off a light pole, then rolled up onto its two right tires. Teetering next to the bridge rail, it was about to flip into the Potomac.

A split-second image of a dirty orange ribbon filled his brain.

In a flash, he saw Janie's face pressed up against the van window. Then he saw nothing.

CHAPTER 2

Full consciousness arrived a split-second ahead of the searing pain and the smell of smoke. Looking past the deflated airbag, he saw that the windshield, though shattered, remained mostly intact. Thank God for safety glass. Through the windshield's cracked mosaic, he was able to make out the crumpled hood of the Lexus mashed into a light post.

He conducted a visual check of his limbs—all were accounted for and appeared to be attached and functioning. The crash had twisted his bucket seat so he was now facing the passenger side where the car's impact with the light post had collapsed the roof to knee height.

The flipped-over red truck was the source of the smoke. The truck's cab had been crushed to a level almost even with the truck bed. The smoke rose from the truck's undercarriage.

Except, it wasn't rising.

He smelled the smoke, saw it pluming from the truck, but it didn't move; the dark vapors appeared frozen, as if he were viewing a photo of the smoke rather than the smoke itself.

He shook the cobwebs from his head, but the smoke remained static, no doubt an optical illusion caused by the shattered safety glass.

His eyes returned to the passenger seat. My God, what if he'd been on time and picked up Janie? He would've packed three of the girls into the backseat, and strapped Janie into the front bucket. Janie would be dead, maybe the others as well.

He wrenched his head around, and saw the green minivan, teetering on two wheels, about to flip into the river.

Janie.

He struggled to get out of the car, but the driver's side door was jammed shut. Not surprisingly, the electric window wouldn't move.

The seat belt buckle had slipped around so he was half sitting on it. He pushed the release button. Jammed.

Wiggling his hips against the belt, he gasped as stabbing pain shot across his lower back and down his left leg. The belt loosened. The bolts that fastened the belt bracket to the floor had been partially dislodged. He grabbed the belt at the point nearest the bracket and, with a quick glance across the road at the teetering minivan, pulled, using not only his arms and shoulders, but his whole body. His cry of pain mixed with triumph as the bracket popped loose. The smell of smoke strengthened. He twisted under and out of the seat belt.

He kicked out the windshield, and immediately pain fired from his hip and shot down his left leg, grabbing the breath from his lungs.

Ignoring the cuts to his arms from the broken glass, he dragged his body through the opening, then slid headfirst down the side of the car to the pavement and crawled to his feet.

Focusing only on the teetering minivan, he staggered to the center line. In the back of his mind, he wondered why he wasn't hearing the sound of approaching sirens. Then he realized he wasn't hearing anything. Had the impact from the collision caused hearing loss? Would it be permanent?

No time for that, he had to get to his daughter. The smell of smoke and burning rubber was nearly suffocating. He saw for the first time that smoke and flames rose from the minivan's engine. He had to pull her out before the gas tank caught on fire.

But, again, the flames weren't moving.

He turned back to the pickup. The smoke appeared to be frozen in the air.

He spun completely around. None of the other cars on the bridge moved. A few tourists who'd been strolling along the sidewalk seemed frozen in time. One woman walking a black poodle was suspended just as she was about to take a step. She should be falling over as her center of gravity hovered out and away from the single foot on the ground.

Tom made his way across the road to the minivan. Shouldn't it be tipping over? He saw Janie's face snug up against the rear window. Her mouth gaped open wide, her palms pressed against the glass. Her body leaned toward the pavement, but didn't fall. She wasn't moving, not a twitch.

She didn't frigging move!

He saw Angie and two other girls flipped and turned inside—all of them suspended in midair.

For a moment he stared into Janie's eyes. An unusual color of blue ice, he'd always been secretly proud when someone would tell her, "Oh, you've got your father's eyes." And while those eyes didn't move, he couldn't shake the feeling she could see him.

He tried to pry open the rear door. Didn't budge.

Maybe if he broke the glass of the rear window. He shuffled as fast as he could back to the overturned pickup to check for tools. His back spasmed as he crouched down, and he had to pause to catch his breath. The driver, a teenage boy, was upside down and had not been wearing his seat belt. The boy's unseeing eyes stared at Tom from his partially severed head. Blood soaked the bench seat and everything inside the cab. Tom struggled to force down the bile rising in his throat as he searched for a hammer or some other tool he could use to bash in the Dodge's rear window. Nothing.

He glanced back at the teetering van. There were other cars on the bridge. Somebody's got to have a hammer. He gasped from the pain in his back and leg as he rose to his feet. Looking east toward the Memorial, he spotted another truck, a white van with *Welch Plumbing* painted on the side, and hobbled toward it.

As he passed the red pickup's undercarriage, he reached out and moved his hand through the rising smoke—*except it wasn't rising*. He felt nothing.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement from the far eastern end of the bridge.

Two people jogged toward him.

CHAPTER 3

As they got closer, he could make out that one was female. Ignoring the pain, he ran/shuffled toward the couple, waving his arms frantically in the air.

“Help! Help!”

The man and woman each smiled and waved back, continuing their easy pace. They must not have heard him.

“Help! Accident!”

Tom reached them near the center point of the bridge. They were young, tan, good looking in a clean, wholesome way. Both blond with ice-blue eyes. Not twins, but enough of a resemblance they easily could be brother and sister. With crisp white shorts and matching lime-green t-shirts, they resembled models from an Abercrombie & Fitch or J.Crew ad out for an easy jog on a warm, late September morning. And they appeared wholly oblivious to the scene surrounding them.

“Do you have a phone?” Tom shouted.

The male reached into his pocket, retrieved a cell phone, and showed it to him.

“Call 911! Hurry, my daughter—!”

“That’s not really necessary, Tom,” the man responded with a gleaming smile.

“You already called? Great. Look, my daughter and a bunch of other kids are in that green van. You got to help me get the door open.” He shuffled toward the van. “We have to be careful, ’cause if the van tips over—wait, how did you know my name?” He stopped

and turned back to the couple. It hit him—his surroundings frozen in a moment of time, two beautiful people greeting him.

Holy shit. He was dead.

“You’re not dead, Tom,” said the girl.

“How do you know what I’m thinking?”

They both responded with a wide grin.

“C’mon, we have to get the girls out of the van now.” Doing his best to ignore the pain, he shuffled as fast as he could toward the minivan, expecting them to follow.

When he’d gone about thirty feet, he turned back. They hadn’t moved.

Then in a sliver of a second, they were standing immediately in front of him.

“Who *are* you?”

“I’m Chad, and this is Britney. Pleasure to meet you, Tom.” They each offered their hands.

Tom assumed there was a logical explanation for the bizarre behavior of these two preppy jerks, but he didn’t have time to focus on it. He had to get Janie out of the Dodge. He ignored their extended hands, and ran the best he could to the minivan.

When he arrived, nothing had changed. The vehicle remained teetering on two wheels, and Janie’s expression was still frozen. She hadn’t moved a muscle.

He heard the girl—Britney?—directly behind him. “It’s kind’ve weird, don’t you think?”

He looked back. They both stood there, still with their hands extended. “I mean, the frozen-in-time thing. Spooky.”

“I agree,” said Chad, never losing his smile. “Way spooky.”

Who the hell were these people? “I don’t know what’s going on, but if you can do anything, please help me get her out of there.”

“As a matter of fact, Tom, we can help,” said Chad.

“Absolutely,” added Britney.

Chad wrapped a comforting arm around Tom’s shoulder, and gently turned him so they were both facing the minivan. “I’m sure

you'd agree that life's about making decisions. Trivial decisions—what am I going to wear today? What am I having for breakfast? And consequential decisions—the choice of a career, the selection of a spouse. Sometimes we're forced to make life or death decisions. Can you think of an example of a life or death decision, Tom?"

"Please, just help—"

"Try, Tom."

"I don't know, pulling the plug on a loved one."

"Excellent," said Britney. "You get an *A*-plus."

Chad waved his arm in front of the wreckage. "See, Tom, you have a life or death decision to make right now."

"Actually, it's a life or *deaths* decision," said Britney.

"You're right," said Chad, chuckling. "I stand corrected. A life or *deaths* decision."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He looked over at the Lexus, half expecting to see his own body still in the cab. Or, despite what they'd said, maybe he really *was* dead. But if he was dead, where was he? And why would stabbing pain be shooting from the small of his back down his leg?"

There can be two different outcomes here," said Chad, gesturing to the wreckage. "Here's choice *A*."

He heard a *whirring* sound, like an old-time tape recorder re-winding. Suddenly, everything moved. Backward. Rewinding to seconds before the collision.

Tom couldn't believe his eyes. He saw the green minivan with Rosie driving eastbound on the bridge, behind the red pickup. He could make out the driver now—good-looking kid, maybe seventeen or eighteen—talking on his cell phone. He saw his Lexus approaching the other two vehicles, and he was driving. But that was impossible, because he was standing on the sidewalk.

He looked closer. *He was driving.*

"Kind've cool," said Britney.

Tom couldn't pull his eyes away. He saw himself look down to check Gayle's text.

“You shouldn’t text and drive,” said Chad.

“Driving distractions kill,” said Britney.

He heard the honking horns and screeching tires. He smelled the burnt rubber. He watched, transfixed, as the Lexus spun out of control toward the minivan and the red truck.

Except there was no collision.

Rosie braked hard, the minivan screeched to a stop, allowing Tom’s Lexus to spin out in front of her. The Lexus careened up over the curb, missing the light post by a whisker, then returned to the road. The red truck continued on its way. Tom could see Rosie through the window giving the Lexus driver—him—the finger. Obviously, she didn’t get a good look at him and didn’t recognize the car. She slowly pulled out again and headed east toward DC.

As the minivan passed, Tom could see Janie and the other girls giggling at Rosie’s obscene gesture.

He waved both of his arms frantically. *“Janie!”*

He knew she couldn’t hear him, but he was so excited to see her alive and safe he didn’t care. He turned back to Chad.

“If this is a dream, I want to wake up now.”

Chad ignored him.

Again, he heard the whirring sound, and the scene returned to where it had been moments earlier—frozen in time with an overturned pickup, a Lexus wrapped around a light post, and his daughter caught in mid-scream inside a green minivan hovering over the edge of a bridge on two wheels.

“And this is option *B*,” said Chad. He swept his arm over the wreckage. This time the scene rewound just a few seconds.

Immediately the now familiar jumble of sights, sounds, and smells confronted Tom: a piercing scream from the woman with the poodle; the screech of brakes and blaring horns from other cars as they swerved to avoid crashing into the pickup; the acrid smell of smoke and burnt rubber.

He whipped his head back to the minivan. The flames from

the engine were moving now. They'd caught on the gas dribbling from the fuel tank, singeing the green paint below the filler cap.

God, no!

The flames moved up the side of the van toward the filler pipe.
And the van slowly tipped toward the river.