

CHAPTER ONE

1

The massive eighteen wheel truck raced out of Virginia, moving at an impossible pace for a piece of metal so large. It leaned to the right, passing an interchange to go north, the last chance to avoid fate. It was just past three thirty in the morning, and the driver was about to die.

I knew this because I was standing at the video wall on the fifteenth floor. The truck passed through a series of screens as if moving through the wall itself. But it tore down a real highway, only a few miles from where I stood. Leaves on surrounding trees waved goodbye to the truck as it passed, a natural reaction of the air in the wake of the truck rushing to fill the void.

The metal monster merged and sped up. Eighty-thousand pounds of energy traveling at sixty miles per hour, the truck was a

missile. My mouth hung open and I made panic sounds as I flailed my arms. The truck was in the second lane from the left.

I worried because I knew what was ahead. The stalled car blocked a lane around a bend, out of sight. It didn't have its flashers on.

It takes forty percent longer to stop an eighteen wheeler than a passenger car. Eighteen wheelers have only ten brakes, not eighteen. I was thinking of these things while I watched the truck speeding ahead. What happened next would depend on the driver's reflexes. I'm the only one who knew and I couldn't do anything to stop it, I could only watch. The truck shivered with energy when it shifted gears, speeding up on the straight, dark road.

There are always those moments that you never forget. Some people call them seminal moments. It's that first time you tried steak or stayed out too late with your friends. It's that first time you got drunk or you saw a naked woman in Playboy. Everyone has those moments, each one different from the others. Your reaction might be positive or negative or indifferent. Whatever the case, that reaction speaks volumes about who you are and what you're going to be. I can certainly say that everything was different after I watched that truck in the monitors on the fifteenth floor of a nondescript office building.

I didn't know then, but would learn later, that the man driving the truck was named Jerry Morris. I also learned he had other things on his mind that morning. In a few hours one of the nation's biggest highways would close, they would hang yellow tape with block letters around the trees. There would be an investigation. Well, more than one.

But I didn't know any of that while I watched the truck; the images looked like shooting stars through small green screens with that grimy quality, like opening your eyes in lake water. I crossed my fingers, hoping that I wasn't about to watch a man die. I knew it was a man driving the truck, because I just got off the phone with him. I forgot to tell him about the car.

Wait...hold on. I'm not doing this right. My mother always told me that I wasn't good at anything and I am proving her point right now. I know you want me to hurry, get to the part with the guns and the police and all that. That's why you want to hear this story, because of what you saw on the news, but I've messed up and need to fix my mistake. This won't take long; you need to know what my life was like back then. Only three short chapters of set up, I promise and then we will return to this point. I just need to go back one day.

CHAPTER TWO

2

"Greg?" said the disembodied voice, somewhere in the distance. I clawed at my ear, like a dog waving an uncommitted leg at an unconfirmed flea. My fingers found the plastic clamshell pressed against my head.

"Greg?"

A woman's voice said my name like a question. I wasn't asleep but unconscious. The ultra-comfy chair still supported my back like a cloud. I felt myself leaned back, headphones on, in a dim dank empty room. My systems began coming back online. To my left was a wall of monitors, some broadcasting the local television feeds, others showing scenes of empty intersections and stretches of highway with only the occasional set of murky headlights buzzing across the screen.

I was at work, and the revelation cracked across my thoughts like thunder as the woman's voice said my name again, "Greg." She wasn't asking anymore but demanding.

I looked directly ahead of me. The microphone hung in front of my face point blank, its ridges resembling a basketball up close. To the right a bright red light told me all I needed to know. I was live on the air, broadcasting to millions, and I was unresponsive when they said my name.

I leapt forward, banging my face into the microphone with a thwap, my headphones fell off my head.

"On the Capital Beltway...um...I-495, there is...um...no traffic at this...this hour and there is some construction," I shuffled through the papers in front of me. They could have been written in hieroglyphs, the sudden surge of panic had made reading impossible. "There were reports...of a crash near the Suitland Parkway, but...no, wait that was yesterday. Um, no reports of any incidents at the Frederick Douglass Bridge that we here in the traffic center have been made aware of. The 14th Street Bridge is...um...fine. I guess."

I silently slid my headphones back onto my head. At some point in the broadcast I guess they heard enough because the anchor was reading a weather forecast through gritted teeth.

How humiliating. I had never fallen asleep on the air before. It was a question I got all the time when I worked

overnight traffic. People wondered how I stayed awake from 9PM to 5AM. Well, not that I actually talked to anyone back in those days, but I am getting ahead of myself.

I pulled the plastic headphones off with a shudder. This was not good. I just embarrassed myself on DC's most listened to station. I was late when they came to me, and when I started talking I didn't make sense. People in radio are often fired for far less. Those who work behind the microphone are dismissed on a whim; if a single person doesn't like your inflection on a word or the tonality of a person's voice, you could be gone. It doesn't matter if you have success, seniority or loyalty. You can be out the door tomorrow because there is an endless line of eager faces tapping their feet and waving their hands to replace you.

The last thing you ever want to do is give your bosses cause to fire you. I didn't just give them a reason. I broadcasted that reason through 100,000 watts to countless cars and homes in the nation's capital.

The phone rang angry. I picked it up, "Traffic Center."

"What happened?" said the producer with malice in his voice.

"I-I don't know." It was true. I had no explanation other than the fact that it was a new chair that had afforded far too much relaxation. I stood up with the phone in my hand and kicked

the cursed cushion out from under me. It wheeled into the anchor desk behind mine.

"Greg," he began, irritated and choosing his words carefully. "We cannot keep having...a problem...from your end."

"I'm really sorry. It won't happen again."

"I collect your apology. Make an effort to...not be a problem in the future."

"I will," I said. I felt a wave of relief wash over me. I might skate on this.

"However," he said, "Bob will need to be informed."

My heart sank. He was going to call my boss. I wanted to object but I knew it was useless. Producers have no mercy. They enter the broadcasting industry with plans to be on the microphone and in smaller markets are often considered the 'up and comers', but by the time they make it to DC they have realized their lisp, lack of personality, or other myriad limitations will never allow a career beyond the producer's desk. This particular producer, whose name I never learned, had no incisors, which forced him to choose words without 's' or 'th' sounds. He spoke so slowly that listening to him was painful.

"I'm regretful," he said, as if through an incisor-less smile. "To have to tell Bob but I am deprived of another option."

"I understand," I said.

He hung up. He sounded like he was chuckling as he did so.

I was still standing in the traffic center as I lowered the phone to the cradle. I grabbed an older, less comfortable chair from the terminal next to me and sat down.

My chin sank to my chest. I tried to steady my breathing. My boss had grounds to fire me and I had no idea how this would work out. My stomach flipped a couple of times as spots settled in my vision.

I decided I should get up and do my side work, to take my mind off the growing worry. The traffic studio was state of the art 25 years ago. Now it was basically a darkened cave with carpet that had been trod heavily, worn to the rubber backing beneath. The exposed floor reflected the dull florescent light, giving the room the look of the inside of a refrigerator. A large expanse of monitors populated the far wall and all around the studio were microphones hanging off arms like desk lamps; every single microphone its own terminal broadcasting to some random radio station on the East coast. Stations subscribe to traffic services so they don't have to pay to generate their own. It saves money and gives stations a check in the box ('WE OFFER UP TO THE MINUTE TRAFFIC') but it means you are getting information from someone who has most likely never visited the town you live in, and has absolutely no idea if there is traffic or not.

I got up and walked to the studio for Norfolk, VA. I grabbed the handset and pushed the gray button marked 'POLICE'.

"Norfolk Police, what's your emergency?"

"This is Greg Harris at the traffic center, do you have-"

"Nope, we've got nothing."

"Well, thank you," I said, but he had hung up. I got up, walked to the Richmond, VA studio. I pushed the gray button marked 'POLICE'.

"Richmond Police, what's your emergency?"

"This is Greg Harris at the traffic center, do you have-"

"Nope, we've got nothing."

"Well, thank you," I said as he hung up.

I did the same for Baltimore, Raleigh, Greensboro, and various other cities that I still to this day have never been. I walked back to my DC terminal with five minutes to go until my next report. As I sat down, the phone rang.

"Traffic Center."

"Hi, is this the Traffic Center?"

"Yes."

"Can I lodge a complaint?"

"A complaint? Sure," I said.

"Well, I have noticed several people riding in the left lane tonight."

"Okay."

"You are only supposed to pass in that lane, so I was wondering if you could call someone?"

"Call someone?"

"Yes, I was wondering if these people could be arrested?"

"For driving in the left lane?"

"Yes. I mean, what if an ambulance comes along?"

"Was the driver blocking an emergency vehicle?"

"No. Not really."

"Not really?"

"Well, I didn't see one tonight but I was thinking about it while I was driving."

"..."

"I just realized that it was a problem and I thought I could ask you to do something about it because these people are a danger to me...and...the children."

"I'll pass it along."

"Wait, when is this going to happen? Is it going to start tomorrow?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How will I know when it starts? Because, you know, just in case I do it."

"I'm sure we'll let you know if it does." Taking these absurd calls is part of the job.

"Okay, great. That's great. Thanks!"

I went back to listening to the commercials through my headphones. Some man talked about a fancy rug cleaning service.

There must be a lot of fancy rugs around these days, I thought. The anchor came back from commercial, "It's 2:08!" The chime blared, my signal to start talking. I read my list of road construction live to the radios of thousands of truckers, gas station attendants, and cab drivers.

When you work overnight traffic, you live a life of constant repetition. In the summer, you read lists of road construction. In the winter, weather conditions. From 9pm to 5am, you do the same things, say the same things, over and over, day after day, broadcasting to millions but you are alone. It's an act of strength to ignore the feeling that you're drowning with no one around to hear the sounds of struggle.

I finished my report and removed my headphones. I picked up the phone and dialed a number I knew by heart.

"Montgomery County Police," said a familiar voice.

"Sargeant Conroy."

"Hey Greg, we don't have anything working right now."

"Good to hear."

"Hope you had a good weekend."

"I did," I said, even though it wasn't true. "How was yours?"

"Good. My son brought his wife over and we fired the grill up."

"That sounds nice."

"Yeah, his wife does a nice marinade."

"Great. Have a nice morning, Sargeant."

"You bet."

I hung up, and leaned back into my chair. I thought about the dead air incident earlier. As far as mistakes go on the air, it was a major one. I tried to think about something else, but it was impossible. I was too busy kicking myself. I couldn't believe I made such a mistake, falling asleep on the air. I even left the mic open which meant they heard me stir, heard me come awake. Live. I was glad that I hadn't said anything embarrassing.

All I had was my job, so getting fired was my worst fear. No one ever wants to be unemployed, because you don't know how long it will be before you work again. I don't care how mentally strong you think you are, the act of being unemployed can destroy anyone given enough time.

I imagined how it would happen. Bob Creasey would call me into his office. I would sit there and he would tell me. Tell me he is letting me go. I will walk out of the office and no one will make eye contact. Every person I pass will stare at the ground, the occasional 'I'm so sorry' in a hoarse whisper that no one will hear because the second the door closes behind me they will obsequiously and profusely agree with the powers that be, telling them what a great idea it was to finally get rid of Greg because they never liked him anyway. I imagined being unemployed,

laying on my bed for one more month in the blazing heat because I couldn't afford air conditioning, sweating and petrified while I fill out applications with a quaking hand. A month later I will be evicted and a parade of men with strong backs will carry my belongings to the corner and set them there for the garbage man and I will pick through the pile, wondering what I can keep now that I have no place to go, no shelter, no roof over my head, no place to lay down, no place to sit, no place to close my eyes, and I pick through my pile of things by the street, with people looking at me in sorrow, they try to avert their gaze but they stare at the man who has nothing, trying to find something to carry, something to carry somewhere but nowhere and I will finally find myself in a shelter, laying on a dirty mattress on a wire cot in a room with dozens of other people, the humid air in the room hangs stale and unmoving, the fat drops of humidity grip the sour smell in the room, the odor a combination of Fritos and stomach bile, bile that was spit up by the man lying in the cot next to me who slept wine laden on his back, wine laden to the point of asphyxiation, the rattling gurgle in his throat still echoing in my ears as I take deep breaths of humid air, my hand in my pocket making thumb circles on the last fold of my cash, hoping, praying, pleading, that this is enough money to make my purchase, my final purchase from a large Hispanic man with a greasy mullet and greasy hands, who keeps calling me "Homes", a

purchase that will in and of itself be a door, a door out of the hell that my life has become, and before I put my purchase in my mouth, I will think about this day, the day that I fell asleep on the air, when everything changed, I just shouldn't have sat in that chair, that comfy chair, if I had just gotten up, sat in the uncomfortable chair instead, I wouldn't have slept, I wouldn't be living in a homeless shelter listening to men drown in their vomit and that wouldn't be the last sound I linger on as I taste the metal in my mouth and pull the-

"It's 2:18."

I caught my breath and tried to regain my composure, fumbling for the headphones in my lap, but my hands weren't working. The twin speakers on the headset had already sounded the chime for me to begin. The music bed for my talk over was playing, but my voice wasn't in the speakers.

"Greg?"

I leaned forward and started answering, "Yes, Veronica. On the Capital Beltway, no delays through Montgomery County, things look good through College Park. No problems across the Wilson Bridge-"

"Greg."

"Can you hear me Veronica?" I asked as I finally pulled the headphones on. My voice still wasn't in the speakers. I looked

down at the board; I forgot to turn on the microphone. My hand shot to the button on the console.

Too late. "Well we are going to see if we can find Greg in the traffic center and get that traffic report to you soon."

The phone rang and I picked it up with full knowledge of who was on the other end, "Traffic Center."

"You have failed us for a...uh...again," said the producer with unmistakable delight. "I am going to have to call Bob immediately." He hung up.

I sat frozen with the phone pressed to my ear. Two problems, it had been years since I had any at all. That night, I had two. I agonized about getting fired for one. Now two...

The phone rang, "Traffic Center."

"Greg? It's Bob. What's going on in there?" he sounded like he had been roused from a deep sleep.

"I made a mistake."

"We can't have mistakes, Greg. We are the traffic authority for the nation's capital."

"I swear it won't happen again."

"It better not. I need to see you today, Greg. Be in my office at 3PM," said Bob. He hung up without waiting for a reply.

I stood silently with the phone in my shaking hand for a minute, before I slowly laid the piece of plastic back in the cradle.

I sat at my terminal for the rest of the night. I didn't dare move. The station kept calling me right before I went on the air to confirm that I was ready to go, humiliating. This went on for almost three more hours.

Finally at 5AM, it was shift change. The morning crew were the stars of the operation, they did live traffic for TV and radio stations during the coveted "Morning Drive" time slot. A few of them had their own studios filled with bright lights and floral arrangements. I heard and saw them walking through, like they did every day, faces pancaked with makeup and silent against the beeps and the bleeps of the scanners and ringing phones. The morning radio traffic anchors started showing up and ducked into cubicled terminals on the far side of the wall.

I stood up, wished a good day to everyone, and as always, no one responded. I walked with heavy feet out of the studio toward the elevators. I had no way of knowing what Bob was going to do and 10 hours to torment myself with how I was going to deal with whatever his decision might be.

I got onto the elevator and pushed the button. I descended to the lobby, a giant shining cave of reflected light and marble, walked past the sleeping security guard, and pushed through the revolving door to the outside.

I felt awful on my way to the parking garage, my stomach turned and churned until I almost threw up on the sidewalk.



CHAPTER THREE

3

I pushed the brake down when I got in front of home, pulled the key from the ignition, and opened the door.

The sun had begun to rise and its radiation peaked from behind the horizon, splashing blue and orange onto the expanse of sky. I rounded the rear of the car, lifted my foot over the curb, and stepped in the moist grass. The drive usually took forty minutes, pedestrian by DC standards. An hour from now poor souls would be trapped in coffins of metal and glass that inched along highways, heading to their government or nonprofit or media or lobbying or other jobs that forced them to dress in business casual or formal attire far too uncomfortable for their travel time. Only the upper crust could afford to live near the place they worked.

I lived in a rented room in Haymarket, Virginia. Homeowners often decided to rent out a room in their house, a relatively

common and easy way to make money in the metro DC area. Usually these arrangements ended in huffy litigation and destroyed property. I went through a series of rooms that weren't properly permitted, often ending in my meager belongings being thrown into a rented van while the police served the summons.

This particular room, walled away and given an outside door with a key, had been home for four years. The family on the other side of the wall was quiet during the day, and I was gone at night. It was a nice situation, one that I had spent almost ten years moving around trying to find. It would be a shame to be evicted after tomorrow.

I walked across the lawn to the door, the morning air perfumed faintly with wet grass and breakfast. The seal on the door broke with a gentle chuff and I was home.

The door barely missed the bed as it opened. On the far side of the room (which was only two feet from the end of the bed) my dresser was pushed to the wall, my small TV rested on top. To the right of the dresser was a chest of drawers, under the bed was a rug, and that was all of the room. The floor was hard wood, slick with finish. Maybe a veal calf would consider it spacious, but no human could really get comfortable. You've probably seen bigger closets.

There was a tiny bathroom attached. Your feet landed squarely in the shower if you sat on the toilet. There was a sink

smearred with toothpaste, but no mirror above it. I removed it the day I got the keys. You could still see where the screws had been anchored in the wall.

I rolled onto the bed and thumbed on the TV. I drew my legs to my chest, knowing sleep would be a challenge.

The sun poked through the slats of the blinds. The TV murmured about the weather and things that were happening somewhere else. I needed distractions. My stomach was sick with worry. I couldn't help but feel that maybe last night I had finally committed the error that would be my doom. Everything I had worked for could be gone.

All I had was my job. You might think that's sad or indicative of an underlying problem, but it was the truth. The thought of losing the job made me miserable but it's not like my life was happy before then either. You don't want to think about this stuff right before you go to sleep, but this is how it goes.

My parents died decades ago, which hadn't mattered since I didn't have much of a relationship with them to begin with. Death changed little. I remember I was hungry a lot as a kid, not with desire or drive but actual hunger from lack of food. Dad was never around and when he was, he was drunk. Mom always needed someone to blame for Dad's absence and alcoholism, and that blame fell on me.

The memory from childhood that lingers is mom screaming at me, blaming me for Dad not coming home. She often told stories about how Dad never wanted children. When asked, Dad never refuted the claim. He had apparently gotten a vasectomy not long after the second month of her pregnancy.

My mother told me for years that my father's absence, and his need to imbibe alcohol, was all because he was disappointed in his son.

"You're not good at anything," she said, "Do you know how hard that is for a father, to realize his son has no talent, nothing special about him? Greg honey, I need you to be better at something. So your father won't be so sad about you, blame me for giving birth to you."

Her voice came to me often, especially when I didn't want to hear it, and I really didn't want to hear it on a day when my fate would be handed to me in twelve hours.

I pressed my eyes closed and shoved myself into the mattress. Working overnights is an exercise in learning how to sleep when you need it. You have to be able to put yourself down. I would tense myself into the mattress then release, as the tension wore off I would often go unconscious. This usually worked really well.

I tensed, released, and closed my eyes tight. There was a moment of stillness; I listened to the turn of the air

conditioner, purring from the window only inches from my head. I slowed my breathing and felt myself drift.

I was on a plane. I felt the armrests on either side. I always know when I'm dreaming. The lights were dim, most of the shades drawn. Several of the passengers snored slightly in an upright position; their mouths hung open from a combination of Xanax and alcohol. I'm always jealous of people who sleep on planes, even if it's chemically induced. The plane bubbled up and down, slight turbulent bumps in the road.

I sat next to the window, in the dream, and I slid the shade up. I was just behind the wing, the engines whined efficiently outside the ice cold glass. There were lights in the distance, the grid ended just a little in front of my line of sight. We're flying low, I thought. I looked at the man sitting next to me. He was thin and had curly black hair that parted down the middle. He wore a grimy leather jacket. He pushed his tray table to the upright position and looked me in the face with a knowing smile.

"This plane is going to crash," he said.

"I know."

The man turned his whole body to me, looking interested.

"How did you know that, Greg?"

"I've had this dream before."

"Not bad, Greg," he said, with a laugh. "You always impress me."

"This plane isn't usually so packed, though, and you're not usually here."

"Well, variety is the spice of life, ain't it?"

"It is. But this is a bad dream. I hate this dream," I said. My mouth tasted like iron. I spat into my hand. A spatter pattern of blood appeared in my palm and one of my teeth bounced on the soft skin.

"Wow, Greg, you got some teeth coming out there. Does that always happen?"

"Yeah."

"You're missing a shoe, too. Does that always happen?"

"Yeah," I tensed a bit, waiting for it.

"That's amazing. So this plane always crashes, you always spit out your teeth, and you're always wearing one shoe. So the only thing different is me and the rest of the people on the plane."

"That's right."

"So why are you tensing? Why do you still look scared?"

"Because it hurts."

"But it sounds like you have been through this before. You already know what's going to happen."

"It hurts when it happens."

"But you're closing your eyes, Greg. You know that something amazing is about to happen but you're closing your eyes. You are

about to witness an event that few people ever live to see and you're gonna miss it just because it hurts. Can I ask you a question, Greg?"

"Who are you?"

"See? You tensed again when you asked that."

"It's any second now."

"I was wondering, are you sure that this plane is always full? Are you sure that you're always wearing one shoe? I pointed these things out to you but I have never been sitting next to you before in this dream. Isn't it possible that you don't notice things until someone pointed them out to you?"

"You're just going to have to take my word for it."

"Still tensing. Look at you. I like you, Greg, you're always preparing. You're like a Boy Scout. You're always ready for the second this plane drops out of the sky."

"But I don't know how it's going to happen. Sometimes it's a cabin pressure failure. Sometimes there is a fire in the cabin. Sometimes we drop from ice on the wings."

"Seriously, Greg, how does that matter? The end result is the same, but it's the details that are exciting. You're closing your eyes for the best part and you get the same lousy result in the end."

"You have a point."

"But I still see you tensing. You just said that with your teeth gritted. I'm not making much impact here. It looks pretty hopeless to me."

He leaned back into his chair, closed his eyes, and slowly exhaled. The front of the cabin exploded. The fire roasted several screaming passengers in the first few rows ahead of us, their clothes and skin bubbled. Yellow oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling and hung like yo-yos for a second before they were sucked out of the gaping hole in the front of the cabin.

The plane rocketed upward into the starry clear sky as the front fell away. The seats we were strapped to soared up. The front of the plane was wide open, offering no hope for survival, as if the plane intended to show us exactly what it looked like to fall 4,000 feet to our deaths. Finally it stopped going up and hung, achieving zero gravity for a few moments.

Then we fell. The metal tube scorched toward the ground, turning as it went, before finally falling upside down. Passengers still alive screamed until their lungs ran out of air. They inhaled and screamed again. I heard some loud prayers and crying confessions of sins. A few rows ahead, a man's burned black flesh flapped from the wind of the decent. There was a smell of fuel fire and shit as passengers bodies fully prepared for the death that awaited them at the end of the endless, icy fall.

The man in the leather jacket next to me was gone.

Another small explosion and I was ejected from the plane. Now I was falling in the cold air, still a long way to go before impact. I was surrounded by passengers, still strapped in their seats but naked. They had been stripped by the cold air rushing around them, their screams endless. A few lost their voices, gasping in laddered shuddery breaths in between shrieks. The screams sounded like squeals now, their vocal cords shredded beyond anything recognizable.

I hit the ground and every bone in my body shattered. My skin was punctured in several places, my lungs tried to take a desperate breath. I lifted my head somehow and saw many of the other passengers, lying in a grassy field lit by the light of the moon. A woman had been cut in half by her seatbelt when the chair hit the ground. A man dragged his paralyzed body by an arm that still worked, his jaw shattered in several places, his tongue and mouth flapped like a wet towel in the space below his nose. I heard one more labored scream escape me and my head dropped back down from the agony.

I woke up with my heart thundering. The afternoon sun blazed through the slats of my blinds. I pushed my face back into the bedspread and felt moistness pressing against my cheek. The TV at the end of the room was still on, promoting the fact that Arch Campbell was up next to discuss the latest movie about something

or other. The beautiful woman on TV said there were other things coming up as well.

I turned my back to the TV and curled myself into a ball. I thought about the meeting that was still going to come today. I took a rattling breath and tried not to think about it. I hoped that I would take it like a man, whatever the outcome of the meeting, but above all I was really hoping not to be fired.

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