

Fourth of July

A Benjamin Davis Novel

A Turk

CHAPTER 1
A REAL TRAGEDY
Monday, April 1, 1996

William Taylor stared blurry eyed at his client's tax return as he considered whether to risk the deduction of a medical expense for a Siberian tiger named *Thriller*.

Why the hell would a big cat need his tonsils out anyway? A zoo with thirty-four exotic animals, owned by a pop musician, that in five years hadn't been profitable and wasn't open to the general public was at great risk of being declared a hobby.

William, a smart accountant, knew that the IRS could declare invalid more than \$23,600,000 of previously declared operating expenses as losses. That would be a taxable event of more than \$8 million, trouble no matter how rich his client.

William pulled his micro recorder from his breast shirt pocket and began slowly speaking into the device, "Tomorrow review holding in *Burrus vs. IRS*, local counsel for the plaintiff, *Steine & Davis*." Then he put the recorder back in his pocket, forgetting to turn it off.

A few minutes later at midnight he called his wife, Becky, for moral support. They'd met in college and married the month after graduation. That was ten years ago.

At thirty-two, William had been an accountant seven years. He was about to sit for the last and fifth part of the CPA exam. He looked the part: bookish, with thick glasses, short-cropped brown hair, short stature, and bad teeth. His parents neglected his dental care. His wife was the polar opposite: tall with curly auburn hair and a great smile. Her killer smile was what first attracted William to the shy girl from the upper Michigan peninsula. William, a native Nashvillian, couldn't resist her the moment he laid eyes on her that Monday morning the first day of freshman English class at the University of Florida.

"I won't be home for dinner, and I may not even be home for breakfast," he joked. "What'd I miss?"

The young professional stated the obvious to his neglected wife. It was the fourth night this week he'd missed dinner with the family. Becky reported she'd served their three kids hot dogs and fries six hours earlier.

I didn't miss much. He rethought, *I bet those were pretty good dogs. At least I know the company would have been outstanding.* William and Becky cherished family time.

"Rosen ordered in Chinese food from a new place, *The Dynasty*. It just opened around the corner. We should take the kids there. They'd love it."

The Taylors had three children: Gary, age seven; William Jr., age five; and Cora, age two. The youngest was the maniac who tormented her older brothers. They kept their mother busy and wishing she saw her husband more.

Although William was ambitious, he felt real guilt that work preoccupied his time from Halloween through April 15th. His boss and mentor, Sol Rosen, took a liking to William, guided him through his profession and through office politics, which could be insurmountable. The goals were an equity partnership and large bonuses. To achieve those goals, one needed to secure clients and keep them happy and paying large fees

"When do you plan on coming home? It's already tomorrow," Becky asked.

“Rosen’s still here. I’ll be damned if I’m leaving before he does. I want to watch him walk out the door and see the back of his head. It’s important for him to see me still here at work when he leaves. It’s not just a matter of principle. It’s a matter of dollars to my bonus.”

Becky groaned, “Money isn’t everything!”

Solomon “Sol” Rosen was the cigar-chomping senior partner of Lamar, Gleason & Rosen, an accounting and management firm that specialized in representing country music recording artists. The firm represented more than twenty Grammy winners and several artists who’d crossed over into movies and television. Although the firm’s principal place of business remained in Nashville, it had opened satellite offices in both Los Angeles and New York to meet the special needs of its clientele. After Rosen walked out and shut the door, the younger man told his wife he loved her.

Becky felt less neglected and responded, “I love you too, William.”

Five minutes later, William locked Michael Jackson’s thick file in his desk drawer, grabbed his suit coat, and headed for the elevator. The building was empty, except for the security guard, whose nameplate identified him as Ralph Kramer.

The offices of Lamar, Gleason & Rosen were on the tenth floor of a twenty-two-story office tower. Taylor pushed the down button and waited for one of the three elevators to take him to his car in the basement parking lot.

The doors opened, he got into car #3, pushed B, and daydreamed about passing the last part of the CPA exam, audit. He’d failed it twice before. He’d passed the other four parts the first time around. He just couldn’t get this audit shit, and the funny thing was he’d never need it in connection with his work. His mind jolted back to reality. “What the hell?”

The elevator jerked hard, plummeted three floors, and abruptly stopped. It was the type of noise that makes you cringe, like gears of an engine seizing up.

William looked up at the smoked glass ceiling and saw his reflection. Fear was in his eyes. *Relax, these elevators have backup systems, and then there are backup systems to the backup systems, and then finally backup systems to those backup systems. There’s nothing to be concerned about. You’ll be driving home in fifteen minutes. Relax, man.*

Confined in the car, William couldn’t know that the emergency brake started sparking. That wasn’t true of Ralph Kramer. The retired sixty-year-old police officer loved his job with Bradley Guard Service. Basically, he was paid eighteen dollars an hour to read, listen to books on tape, or snack from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. at the Crystal Tower. He’d been employed there the last three years since retirement from the force. It was easy, quiet work. He had almost nothing to do and almost no contact with people. He’d gained fifteen pounds because the work was so sedentary; he’d lost his hair before he’d started the job.

Kramer’s sensors picked up the sparking emergency brake, but he didn’t know what to do. He had almost no training for such an event. His instinct told him to determine whether the car was occupied. “Anybody there? Push the black button to reply.”

William couldn’t answer. The violent force of the abrupt stop threw him to the floor. On the way down, he hit his head so hard that he cracked the paneling of the elevator. Blood poured from the deep gash on the back of his head and started to pool on the elevator floor.

William looked down. *That's a hell of a lot of blood. Damn!* Concerned, he put his right hand on the back of his head and brought it back in front of his face. The tips of his fingers to the palm of his hand were covered with blood. *Shit, I'm losing a lot of blood.*

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. It was immediately covered in blood and so slick that he had trouble punching the numbers 911. Another problem was that his eyes wouldn't focus.

He could hear someone answer, "911, state the nature of your emergency."

All of a sudden William's mouth got so dry no words came out, no matter how hard he tried. Finally he squeaked out, "William Taylor, injured in an elevator in the Crystal Tower."

"Is that at Fifth and Church, sir?"

Establishing location of a caller was the most important priority; the details were secondary. "Are you injured, sir?"

"Yes, bleeding pretty badly from the back of my head."

"Sit tight. Help is on the way. Is there anyone you want me to have the police call to let them know about your situation?"

William didn't reply. He disconnected the 911 operator. He'd given her the information he needed to. Now he had to make the tough call to Becky. He didn't want her to hear about this from some police officer over the phone or, worse, to see a police car arrive in their driveway at two in the morning to report his predicament.

Dazed, William lay on the elevator floor, trying to gain his composure. His mind racing, he figured the elevator fell a few floors and then the emergency brakes caught it. He was right, but what he didn't know was that those emergency brakes were defective.

"Is anyone in car #3? This is Ralph Kramer." Kramer used his cell phone to first call 911 and then the emergency number for Olympus Elevator Company. He reported, "The emergency brakes of car #3 engaged and are sparking. I've got an elevator stuck between floors at the Crystal Tower, Fifth and Church. Unknown if anyone's in the car. I'm trying to make contact."

The dispatcher at the company responded, "We're already on our way. We heard from 911. They got a call from an occupant, a Mr. William Taylor. He reports bleeding from the back of his head."

The police department's computer system maintained elevator service records for such emergencies.

During Kramer's exchange with 911, Taylor momentarily became more alert. He managed to struggle to his knees and push the black call button,

"Help! Help! Help!" William called. His head was pounding, and the blood continued to gush. From the speaker he heard, "Keep pushing the black button to communicate."

William was back on the elevator floor, exhausted from his efforts. He thought and almost yelled out loud, *what fucking idiot designed this communication system? Couldn't they anticipate that someone might be knocked to the floor, unable to get up?*

He worked his way to his knees but fell back onto the bloody floor. Frustrated, the button four feet away, he yelled to no one, "William Taylor, Taylor . . ."

Barely conscious, William mustered all of his strength, got to his knees, crawled the short distance, and pushed the damn black button. "Taylor, William Taylor," he gasped "Cell, 400-7163."

Five seconds later Kramer called William on his cell phone. Contact with the outside world, and William didn't have to push that damn button. He was proud of his ingenuity, but his head was pounding harder, and he was feeling nauseous.

"Mr. Taylor, help is on the way. Hang in there. How badly are you hurt?"

The answer was obvious by the weakness in his voice, "Hurt bad, hit my head . . ." He faded.

Kramer tried to keep him talking and asked, "Are you married?"

"Yes, ten years. Becky. Tell her I love her," he choked out.

"Don't worry. You'll get to do that. Children?"

William closed his eyes and started to sob. Kramer repeated the question. No answer. Kramer yelled into the phone, "Wake the hell up, Taylor!"

He did, and William insisted, "I'm calling my wife" and hung up.

Kramer began to protest, but it was too late. He knew that the injured man was right.

William slowly dialed his home number. He misdialed twice.

Finally Becky answered, "If you're calling to impress me with your dedication to work, I'm not. I was in bed trying to fall asleep. I've got a day tomorrow too."

She waited for some snappy response. There was none, so she continued, "By the time you get home, get to bed, and do your morning routine, you'll be operating on three hours of sleep. I wouldn't want you doing my taxes."

Still no response, so she decided to provoke him, "Are you thirteen years old, have nothing better to do than harass some poor housewife trying to get a good night's sleep so she can care for her children and family? What's wrong with you?"

During her rant, William had been mustering all his strength to get out a cohesive sentence. He managed to say in a very weak voice, "No, I'm hurt, sweetheart. I'm bleeding in the elevator, which is stuck between floors. Help is on the way."

His words were choppy. Her attitude immediately changed from smug to concerned. "Where are you hurt, darling?"

"My head, bleeding badly, feel weak, fading . . ." His voice trailed off.

"William, William, William, William!" Becky yelled into the phone, louder and louder each time. The last time was almost a shriek.

It worked. His eyes shot open, and for the first time he noticed the name of the elevator company, Olympus, and the names of the last two inspectors, Thomas Gunn and Thomas Brooks. As William read the name of the last inspector, he felt a jolt accompanied by a horrific grinding noise.

Becky heard him say, "Fuck you, Olympus, Gunn, and Brooks." Then the elevator fell the remaining seven floors. The crash shook the Crystal Tower. The sound was unmistakable, even from the other side of the phone.

Becky screamed in horror, her entire body shaking. She knew what happened. She screamed, "William!" and said a little prayer for her poor husband. She was sure he was dead. Then she heard a slight whisper, "Becky . . ." She knew she heard something, but it was extremely faint, ghostlike.

“Becky . . .” There it was again. He was forcing out her name between measured breaths. She cried as she pictured him alone and dying. Then she heard another voice. She didn’t know who it was.

Feeling helpless, Ralph Kramer kept saying, “Mr. Taylor, help is on the way.”

Dying, William wondered, *who is this idiot?* The still working phone was only five inches from William’s mouth. Becky could hear his shallow breathing, and between breaths, he mumbled words that she couldn’t understand. After a few minutes, his incoherent words turned to sobs and then complete silence. She kept yelling his name again and again. No response.

The impact caused severe trauma to many of his organs and internal bleeding. However, according to the autopsy report, the smoked glass ceiling cut him so badly that the cause of death was from cuts made by the falling smoked glass. According to the autopsy report prepared by Dr. Edward George, William was “cut to ribbons and bled to death.” The report also found that William survived the second elevator malfunction and crash by fifteen minutes, in pain, conscious, knowing he was going to die.

The police investigation lasted two full days. Olympus Elevator Company was allowed access to the site on the second day.

Two days later, William Taylor was buried at Woodlawn Crematory and mourned by his widow, Becky, and three children.

WILLIAM TAYLOR SR.
BELOVED HUSBAND AND FATHER
August 22, 1964—April 2, 1996