

All Fall Down

by **Derek Elkins**

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Ray stole a glance over at Corrine as she sat, half twisted around, playing with the twins. Yeah, she didn't have a clue. Sure, she was a bit suspicious. After all, how often had they deviated so much from their routine? But Ray thought he'd handled it really well. That part about stress at work was especially convincing.

Corrine caught him mid assessment. "What's the matter, Ray?" She tilted her head in that cute little way of hers, like she'd done a thousand times since they'd started dating in the suburbs of Philly. "Are you sure everything's okay?"

He gave her what he'd hoped was a convincing smile but felt cold and dead on his lips. "Like I told ya: everything's a peach. I just got a lot going through my head right now."

In the back seat, Emma suddenly shrieked into a version of some unintelligible song that lodged a four-inch spike eight into Ray's brain, causing his knuckles to whiten on the wheel. "Oh Christ, can you keep her quiet?"

Corrine nodded and immediately reached into the backseat to grab Emma's hand. "Hey girls, how would you like to play a little game?"

His wife and the girls faded into the background as the memories of that time in the boss' office played once more.

Ray had been reaching minute twenty of a fifteen minute break when Steve poked his half-bald head into the breakroom. "Ray, there you are. Martins is looking all over for you."

Ray groaned and rolled his eyes. That would be Vic Martins, his immediate supervisor and pain in the hindquarters. "Why?"

Steve shrugged. "How should I know? He just said to find you. He didn't say why?"

Ray rose to his feet. "And where does his majesty wish me to be?"

Steve, job done, had already begun to move down the hallway. "His office."

Ray squared his shoulders and set off down the opposite side of the hallway toward the boss' office. Great. This was all he needed. It was bad enough that he'd spent all morning having to listen to Mrs. Logencamp groan on and on about how poorly her portfolio was performing. Now he was being cheated out of his normal thirty minute/fifteen minute break. Well, he'd show old Vic the Stick. A day like today may just call for an hour and a half lunch.

Ray stopped in his tracks right outside of Martins' office as he realized that the boss wasn't alone in there. There was another guy in there with him: one Ray didn't realize. What the heck was this? Did somebody die? He knocked on the door softly.

Vic's eyes bounced up suddenly, recognized Ray and quickly fled to the other guy's face. "Yeah," he yelled. "Come on in, Ray."

An alarm suddenly started ringing in Ray's brain. As he twisted the knob, Ray felt that old familiar smirk drop onto his lips. Something was going on, but if they thought for a second that they'd catch Ray Denton unprepared, they had another thing coming.

He took one step into the office and closed the door behind him. "Mr. Martins." He nodded toward his boss.

Vic's eyes glanced once over to the new guy and then slid to the floor by Ray's feet. Never a good sign. "Ray, have a seat, will ya?"

Ray could have said no and remained standing, but he didn't want to seem guilty. "Sure," he said, taking the nearest chair.

Slowly, Ray crossed his legs and smiled, daring them to find him guilty of anything.

Vic began to fiddle with a pencil with his left hand as he made his way to the solidity of his desk. "Ray, this is Gary Cross. He wants...He's got a few things he wants to talk over with you."

Ray forced his shoulders to relax as he examined Gary Cross. He's got a mustache like a cop, he thought immediately. But that was just an initial judgment. It could mean anything. Of course, Gary was wearing a cheap polyester suit, another sign of a cop, but let's not get hasty. This could really be about anything.

But Ray didn't really think so. Ray wasn't an idiot. He knew how to read the signs and the signs right now were screaming at him. Before Gary Cross even uttered a word, Ray knew exactly what he was gonna say. It was the Turner and Sparks account. But that was okay too. Ray had that one covered from day one.

Gary Cross was seated in the other chair facing Martins' desk. He had old, leathery skin and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, probably from decades of smoking and waiting. Probably to allow Ray to form the wrong opinions, Gary sat staring at Ray for a crazy amount of time before speaking. Ray was about to interrupt the silence with an anxiously witty aside when Gary began.

"We've been watching you a long time, Ray. Of course, you're a pretty smart boy. You've learned to cover your tracks well. But you can't hide the customer's feelings and Mrs. Turner had some very strong feelings in the last few months."

Ray relaxed. So it was the Turner and Sparks account. Well, now he was on familiar ground.

Gary continued, unfazed by the slight smile creeping up on Ray's lips. "So I had one of my best men take a look at the Turner/Strong account. And you know what, Ray? He didn't find a single thing wrong. Every dollar was in the right column. Every period was in the right place. But you already knew that. Didn't you, Ray?"

Ray allowed his smile to grow a bit more confident, but he didn't say anything. He wanted to see Gary's full hand before he allowed any of his cards to show.

"Yeah, see, I can see by your smile that you think you had all your bases covered, Ray. And you did a superb job too. Why, we hadn't see a racket like yours since John Stark. We knew you were something special."

Ray's smile slipped. Woah. What?

Gary pointed a finger at Ray. "Yeah. You remember John, don't you Ray? He had a sweet little gig going on. See, he wasn't taking anything directly from the portfolios. He'd just move stuff around a little. He'd move a certain bad selling stock into this account and move a good selling stock from that account and into another. Soon, the majority of the good stock was in a certain portfolio. But not all of it. See, John was kind of like you. He didn't want to give anything away. He didn't get too greedy cause he wanted this to last a while. But like you, John had one of those suspicious clients. He had one of those clients who liked to keep their fingers in everything and know where everything was and how it was doing. Just like Mrs. Turner. And once we started pulling on one string, the whole thing started coming apart. Just like with you."

Ray struggled to smile. "Look, I don't know what..."

Now, Vic Martins was staring directly at him and his eyes didn't let up for a moment. This was his management face. This was his I-don't-want-to-do-this-but-if-I-have-to-it's-gonna-get-over-quick face. "Ray, you're fired."

Ray stood up quickly. "You can't do that. I didn't do anything wrong."

Vic's face stood stony. "Get your stuff and get out before we escort you out."

Ray's eyes flashed violently. "I'm gonna fight this. I'm gonna sue this company and you for wrongful termination. You can bank on that, Vic."

"Get out, Ray."

And that was it. He knew he was done. He knew he wasn't going to fight anything. The more he fought, the more that would come out. His world had just gone officially downhill and there was no way back up.

It was on the way home that Ray decided that if he was going down, he was gonna take his family with him. They could take away his livelihood. They could take away his house and his cars. But he was the only one that was gonna touch his family. If it was going down, it was going down. There was no way around that now. But if it was going down, it would be on Ray's terms.

And here he was, about a mile away from their summer cabin and he was starting to sweat just a little. But that wasn't gonna fly. It was gonna be bad enough with what lay ahead. He couldn't afford to let Corrine know that something was wrong.

So he gave her his best customer smile and hoped it would be enough. "This is just what we need, babe. A few days away and no more stress."

Corrine smiled back with a small nod before turning back to the girls.

Another minute and it was down the gravel road which opened to that same little meadow with the old cabin. It had been a while since they had come here, but everything was where it needed to be. Well, almost everything.

Ray pulled into the circle drive and wasted no time getting out the bags from the trunk. He'd almost slipped up at home and forgot to pack them. Luckily, Corrine, none the wiser, asked about the luggage. If they were gonna be gone for a while, they surely need them. Sure, thanks babe.

After a minute of fiddling with the key in the lock, the front door swung open and that musty smell hit Ray strong in the face. He wished he didn't have that. He wanted everything to be perfect. If this was going to be their last memory, he wanted it to be a good one.

His first step was to get the fire going. But, what do you know...they were out of wood.

Frowning, he turned to Corrine, who was getting the girls situated on the couch. "Babe, I thought we left this place stocked with wood, but we're out. I'm gonna head out for a second and chop us a little."

Corrine nodded as Ray grabbed the axe and headed out the door into the cold. As soon as the cabin was out of view, Ray looked around until he located the old path to the lake hidden between the big Elms. It was just a bit down the path.

Of course, he'd have to shoot Corrine first. He couldn't let her free to defend the girls. The girls shouldn't do anything though. They'd be too alarmed to know what was going on.

And there was the side path that led to the oak tree with the old tire swing.

But should Emma or Cody go next? Ray didn't really want to think about it, but he knew he'd never go through with it if he let his emotions creep back in. It didn't matter really which one of the girls went next. He'd off the one closest to him first.

He reached the big oak with the tire swing and stopped dead. There was the oak. There was the tire swing. But there was also a fresh mound of dirt with a box lying on top of it. What the hell was this?

Ray raced over and knelt beside the mound of dirt. His hands shot out and grabbed the old shoebox, but he knew what he'd find even before he lifted it. It was empty. He'd hidden the pistol by the oak tree a couple summers past, afraid one of the girls would get to it in the cabin. He'd buried it in this very shoebox and now it was gone.

It had to be here somewhere. It just had to be. His eyes darted around, in the hole, around the dirt but it was nowhere.

Ray shot to his feet. Whoever did this was gonna pay. One last way out of this mess and someone had taken that away from him too. Well, that wasn't gonna fly. This was not the way Ray was gonna go out.

His eyes rested on the axe that was lying next to the mound of dirt. Man, he did not want to do that. But if it was the only way...

"Hey!"

Ray whirled around and there was a guy leaning against the tree on the other side of the path. And he was twirling Ray's pistol around in his right hand.

Ray took a step forward and stopped, pointing at the pistol. "That's my gun. I want it back."

The stranger smiled but all Ray could see was the pistol twirling around in a lazy loop. "What do you need it for?"

Ray took another step forward. "That's my gun. And I said I want it back."

The gun stopped twirling and rested, barrel pointing at Ray. "You need to forget about the gun, Ray. And the axe."

Confused, Ray's eyes finally made it up from the gun to the man's face. The stranger was completely bald. Even his eyebrows were missing. And he was wearing some kind of costume. And he was...smiling at Ray. There was something settling about that smile. Maybe he was a hypnotist.

Ray backed up until he felt the Oak behind his back. Only then did he allow his legs to slowly fold him to the ground with the Oak supporting his back. "Give me my gun," he repeated, weakly.

The man continued smiling back. "Both you and I know that wouldn't be wise, Ray. Look, I know it seems pretty dark where you're at right now but it's not the end."

Ray grabbed a hold of his temples, covering his eyes. "Of course it is. How could it be anything but the end? There's no way out of this mess. Just give me my gun."

Ray heard the sound of something hitting the brush yards away and knew the man had thrown the gun. Softly, he began to cry into his hands.

"But what are we gonna do? There's no way out of this. I'm going to jail and what'll happen to Corrine and the girls? What are they gonna do without me?"

Ray heard the stranger stepping forward. "Better they were dead than go through the pain? Is that it, Ray?"

Ray shook his head but didn't say anything. What was there to say?

"Ray, somewhere along the way, you forgot who you were. Somewhere you started thinking that money and comfort was all you needed to be happy. And then they started to be the same thing. But your wife and kids don't love you because you provide for them, Ray. They don't love you because you give them big Christmas gifts or make sure the pantry's always full. Your Corrine loves you because you're the man she married. Maybe you've changed just a bit over time but if you can change one way, you sure can change another. And Emma and Cody don't think of you as the man who brings them presents and good food to eat. They love you because you're their daddy. You're not the individual things you give or do. You're more than that."

The stranger took another step forward. "It's not gonna be easy, Ray. Nothing that's worth anything is gonna be easy. But you'll get through it. You'll all get through it. And you'll be stronger because you'll get through it. And when you get a little down the road, I want you to think about one thing. There's the reward that you get because you truly deserve it and then there's something else, something you don't deserve but that's offered to you anyway. When times like this come around, you've got to take it even when you don't deserve it, Ray. You've got to take it because while you may not think you deserve another chance, someone else thinks you do."

Then there was silence but Ray knew only the inside of his palms. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't know what else to do. And he didn't understand half of what the guy was saying to him. All Ray knew was that his plans had changed.

Suddenly, there was a flapping noise, like a startled bird had taken off. ..then the sounds of the woods and Ray was all alone.

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