

Free Fall

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PROLOGUE

Would you back off?

The voice was desperate, frustrated. An exaggerated whisper that was a little louder than a conversational tone but hadn't quite reached the resonance of a shout. Fred Clausen pinched his lips between his teeth and was forced to bite down fairly hard to keep from laughing. He took a step to the side and watched the concentration return to his partner's face as the young man tried again to shove the key in the lock.

The dented and only partially attached doorknob didn't seem to be in any danger of giving in, so Clausen leaned his back against the cinderblock wall and took some of the weight off his arthritic knees. The faint light from the large neon sign at the other end of the parking lot flashed white then red, over and over again, giving an alternately angelic and devilish quality to his partner's expression as he continued to complete what should have been the simple task of opening Room Fourteen.

The architecture of the Pagoda Motel took a shot at Oriental but didn't quite make it – unless, of course, they had trailer parks in Peking. Six detached buildings had been carefully lined up on a treeless expanse of asphalt at the edge of the city, separated

from the street by nothing more than a barely noticeable seam where the blacktop of the parking lot met the blacktop of the road.

Clausen brought his wrist up close to his nose and had to wait a few seconds for a car to drive by and reflect enough headlight to defeat the gloom. His watch read eleven thirty-two. He should have been in bed listening to the pleasant rhythm of his wife's snoring a half-hour ago.

The light from the passing car had also been sufficient for his overly enthusiastic young ward to unlock the door and dive through. He reappeared a moment later, his face a mask of anger and purposefulness.

Clausen reluctantly bounced his back off the wall and shuffled past him into the stale-smelling belly of the room, his feet causing quiet crunching sounds as they found old food and God knew what else hidden in the thick red shag. He headed straight for the TV and flipped it on, then picked up the phone by the bed and used it to jab at a particularly dark and utterly unidentifiable stain on the bedspread. It didn't appear to be tacky, so Clausen dropped onto the bed while his partner jerked the curtains fully shut and put the stout leather bag he'd been carrying on the table under the window.

'What the hell are you doing? Are you ready?'

'Ready for what?' Clausen grunted out, scooting to the bottom of the bed and using his toe to jab at the television's volume button. Soon the housewife on the screen was pitching her dish detergent at a decibel level that vibrated the ashtray on top of the set.

'I don't mean to bother you, *Fred*, but do I have to remind you that we have a job to do? Maybe you could find the strength to pitch in a little.'

Clausen let his head loll over and he watched with feigned interest as his new partner cleared the predrilled holes in the wall that separated the room they were in from the one next door. The kid was hopeless. He had the look: close-cropped hair, a body that was thin and ramrod straight, a grave, dignified expression that seemed to hang on at the corners of his eyes even on those rare occasions when he laughed.

And then there was the wardrobe. They were there to take dirty pictures of a guy in a hotel that rented rooms by the hour – a casual dress affair if there ever was one. So what did he do to blend in? He took off his suit jacket and put on a blue wind-breaker that looked suspiciously like it had been pressed.

Clausen had tried to teach the kid how to get by in today's FBI. How to swipe police collars and pad arrest numbers, how to suck up to the supervisors and ASACs – everything he'd learned in his pleasantly uneventful twenty-five years in the Bureau. And what did he get for all that effort and goodwill? A cold stare. No future, this one. No future at all.

'Anything worth looking at?' Clausen said, struggling out of the pit in the center of the mattress and trying to ignore the pain in his lower extremities as he knelt down on the floor.

They'd been shadowing this high-society prick for three mind-numbing weeks now. Their orders had

been explicit as to the high level of surveillance required, but had been cautiously vague when it came to things like what it was they were after. Now it looked like a light was about to dawn.

Clausen reached for the reel-to-reel tape recorder under the bed and slipped the headphones over his ears, effectively blocking out the sound of the television behind him.

His young partner was completely engrossed in his effort to assemble the tiny box of a camera he'd pulled from his bag, so Clausen crawled over to the section of compromised wall beside the bed's Formica headboard. The reel-to-reel was still recording silence as he pressed his eye up to one of the small holes and took in what seemed to be a mirror image of the room they were in.

Their subject – or perhaps more accurately, victim – had done only a marginally better job of blending into this part of town than Clausen's partner: old, dirty polyester slacks, a black T-shirt with an obnoxious slogan peeling off in large flakes, tennis shoes with one sole flapping. The effort had been wasted, though. Even calculatedly uncombed, it was obvious that his thick brown hair had been expertly trimmed. His fine, pale skin was equally well cared for and the quiet air of superiority that made him look older than his thirty-two years was too perfect to have been learned; it had to have been bred into him.

The black woman he was slowly circling was less interesting. One of the countless street-walking hookers who could be seen gathering in small flocks on almost every corner in this part of town. Clausen concentrated on her for a moment, trying to calcu-

late why their victim had chosen her over all the others.

She seemed pretty much generic. Taller than average maybe, and a bit more stocky. Not really fat, it was just that she didn't have that angular thinness many of her peers carried as badges of their addictions. She was also no spring chicken – probably nearing the end of her useful life in this kind of work. Of course, her clothes were typically impressive, constructed of boldly colored fabric designed to shimmer in dim streetlight and accent the outline of skimpy underwear beneath. Makeup was equally heavy and haphazardly applied. An unnaturally colored wig covered her head.

Clausen pulled away from the wall and flipped the headphone off his left ear. 'Is it me or were we taking pictures at that boy's wedding less than two weeks ago? I mean, I know those blue blood chicks probably aren't what you'd call wild in the sack, but damn, I—'

'Could you just *be quiet?*' Another harsh, scolding whisper. Clausen ignored it.

'I'm telling you, son, I know about these things. I see rocky times ahead for this guy's marriage.' He affected a sad shake of his head. 'I don't know about you, but I think I'm going to wait the full year Emily Post allows before I send a gift.'

That was the comment that finally did it. His young partner pulled his face away from the camera in front of him and whipped his head in Clausen's direction. His eyes seemed to have sunk a little in his head, probably due to the extreme tension in his facial muscles. 'Are you having a good time, Fred? Are you?'

Clausen smirked.

'We have a job to do!' the young agent continued earnestly. 'An important job.'

'An important job, huh?' Clausen leaned back into the peephole and watched the hooker next door begin a seductive dance to the music in her head.

'Son,' Clausen said, sitting back on the carpet and leaning against the bed. 'This is nothing but institutional paranoia. I think you could safely say that we're violating that boy's civil rights for no good goddamn reason.'

His partner was concentrating on his camerawork again and except for the barely perceptible ripple in the muscles of his jaw, he didn't react to Clausen's analysis.

'You just gonna stand there, or are you going to come over here and get some of this?' The woman's voice barely rose above the interference coming through the headphones. Clausen sighed quietly and rose to the small peephole again. He watched her reach out and saw the young man jerk backward out of range. 'Don't touch me!'

The woman didn't seem at all surprised by what Clausen thought was kind of a strange request to make of a paid-for hooker. He watched the young man take another step back and nod toward a corner of the room hidden from the FBI agents' view.

The sound of muffled footsteps was closely followed by a second girl coming into view. She crossed behind the woman standing in the middle of the room and came to a stop between her and the young man, who seemed to have temporarily stopped breathing. Clausen felt a brief burst of adrenaline

shock his nerve endings as he carefully examined the new player in their little drama.

She was so tiny. Her thin body was devoid of curves and wouldn't have reached five feet if she'd stood on her tiptoes. Her complexion seemed a little darker than that of the other woman in the room, but it could simply have been her lack of makeup or the frame of dark curls shadowing her face. Her clothes were less professional, too – a simple one-piece blue dress with buttons down the front. One thing was certain, though. This girl was still looking forward to being a teenager.

The older woman took a tentative step toward her client again, and again he moved back. Her expression of confusion melted into a sly smile when the man jerked his head toward the young girl standing silent between them.

'Why don't you come on up here with me, honey,' the woman said. Clausen could see the self-consciousness and hesitation in the little girl's face as the woman took her hand and helped her up on the bed. The girl scooted back and laid her head on a dirty pillow, her dress sliding up her legs far enough for Clausen to see what looked like a pair of white-and-orange polka-dot panties. The slightly nauseous feeling in his stomach started to grow when he realized that they weren't polka dots at all. They were fucking cartoon characters.

Jerking away from the peephole, he fell backward onto the grimy carpet. 'No way,' he mumbled, meeting his equally horrified partner's gaze. 'There's just no fucking way.' Clausen rose slowly to his feet,

slid his .38 from its holster, and started purposefully for the door.

'What the hell are you doing?' his partner said in a loud whisper, then jumped up and blocked the door. Clausen grabbed the lapels of the young man's windbreaker and tried unsuccessfully to shove him out of the way. 'What the hell are you doing?' he repeated, eyes trained on Clausen's right hand that, in addition to the nylon lapel of his windbreaker, was holding a loaded pistol.

'What the fuck do you think I'm doing?'

'We aren't authorized to interfere, Fred. You know that. We're just here to record events. Now come on. Let's do our job.'

'Our job?' He released one of his partner's lapels and pointed to the wall they had been looking through. 'Our job is in that room right now.' He tried to push past again, but his young partner shoved him roughly back. 'Yeah, Fred, our job is in that room. We are going to gather the evidence that we were ordered to gather. You think I like this? I have a daughter not much younger than that girl. I'd like to go in there and hold that son of a bitch down while you put a bullet in the back of his head. But I can't. There are bigger things at stake here—'

'Pull your head out of your ass! There's *nothing* at stake here.'

'It doesn't matter what you think, Fred. It doesn't matter what I think. We have clear orders.'

Clausen slowly lifted his gun hand until it was aimed at his partner's chest and looked into his eyes. They were clear and unafraid, glowing with the light of a man young enough to think he could make a

difference. A kid who had been stroked into thinking he could save the world.

But Clausen was too old to use that excuse. Old enough to know that this assignment was bullshit. And what was even more bullshit was that he was going to let this go. He could already feel his righteous indignation fading as thoughts of his pension and a retirement full of warm beaches and umbrella drinks crowded into his mind. He let his gun fall to his side and watched his partner return to his camera as though nothing had happened. He stood motionless in the middle of the room for what seemed like a long time. Finally, not sure what else to do, he took a few hesitant steps toward the wall and put his eye back up to the hole, intentionally focused only on the man who was the subject of their assignment. By the look on his face, the show playing out on the bed was the center of his universe. Clausen forced himself to follow the man's gaze and watch as the older woman used her teeth to slide the girl's panties over the sneakers still tied to her feet. The little blue dress was completely unbuttoned now, revealing the uniform brown of the girl's barely pubescent body. Clausen felt the breath catch in his throat as the woman began running her tongue in slow circles up the girl's thin legs. He had to look away when she buried her face between them.

Their subject was standing now and had managed to tear his attention away from the show in front of him long enough to slip on a pair of rubber surgical gloves. Clausen closed his eyes hard and backed away from the wall. When he opened them

again, his partner was looking at him with a mix of sympathy, uncertainty, and pain on his face. It was more emotion than he'd thought the little bastard capable of.

'You do what you gotta do,' Clausen said, starting for the door again. 'But I'm not part of this. You can write it up any way you want to, but I'm not staying here to find out what he does to that little girl with those gloves.'

I

Tristan Newberry glanced up at the seemingly endless rows of gray metal shelves surrounding him and immediately spotted the ancient black man as he came around a mountain of file boxes.

'You ready for another one?' the man said as he continued to shuffle, slightly stooped, in Tristan's direction.

'Guess so.' Tristan wedged a toe under the box at his feet and lifted it a few inches off the floor. Still a little heavy. The old security guard, as the only other human being inhabiting this forgotten warehouse, insisted on helping lug files around. But at seventy-two, his back wasn't what it once was. Tristan crouched down, pulled out a few of the heavier looking bundles, and laid them on the floor.

'Watcha doin'?' Carl said, continuing to deliberately close the distance between them. Same question every day.

'The bottom of this box looks like it's about to fall through.' Same answer every day.

Carl nodded sagely and accepted the white lie with a grateful smile.

Tristan hefted the box with an exaggerated grunt and presented the light end to the old man who got a firm hold of it and began shuffling slowly backward.

'Probably ought to cut down here,' he said, adjusting his trajectory a bit. 'Looks like we got another leak the other way.'

Tristan looked up at the tangle of pipes running across the ceiling and tried to spot the particular one that Carl was talking about. The insulation surrounding most of the lines had started to rot years ago and now the condensation was beginning to slowly drip on the mindless government drivel contained on the shelves below. After the first few weeks of being trapped there, Tristan began to notice that the distinctive smell of mold was still clinging to him on his drive home. Now it hung on even after his evening shower.

This wasn't how things were supposed to have worked out.

He'd been a year into his law degree at Georgetown University when the economy had gone into a tailspin. By that time, he'd already sold damn near everything he owned to pay for tuition and was up to his eyeballs in credit card debt and student loans. But who cared? In less than two years, he'd graduate and sign on with some prestigious law firm for a hundred grand a year, right?

Wrong. Last year's law school graduating class probably had more lawyers in it than there were practising. And they were all going after the same ten jobs. He'd recently run into a friend who had passed the bar six months ago, working in a video store.

So he'd no choice but to drop out and take a shot at landing a job in one of the few growth industries left in America: the government. Or more specif-

ically, declassifying documents through the newly fortified Freedom of Information Act.

He showed up for the open interview and was directed toward a waiting room so full of other potential applicants that some of them had been forced to stake out small areas of industrial green tile and sit on the floor. After a few seconds of milling through the crowd and discovering just how jealously those tiles were being guarded, he'd headed for the door. What chance did he have? He was just a penniless law school dropout from a poor farming family with no connections and no background in government work.

He'd been halfway down the hall, and nearly to freedom, when a young woman in thick, black-framed glasses jogged up behind him and took him by the arm. He could still hear her voice: 'Mr. Newberry. I'm sorry. You were directed to the wrong interview.'

He'd followed obediently through the maze of hallways, stairs, and elevators, long enough for his normally infallible sense of direction to start to spin, then was deposited in a small, windowless office somewhere deep in the building.

It was there that he had met some bald guy with marginal dental work and heard the rather cryptic legend of the Misplaced Documents. The guy had gone on to tell Tristan how his résumé was most impressive – which it wasn't – and how he seemed to be imminently qualified to help in the search – which he wasn't. Blah, blah, blah.

At first he hadn't been that interested in the man's story. He just wanted a secure job that would

pay enough to keep him living at a reasonable standard until the economy turned around. But the more the guy talked – in circles, mostly – the more captivated he became. Bald Guy – he honestly couldn't remember his name – had told him that the person they were looking to hire would be kind of the Indiana Jones of the National Archive. Now, how could anybody resist a pitch like that?

'On three,' Carl said.

Tristan followed Carl's lead and gently swung the box as the old man counted. On three they dropped it on the card table Tristan had been using as a workspace since his first day.

'I'll go grab the stuff you took out,' Carl said, already moving off in the direction they'd come from. Tristan nodded absently and peeked into the box. What would it be today? Farm subsidy budgets from the 1940s? An in-depth statistical analysis of the height of wheat versus inches of rainfall? Whatever.

As was so often the case, the reality of the job hadn't quite lived up to the initial hype. The real story was that, a while back, some government moron had deposited a hand-truck full of apparently sensitive FBI documents in the middle of an Agriculture Department storage facility. And now they needed to be found before the warehouse could be emptied into the public domain.

It hadn't seemed like a particularly monumental task until Bald Guy had started slapping down thick stacks of bound paper.

'Revision of the filing system,' he'd said. Slap.

'Original warehouse closed down, documents moved.' Slap.

'Broken water line, documents moved again.' Slap.

'Construction.' Slap. It had gone on like that until there was a paper trail nearly eight inches in height teetering on the desk.

Strangely, though, the job was right up Tristan's alley. Since grade school whenever he'd taken those tests where you had to find patterns in streams of numbers or geometric shapes, he'd always scored off the scale. He'd told Bald Guy as much during his interview and gotten a disinterested smile that seemed to say 'lucky for us.'

Tristan sighed heavily and rubbed his temples as he dropped into the worn canvas chair. Day in and day out, it was the same. Endless hours cross-referencing old government records he could care less about, trying to follow the murky trail of a few pointless FBI needles in the Ag Department's haystack.

When he'd finally pulled his nose out of the endless procession of boxes and files to look around him, though, it had finally struck him how strange his situation was. Why was he here alone, with only an ancient security guard to watch over him? Or more accurately, a security guard and a battery of video cameras. Tristan looked up at the sleek, ultra-compact camera bolted to the dilapidated wall in front of him and wondered again who was watching. Not Carl – as near as Tristan could tell the cameras didn't output anywhere in the building. It had started him wondering. When he'd told Bald Guy about his childhood test scores,

had that smile really said 'lucky for us'? Or had it said 'we know'?

It was little things like that that had kept him interested. He'd always been burdened with an over-active sense of curiosity. Why wasn't anybody checking up on him? He hadn't talked to Bald Guy, or anyone else in a position of authority, since he'd started. Why did some of the file records seem almost intentionally cryptic and obtuse?

It looked like he might be getting closer to finding out. A hell of a lot of detail work and two back-to-back strokes of blind luck had led him to the section of the warehouse from which he was now pulling boxes. Four months, six days, four hours and thirty-three minutes of mind-numbing torture and he was finally starting to get somewhere.

Tristan leaned forward and turned up the small television resting on the edge of the table, but his attention was instantly diverted to his portable computer when it picked up the vibration and the screen-saver came on. A million pixels glowed out the picture of a man struggling up a snow-covered mountain surrounded by sky. Tristan reached out longingly and touched the screen, but withdrew his hand when Carl came around the corner and dropped a portion of the remaining files on the table.

'Who you votin' for, Tristan?'

'Huh?'

Carl nodded toward the TV screen where the highlights of last night's presidential debates were being rerun for the hundredth time.

'Oh. I don't vote.'

'What do you mean you don't vote? You're a college boy. If anybody should, it ought to be you. You understand it all.' Carl pointed at the screen. 'I'm starting to like that Hallorin guy. I mean, he always seemed like he had something to say, but he was such a hard-ass. Now, though, he seems . . . I don't know, less . . .'

'Glasses,' Tristan said absently as he centered a dusty file in front of him.

'What?'

'It's the glasses. In the last election, when the economy was riding high, everyone wanted to be associated with the government – take credit for the boom. Now, with the Dow at forty-five hundred, it's a whole new ballgame. No one wants to look like a politician. Senator Hallorin, our previously obnoxious third-party candidate, has gone with eye-glasses. And as you pointed out, they have the added benefit of softening his image.' Tristan motioned to the screen with the binder-clipped stack of paper in his hand. 'Now our clever Democratic candidate has completely bucked the conventional wisdom of facial hair being the political kiss-of-death and gone with the beard for the same reason. Senator Taylor, our flat-footed Republican front-runner, missed the boat again. His only recourse now is to shave his head. But since he's leading by thirteen points, don't hold your breath. Packaging, Carl. It's all about smoke and mirrors.'

The old man shifted uncomfortably and shoved his gnarled hands in his pockets. 'I really don't think it's what they look like that's important, it's what they say—'

'What they say?' Tristan interrupted, feeling his mood darken as it always did when the subject of politics came up. 'They aren't saying anything.' He pointed to the television again. 'Our Democratic hopeful's gotten used to all the limos and butt-kissing he gets as vice president and doesn't want to be pounding the street looking for a job. So he'll tell you that he's dedicated to supporting the poor and out of work. But then he'll get real vague when it comes time to tell us exactly how he plans to pay for it.'

Carl tried to say something, but Tristan cut him off.

'Then there's ol' Bob Taylor. He'll try to blame the sad condition of the country and the world economy on the current Democratic administration, and try to make you forget that the Republicans have controlled Congress through all this and that he's been a major power in that party since the dawn of time. Notice how, when he talks about his history of leadership, he never mentions Congress? No, he always talks about the past – his days as head of the CIA, the Cold War, the Carter years.

'And last, but not least – except in poll numbers – we have your newly bespectacled Independent candidate, David Hallorin. He'll try to convince the public that the country's current condition is the result of years of mismanagement by both established parties, which is essentially true. What he'll leave out, though, is that the parties have pretty much just followed the public's mandate to not rock the boat – boat rockers don't get elected. And while he's dancing around the fact that the American