

Free Fall

By D.R. Ransdell

2498 words

The forest of green shimmered. Trees stretched seven stories high. Slender leaves twinkled in the sun. Glimpses of lakes streaked between the shades of emerald.

I'd never seen anything like it. I'd grown up in Durango, Mexico, where the only sustained green was in the sierra. I'd traveled up the corridor as far as Tucson, which was the same kind of desert. Acadia National Park was lush in a way I'd seen on TV, but I wasn't focused on the scenery. I was on a mission. They didn't come when you wanted them to. They sprang up, making demands.

My cousin had talked me into this one the week before. We were kicking back on her porch swing when she quietly laid it on me. "Kique, it wouldn't take long. A week at the most. You could use a vacation."

Rachel knows I'm like a dog excited to hop in the back of any pickup truck, but I had no reason to make it easy for her.

"Why not do it yourself?"

"I think it will take a man."

"I'm not sure I have any clean clothes," I said. Rachel knew I didn't care a thing about laundry.

She pressed her slender violin hands together. "I may have taken some liberties."

"You washed my clothes?"

"She's a really good friend."

“Who’s in a lot of trouble.”

“Not yet. She wants to be.”

“In trouble?”

“Not exactly.”

“She wants me to be in trouble?”

Rachel unfolded a map of Maine. “You’re too clever for that.”

“What does she need?”

“To murder her husband.”

I shaped my hand into a pistol and pretended to shoot. “Think I’m a hit man?”

We shared silent smiles. She was present the time I intervened on my sister’s behalf.

“You’re no hit man,” Rachel said. “But you could help my friend become an escape artist.”

“Do you know how much you’re asking?”

She added an extra slug of Brandy Presidente to my Coke. “All I ask is that you set things up. Fair enough?”

“What are you paying me?”

“It’s for a good cause.”

“They always are.”

She smoothed my shirt sleeve. “Forever laundry?”

“I might not stay in Tucson.”

“How much, then?”

“Three k, minimum. And your friend buys me a plane ticket.”

“Her husband controls all the money.”

“Where do they live?”

“Austin.”

“Get me the bank account numbers.”

“You’ll take care of it?”

“Don’t I always?”

We clinked our glasses. I’m a sucker for a good cause.

I met her at Coffee Shake, along the main drag of Bar Harbor. We sat near the front window where we could keep an eye on the passersby. It was a cruise day, so the sidewalk teemed with tourists.

My cousin hadn’t exaggerated the situation. Despite the deep olive skin, Adela Orozco had a black eye and signs of bruises on both arms. The irises depicted on her blouse couldn’t mask the defeat in her eyes.

Adela stirred her cappuccino. “I can’t stand it anymore.”

“So leave him. I’ll help you.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can. You have to decide you want to.”

“But I love him!”

I knew better than to argue. She loved him and she hated him. They always did. “The default fee—”

“No. I’m ready. Rachel promised you’d help.”

“If that’s what you want. But you have to know the risks. It’s easy to get caught.”

She folded her hands together as if praying for God to get rid of him. “I’m caught either way.”

True enough. She’d jumped into the quicksand of terrible choices.

“What does he like to do?”

“He’s crazy about hiking. That’s why we vacation here. For a month, he takes a long hike in the morning, five or six hours. Then he comes back and rests. In the late afternoon we do the Great Head Trail. That way we can swing over to Sand Beach and have a beer while we watch the sunset.”

“They allow beer inside a national park?”

“We do it anyway.”

Right. A regular tough guy. “You like to hike too?”

She shrugged. “I go.”

Of course she did. It was that kind of relationship.

“What would happen if one of his friends saw me talking to you?”

“He doesn’t have any.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“You’ve been coming here how long?”

“Seven years.”

“Right.”

Seven years, no friends, and one abusive husband. The only surprise was how long it took her to reach out.

As soon as I let Jimmy Orozco know about my range of services, he asked me to meet him at the Hungry Shrimp, which was a block from the harbor. The day trippers had vanished, so the bar was full of locals bent on spending their paychecks. The dead fish on the walls were overdone, but I liked the wood accents: walls, tables, chairs. It was a second-class diner for people who didn't need enough light to see what topped their lobster rolls.

I went for the shrimp instead, but Jimmy only thought I was weird because I wouldn't drink Lone Pine, either of the Allagashes, or even Smuttynose Old Brown Dog Ale, although I liked the sound of it. Instead I had a Fighting Crabtini. Why not? I was in Vacationland.

We small talked while we ate. Jimmy's brown hair shook over his forehead when he talked because he was a month overdue for a trim. Since his Moose Crossing t-shirt didn't shout high fashion, I wasn't sure he noticed about the hair.

Jimmy wiped fish off his bottom lip. "I checked around. My buddies said you're good."

In small circles, word got around. "So far I've done all right."

"Why should I pay you if I'm doing the dirty work?"

Fair question. I forked my last shrimp. I wouldn't have over-fried them myself, but they were still good. "Do you want to get away with it?"

He took a swig of the Long Pine. "Okay. But I'm not paying until she's dead."

I chewed slowly as if the motion helped me think. The trick was to convey a balance between interest and disinterest, wanting the work and rejecting it. "I'm not helping until you pay." I stood. Usually that was all I had to do.

“Sit, sit. Don’t take yourself so seriously.”

“I have to. Otherwise no one else will.”

“Listen, I’ll pay you half up front.”

“All right.” He had no idea that was the usual deal. “Why not just leave her?”

“Can’t.”

They never could. “Why not?”

He lowered his voice so far that I had to lip-read. “She’d get all my money.”

It was always about money. Sex too, but since most clients didn’t want to talk about that, they talked about money instead.

“She doesn’t deserve it?”

“We’ve only been together seven years.” He made it sound like a century.

“Seven-year-itch, huh?” He didn’t get it, so I let it drop. Not everyone stayed up late watching old American movies.

I spent the next two days hiking and re-hiking Great Head Trail. There were dozens of places you could push someone over the edge, and who would know better? But the spot I chose included a view of the ocean below. It was a great place for a distraction. It only took one misstep to take a tumble. A long one.

On Thursday I finished the necessary purchases at Outdoor Adventures before meeting Adela at Coffee Shake. When I brought her a cappuccino, she looked up, startled. “That’s for me?”

“That’s what you had last time.”

“My husband never—I mean—”

“Doesn’t even buy you a coffee?”

“He buys it. But he never—”

She didn’t have to say anything else. Jimmy wasn’t the partner type. He just didn’t know it.

“Do you have a plan worked out?” she whispered.

Why else did I call for a meeting?

I wiggled a napkin out of the holder and picked up a pen.

When I reached the Hungry Shrimp that night, I ordered myself a Pirate’s Lust and brought it over to the table where Jimmy was waiting.

“You didn’t buy me a Lone Pine?”

“Wasn’t sure what you wanted.”

“I always get the same thing.”

I pointed to the bar. “Want me to—”

“Never mind.” He marched off to the bar and fumed while he had to wait for three twenty-somethings to decide which mixed drinks they wanted.

They were stalling on purpose. I’d already talked to them about it.

By the time Jimmy came back, I’d drawn him a map. It was the second one I’d drawn that day.

“Memorize this and then get rid of it,” I said. “Don’t change your mind. Use this spot exactly. If someone is on the trail, stall until the two of you are alone.”

“What about—” he pointed to a dot on the napkin.

“That only gives you a fifteen-second delay.” I underlined the X I’d drawn. “Here you have thirty seconds. The road curves so sharply that people slow down to get around the bend. Call it lead time.”

“If I chose another spot? I’ve hiked that trail for years, so I know it pretty well.”

“You haven’t noticed all the other hikers around here? It’s even crowded at dusk. Do this exactly how I’m telling you.”

“Or else you don’t guarantee results?”

“I never do. There’s always a risk. But you already knew that.”

Jimmy tapped his beer can. “I guess you received my payment.”

“I guess I did.” I drained my glass and left the bar. I still had a lot to do.

They were twenty minutes late. I thought maybe they’d run into other hikers, but it sounded like they trudged up the path alone. I couldn’t see either of them from my perch on the rocks below.

“Wait,” Adela said. “I want to take a picture to send to my sister.”

Right. That was the script.

“You don’t need another damned picture,” Jimmy said. Then he shoved her off the edge.

The netting sagged more than I expected, but it broke her fall. More importantly, I got my hand around her mouth before she could shout out.

“Mphgh!”

“It’s me,” I said softly. “New game plan. Play dead.”

“But—”

“Play dead. Lie on your stomach. Keep your eyes closed.”

“But—”

I scrambled underneath the netting, underneath her, well out of sight.

“What happened to that woman?” shouted Mundo. He was one of the twenty-somethings I’d made friends with at the bar.

“My god!” cried Jorge, his friend. “Is she dead?”

“She’s dead all right! She broke her neck!”

“Did you push her?” shouted Nardo. “You’re a killer!”

“Stop!” cried Jimmy. “It was an accident!”

“Take a video!”

“I’ll pay you!”

“He’s a murderer! Get him!”

To his credit, Jimmy ran quicker than a marathon entrant. Nardo assured me later that they didn’t have to slow down to let him get away.

Because I’d devised a shortcut, I was waiting for Jimmy beside his rental car by the time he reached the parking lot.

He ran to me and doubled over, panting. He struggled to form a sentence. “Three hikers appeared out of nowhere! You said I’d have time!”

“I said there’s always a risk. Can they identify you?”

He wailed, which I took as a “yes.”

“That’s why you’re leaving. Immediately,” I said.

“That wasn’t the plan!”

“She’s dead, isn’t she? So things got messy. You shouldn’t be so surprised.”

“My suitcase is back at the cabin!”

“I’ll send it to you. I have your address.”

“But I’ll need my—”

“You have your driver’s license, don’t you?”

He felt his back pocket. “Yes.”

“You want to stay out of jail, right?”

“Of course!”

“I’ll take care of everything.”

He banged on the rental car. “What about this?”

“I’ll return it after the office is closed.”

“But back in Austin—”

“You say your wife’s mother is sick and she went to Mexico to take care of her.”

“Her mother is dead!”

“So her aunt is sick. And then her uncle is sick. Whatever. Make it up.”

“When they find her body—”

I pointed to the vehicles that surrounded us. “There are a million tourists on this island right now. Do you think the police have time to look for a dead woman who won’t be there?”

“You’ll move the body?”

“I said I’d take care of it.”

I handed him printed directions. “Drive to the airport in Bangor. Don’t speed. You have plenty of time to catch the flight to Dallas. From there you connect to Austin.”

“What will I tell my neighbors about cutting my vacation short?”

“Too much rain. The whole damned island is full of ticks.”

“Ticks,” he muttered softly. “But Adela’s friends—”

“Her aunt and uncle are really sick. Then she broke her leg. Pretty soon, people will stop asking.”

“What about her stuff?”

Adela had already sent her favorite things to Rachel’s house.

I got out of the car. “Cart it all to Goodwill. They’ll take anything.”

“But—”

“You’ll figure it out from here. The whole thing is win-win. That’s all you have to remember.”

I sauntered over to my own rental. Before I unlocked the door, Jimmy screeched out of the parking lot.

That night, at Bar Harbor Airport, I bought Adela a coffee and sat beside her. “How you holding up?”

“So-so. Mundo had to pack for me. I couldn’t do it myself.”

“That’s perfectly understandable.” The truth always hurt. It sank in on its own sweet schedule.

“How did you know he’d push me?” she asked.

“I didn’t. It was a calculated guess.”

“Now what do I do?”

“Start over.”

“But what if—”

I handed her a packet. The false passport looked pretty good. The fake ID was also perfect. My sister had a light touch and lots of practice.

“But how did—”

“Thank Rachel. She arranged it.”

“I don’t know how to pay you. Or thank you, even.”

From the depth of her eyes, I read the message. She was an attractive woman, only a few years my senior, bouncy breasts, rounded hips, subservient, sweet, caring—and way too dependent on the love of a man to make her feel like a woman.

“You might say this was pro bono.” I took an envelope out of my pocket. “Here’s a thousand from your husband’s savings. Don’t count it now.”

“That’s all?”

“Do you want to keep getting hit your whole life?”

She slipped the envelope into her purse. “A thousand is perfect. Won’t Jimmy notice something is wrong with his account?”

“You think he’ll go to the police and complain?”

I walked her to security, which was minimal, and wished her a good flight to Boston. Then I paid off my buds at the Hungry Shrimp. I found a nearby hotel room and paid cash for a full week.

It was finally time for a vacation.