

## WE ALL FALL DOWN

By Kim Hackett

### PROLOGUE

*Greensboro, Illinois—August 17, 2007*

Bo Ogden drove his pickup into the alley a block north of the Kirby House Restaurant a little before midnight, eager to get started and establish an alibi. The vacant streets glistened as though glazed with ice, but it was August, the pavement's sheen only a remnant of a recent rain shimmering on the oily blacktop. He coasted between the two-story brick buildings, coming to a stop in the near-empty lot behind Ralph's Bar & Grill. If anyone noticed his pickup there, it wouldn't seem odd. He was a regular at Ralph's.

The door hinges creaked when he got out, drowning out the after-rain chorus of cicadas and frogs and the slow, rhythmic ping of water dripping from roof to dumpster. In dark jeans and a faded black t-shirt, he entered Ralph's through the back door. The owner slouched on a stool behind the bar, working a crossword. Another regular hunkered down at the far end of the bar, while a skinny, under-age kid swept the floor around the silent juke box.

Bo took the stool nearest the back door and nodded at Ralph. The bartender rose, held a cloudy mug under the Budweiser tap, set it in front of Bo, and went back to his puzzle.

Bo checked his watch. The crowd ought to be coming in soon. Behind the bar, the local news played on the television. Earlier that evening a fire had claimed a farmhouse in another small town in Illinois, not far away. It took volunteer firemen three hours to put it out. Gonna be a busy night for heroes, Bo thought.

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Outside in the alley, Dirty Brown crouched near the dumpster. A fine mist haloed the street lamp above him. Thunder rumbled in the distance. He crossed the street and disappeared into the shadows of the century-old oak trees lining the sidewalk. St. Mary's church bell rang from the north end of Main Street. Midnight. If he didn't hurry, a stray dog or cat might beat him to his meal. It'd been days since the owner had left food on the Kirby House's back stoop, an unusually long dry spell.

Another long, muted rumbling. His empty stomach this time. From the Kirby's rear entrance, even on this sodden night, a myriad of discordant aromas brought moisture to his dry mouth: fried shrimp, burgers, salmon, and sauerkraut. The Styrofoam boxes usually held make-ahead foods, like ribs or pot roast. But occasionally he'd lift the lid and find a fresh-cooked hamburger and still-warm fries.

No boxes tonight. It seemed he'd go hungry again.

A crack of close thunder made him flinch. In heavy storms, he usually took refuge under the train trestle or in the park's bathrooms. Both were clear across town. He'd never make it.

Dirty had never known a business owner in Greensboro to leave a back door unlocked, but reached for the handle anyway. The knob turned, surprising him. He opened the door a few inches, half-expecting to find the dishwasher rinsing the last of the evening's china. But the steamy back room was dark and quiet.

"I'll be damned," he said, then stepped in and shut the door behind him.

He hesitated, allowing his eyes to adjust. A dim light filtered in through the small round panes in the swinging silver doors leading to the dining room. It glimmered off the massive wall of stainless-steel appliances and counters. An island in the middle of the kitchen held a foot-high stack of take-out boxes and more than a dozen oversized spice jars. The tickling scents of pepper, paprika, and garlic made him sneeze.

Feeling his way, he snaked through the dim kitchen and cautiously pushed open one swinging door. The street lamp outside the plate glass window created a murky glow inside the dining room. To his left, liquor bottles lining the mirrored wall winked at him with a car's passing headlights.

He nodded back. "I see you," he said. He plucked a yellow rose from the center of a table for two and jabbed the stem through the buttonhole of his jacket, then sidled around linen-covered tables and high back chairs toward the bottles. His callused, grimy fingers clasped the neck of the closest one. "Jack Daniels," he whispered. "My ole buddy." He lifted the bottle and swirled the contents around. Only a few swigs left. A flicker of guilt came. After all, she'd been so nice to him. At last he shrugged, stuck the pour spout into his mouth, and guzzled it like cold lemonade. Someday he'd figure out a way to repay her.

After he emptied that bottle, Dirty Brown reached for another.

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Down the street, Bo finished his second beer and ordered a third. As anticipated, hordes of college kids staggered in when the nicer joints in town closed. Ralph hustled behind the bar. It was at last time to get to work.

He caught the owner's eye. "Leave this." He pointed to his beer. "I'm goin' to the john." He paused. "If I'm not back by last call, pour me another."

The men's room was next to the back exit. Bo glanced over one shoulder before slipping into the alley. He crossed the street and scurried into the darkness under the trees.

The back door of the Kirby House was unlocked, as promised. Running a hand along the baseboard, he found the flashlight and thumbed the button. A small circle of light hit the far wall. Pointing the beam left, he spotted a stack of boxes concealing the kitchen windows. So far, so good. The security system mounted on the wall read, DISARMED.

Like candy from a baby, he thought, smiling. Now for the safe.

He pulled a piece of paper from his jeans pocket and read it aloud. "Twenty-four, sixteen, twelve." The flashlight's narrow beam led him across the kitchen, where he helped himself to a pair of food-prep gloves left on the stainless-steel work station. Closing his eyes, he killed the light and took a deep, satisfying breath.

He left the kitchen and maneuvered behind the bar, the glow of the street lamp his guide. The safe was hidden behind a curtain just left of the sink. He quickly spun the dial to the appropriate numbers. It didn't open.

He scowled and spun it again, more carefully this time, but still the square metal door didn't budge. He re-checked the paper, tried the numbers a third time. The lever went down with

a thunk and the door popped open. He took the envelope, which contained his payment—left the cash in the bank bag, as instructed—then closed the safe.

He folded the fat envelope and shoved it in his front hip pocket. Funny, he thought, gettin' paid for somethin' I'd gladly do for free.

A cop car rolled by outside. "That's it, pig, drive right on by. Go make your rounds." He rolled his head around and rubbed the back of his neck. After a week of reconnaissance, Bo knew another cruiser wasn't likely to pass by for at least forty-five minutes. He retraced his steps behind the bar area, past a few tables, and back to the swinging doors.

Movement caught his peripheral vision. He froze. A rat, he thought. Restaurants are full of them. He squatted and probed the darkness with the narrow finger of light.

A moan came from under the front of the bar and Bo tensed, smothering the light with a cupped hand. On the floor, between two stools, a man was propped against the wooden slats. Sound asleep, a bottle of Bacardi 151 stuck between his sprawling legs, one foot pointing east, the other west.

Bo shuffled closer.

Dirty Brown, the town gutter-pup. From the smell, sleeping off one hell of a bender. He shone the flashlight in the bum's face and poked his shoulder. He was good and passed out.

Bo chuckled. "You sure hit the jackpot tonight. Didn't ya, Dirty?" He lifted the bottle from between the man's legs. "Thank you. Don't mind if I do." He wiped the spout with his shirt tail before tilting it into his own mouth.

"Think now, Bo. How does this change things?" He took a second pull and smiled, tucking the bottle under one arm. He shoved the flashlight into his belt and grabbed hold of an

arm so he could haul Dirty out from between the barstools. When he had him in the open, he gripped him under the armpits and dragged him across the hardwood floor. Rum sloshed onto his shirt. The old fart was long but skinny, so though he wasn't heavy it was awkward getting him across the kitchen floor to the gas stove. Spindly arms and legs kept catching on things. His right foot got tangled up in a serving tray and stand. A dozen coffee cups crashed to the floor, but old Dirty snored on.

After leaning him against the stove, Bo pulled out some hamburger patties and lit the gas grill. He held the bottle up in a toast. "Thanks, Dirty. Cops'll never think arson now." He took one more swill, then sprinkled some on Dirty's shirt, soaking the front. He spooned grease into a large frying pan and set it on the lit burner. While the meat sizzled on the grill and the grease heated in the pan, Bo set a box of take-out sacks, some dish towels, and a stack of menus close by. He draped a chef's apron from the grill to the flammable stack, then propped a spatula in the drunk's limp hand, snickering at the comic effect.

When the slimy blob of grease had liquefied he emptied the bottle into it. He swirled the contents around in the pan, then tipped it to the stove's flame. The rum ignited. He poured it over the apron and menus. Flames sputtered and fizzled, then splashed two feet high, as if someone had done a cannon ball into a pool of fire.

Bo backed away, mesmerized. He slid his fingers under the collar of his shirt, caressing the scars on his chest. "Wish I could stick around a little longer, Dirty Brown."

He peeled one glove off with a snap and dropped it into the fire. He threw the second glove in and ran the palm of one bare hand through the flame. The heat prickled his face and throat. He closed his eyes and took in the heady feeling. How long could he take the scorching

heat? He wished he could stay to find out, but the business of an alibi tugged at him. Reluctantly, he turned away.

Outside, the rain had picked up again, but it didn't dampen his spirits. He ran light-footed through the darkness to Ralph's, slipped into the back of the bar and ran a hand through his hair. Wet. He felt his shirt. Soaked with rain and rum. Finding Dirty Brown had been auspicious, for sure, but it'd slowed down the work. No time to spare in the men's room in front of the hand dryer.

Aw, shirt's dark, bar's dark. Safe, he thought. Besides, Ralph'll be too busy keeping up with last call to notice.

Later that morning in Oakleaf, Illinois Bo set his bong on the coffee table and exhaled a long-held breath. A cloud of smoke billowed in front of him. Through the back window, a fiery orange sun peaked out over the poplar trees on the east side of the pond. The break of a brand new day. A fresh start. He looked around at his new apartment; two bedrooms, a mini-kitchen, one bath, and the tiny living room where he now sat. Better than the trailer he left behind. Nothing fancy, but good enough. And free. He picked up his worn leather journal and touched the tip of a stubby pencil to his tongue. He began writing.

*That went well. Pretty sure R. was too busy chasing after those rich kid's tips to give a shit how long I took in the bathroom. The old man being there, that was just pure dumb luck. Far as he knew, he drank until the lights went out. A befitting curtain call. I hope when I go it's from doing what I love. Most people say they want to slip away quietly in their sleep. Those retards have no imagination. You only die once, make it good. Go out in a blaze of glory, as they say.*

*Steve Irwin died happy, doing what got his rocks off. Dale Earnhardt no doubt died with a big ass smile on his face when he hit that wall. Hell, I respect people who have a swan song there at the end. The old fart got lucky tonight, that's how I see it. Who wants to sit slumped over in a wheelchair waiting for their turn to come? I could see doing that again. Maybe with someone I know. Someone awake.*

Bo held the journal in his lap and sat quietly for a moment, searing the details into his mind. He didn't want to forget any of it, but of course he couldn't write it all down. He wasn't stupid. He knew from experience memories fade, even important ones. A few notes here and there helped keep them fresh. Key words could trigger a flood of images. He thought it smart to quit there. It was enough to jog his memory. But he wasn't yet satisfied, and though he'd been up all night, he wasn't tired. He wrote a poem.

*Kindling, kitchen, a merciful kill*

*Inebriates drink against their will*

*Rainfall, raptness, flammable rum*

*Bourbon, blazes, bedraggled bum*

*Yearning, yearning, year upon year*

Bo tucked the pencil behind his ear and read the poem. Nothing special. Too rhyme-y, like most of his poems. But so what? No one in the world would ever read his work anyway. He'd written his first poem in third grade. A homework assignment. Turned out to be a love letter of sorts for his mother. Not in a weird Freudian way. Simply an honest profession of a boy's love

for his mother. The teacher gave him an A plus. He'd intended to give it to his mom for Mother's Day but never worked up the nerve, afraid she'd show it to his dad. There'd have been no end to the teasing after that, so he'd hidden it under his mattress instead. By the time he turned fifteen he had three dozen unread poems stashed away. He thought he might share them with a best friend or even a girlfriend someday. Someday never came. Neither did a best friend or a girlfriend. The poems burned up with the house. Sort of depressing when he thought about it, so he decided not to. This had been a good couple of days and if he liked corny poems that rhyme, so be it. He read it again, but this time it got thick in his throat, catching him off guard. Once again, he hadn't set out to kill anyone, but boy oh boy, he sure didn't hesitate either. He sat quietly for a while, then went to bed and slept like a log.