

# **Slow Fall**

## **Counting Down**

**Sample Chapters 1-4**

**Jeff Inlo**

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By Jeff Inlo

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**\*\*\*Important Note\*\*\***

This is the Free Edition which only includes the first four chapters of the book. If you wish to purchase the entire book, please visit my web site at [www.sitelane.com](http://www.sitelane.com).

Thank you.

*To Joan... and for all those who understand zombie preparedness!*

*Special thanks to Claire for her advice and support.*

## Chapter 1

"It's the zombie apocalypse... without the zombies."

Ray Breckford considered his next door neighbor's rather bizarre comment and replied as he had always done in the past, with a chuckle and slight shake of the head.

"You know, Ed, talking to you is always an adventure."

"I appreciate that, Ray," Ed Spielman responded, but to Ray's surprise, Ed lacked the twisted grin that normally punctuated such profound statements. If anything, he displayed genuine concern and revealed as much in a grim warning. "Unfortunately, I'm serious. This is not going to turn out well... for anybody."

Ed's somber expression and grave tone surprised his neighbor.

"Zombie apocalypse?" Ray questioned.

"Without the zombies," Ed repeated.

"Care to expand upon that?"

"You sure you want to hear this?"

Ray nodded.

"Okay, but remember, you asked. You know what people find so intriguing about those zombie stories? It ain't the flesh eating gore stuff—well, for some people it might be—but for most people it's really about watching others respond under duress. Basically, civilization collapses almost immediately and people are faced with drastic decisions about how to survive."

"How to survive? This isn't about survival. I'm not sure what it's about, but I don't think anybody's in any real danger here. Actually, I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard, but apparently there's something to it. It's all over the news, and everyone's talking about it at the hospital. I can't ignore some of the things I've heard, especially from some of the doctors, but it's still bizarre."

"You think it's ridiculous?"

"Absolutely. They're saying no one in the world is getting pregnant."

"No mammals," Ed corrected. "Mammals have stopped reproducing. Birds, insects, and fish are all just fine."

"And that's why I think it's absurd. How can they know all that?"

"Simple studies."

"They're studying every mammal on the planet? How long has it been? Just a few weeks or more, maybe a few months. No one's really sure when it started, but all of a sudden they start making statements that no mammal has conceived in the past two months. Like I said before, it's ridiculous."

"Ask the dinosaurs if they think it's ridiculous. Oh wait, you can't. They're all gone."

Ray marveled at the implied connection.

"You think this is what happened to the dinosaurs?"

"I don't know what happened to the dinosaurs," Ed admitted, "but maybe. It's just as reasonable as believing some meteor struck the Gulf of Mexico and blackened out the sky. Who knows for sure? You think scientists have all the answers? Good luck with that. What I'm saying is that it's not ridiculous to accept that a species, or even an entire class of species, will have to face some cataclysmic event which would cause its extinction."

"But this is crazy. How can they be so sure that no one in the world—that no mammal on the planet—can reproduce?"

"You work in a hospital. Aren't the obstetricians concerned? Has there been a single confirmed new pregnancy in the last few weeks?"

"Not that I'm aware of. But it sounds so crazy. I still can't believe this is anything more than some strange cyclic anomaly."

"Optimism. That dies right when the first zombie breaks through the front window."

"So we're back to the zombie analogy?"

"I didn't think we ever left it. You keep talking about how ridiculous this all sounds. That's what they say in the zombie movies when the dead start rising from their graves."

"That's my point. Zombies aren't real."

"So that means all of these stories you're hearing on the news are fake? You mean they've been able to convince each and every pregnant woman on the planet to hide the fact that she's just conceived? You don't think some attention seeking bimbo wouldn't just love to run forward with proof of recent conception? Instant celebrity. Who's going to pass up on that? More people are probably trying now than ever before."

"I admit something is going on, but how can this be possible?"

"Possible? Anything is possible. You just have to find the reason. It's just a matter of focusing on the right cause. I'm sure they're working on that right now. They may even already know. I've got my own suspicions on that."

"Care to share?" Ray asked, wondering if he would hear more about zombies or perhaps a sudden turn into the wicked plans of Satan worshippers.

Ed, however, responded with uncharacteristic reluctance at spouting unsubstantiated theories.

"I don't think so. You might think I'm crazy."

"No, not crazy. It's like I said before, it's an adventure talking to you. You're an eccentric, and eccentrics need to be heard. Don't stop now."

"I'm not sure. You're the only neighbor who still talks to me."

"That's because I like you."

"You have to like me. You live right next door. These other clowns can go hide behind their fences."

"Well, don't worry about it. I promise I won't tell anyone your ideas, except for Mary, but I have to tell her. She's my wife."

"Let's do it this way. I'll give you a whole bunch of possibilities, but I won't tell you which one I believe, and we'll leave it at that."

"Well, I've heard some on the news."

"Did you hear about the sunspots?"

"Yeah, that one and the shifting of the magnetic poles. They wonder if some kind of global energy wave is affecting everyone's biological cycles. It sounds reasonable."

"There you go. You just said it's reasonable. A moment ago, the whole idea was ridiculous."

"Well, the concept is still ridiculous. I don't believe that every mammal on the planet has suddenly lost the ability to reproduce. I still think it's some kind of strange blip on the radar. If it is some kind of energy wave, it will die down, or we'll adapt to it. Maybe we're just all out of sync."

"What if it's not just some kind of energy wave? Not that I'm saying it's not. There are all kinds of things out there we don't see, but they still exist. Radiation and impulses from the sun, gravitational waves. These things can tear apart entire planets. Who knows what they could do to the human body? Along those same lines, there's the theory about the planet's alignment with other stars."

"That sounds more like astrology than a good theory."

"Astrology is all about cycles, just like sun spots."

"Is that the theory you like?"

"I'm not admitting to anything, other than there are a lot of ideas out there. Like the one about the bird flu. You have to admit, that's a good one. Some militant country might have been messing with the makeup of the virus—you know, hoping to make a weapon—and boy, if so, did they ever succeed."

"That's the one that seems to be getting the most press," Ray admitted. "There's a lot of conspiracy theories about that one. It kind of makes sense. If the original virus spread among birds, but was then mutated, it could have been altered to target mammals only."

"So, once again, it doesn't sound so absurd, does it?"

"I still think it's absurd. How could a virus infect every mammal on the planet all at once? It would take time to spread. It wouldn't happen with the snap of a finger."

"It doesn't have to infect them all. It just has to affect enough of the right ones. Maybe it doesn't do anything to senior citizens, but then seniors aren't trying to get pregnant, are they?"

"I still think it's questionable. What else do you have?"

"Microbes. They interact with the environment in different ways. Maybe a new microbe is interfering with the reproductive process."

"And where did this new microbe come from?"

"From a lab or maybe deep in the ocean. Maybe from space. An asteroid. Come to think of it, maybe it's aliens," Ed offered his twisted grin for the first time. "Maybe one of those extra-terrestrials that make crop circles decided they like our planet but don't like most of the inhabitants. Maybe they're the ones that messed with the bird virus. Or maybe they just hit the earth with one large beam. Hit us all at once."

"And why would they do that?"

"Clear the planet without bombing us to hell."

"That's kind of like the zombies."

"Ideas for movies have to come from somewhere."

"Well, your first few ideas were a bit more reasonable."

"Here's one that you might not think is reasonable. Maybe it wasn't aliens. Maybe it was God. Maybe God just got tired of us messing up all the time. Hey, He used a flood once, but maybe that was too messy. If He just decided we should no longer go forth and multiply, this would pretty much do it."

"And not as big of a mess."

Ed's smile disappeared, evaporated like a tiny droplet of water on sizzling hot steel.

"Don't count on that. Maybe God won't cause a flood or burn everything with holy fire, but He might just leave that to us. We can make a big enough mess on our own."

"I guess this is how we get back to the zombies."

"Not the actual zombies. I was talking about the ramifications of a zombie apocalypse. Same thing could happen here. If this all turns out to be true—and I'm beginning to think

it's gone way too far to be some kind of lame early morning shock jock scam—then this is bigger than anything mankind has ever faced in its entire existence. I'm looking at the effects, what we're all going to be facing from this. It's not going to be fun... or pretty."

"Survival?" Ed asked.

"Ultimately."

"But it's not like we're all sick. There just won't be anymore babies, and that will only be for a while. They'll figure this out. If it's a magnetic pulse or sunspots, the cycle will eventually diminish. If it's a virus, they'll come up with a vaccine."

"And if they don't?"

"Then, like I said, we'll just have to learn to live without kids. Mary and I don't have any. It's not like the end of the world."

"Yes, it is."

With that, Ed turned and walked away.

## Chapter 2

"I just had a very odd conversation with Ed."

"Is that supposed to surprise me?" Mary asked, as she met her husband in the kitchen.

"Odder than usual," Ray confessed.

"Well, with everything that's going on, I'm not surprised. What did he say?"

"I think what he said is that the end of the world is coming."

"That's a bit dramatic, even for Ed."

Ray considered his previous conversations with his neighbor. He had to admit Ed had a rather unique viewpoint on most issues, but Ray couldn't ignore certain facts. There were almost always hidden nuggets of amazing insight sprinkled within narratives of conspiracies, agendas, and unusual events.

Within even the most bizarre discussions, Ed would include something about the price of food or oil, or maybe a prediction about an election, or a word of advice about certain investments. They were never direct admissions, just little perceptions mixed in with rather peculiar stories; stories about politicians getting facelifts, professional sports teams leaving the country, or some new invention never being allowed to see the light of day. And while the main point of Ed's opinions never seemed to hit the news, those secondary insights about prices, elections, and the stock market usually proved to be quite accurate.

"Maybe it is dramatic, but there's something to this. He compared us to dinosaurs."

"Dinosaurs?"

"Yeah, said something obviously happened to them to cause their extinction. Maybe the same thing is happening to us right now."

"Ed also once said that Bigfoot was a cross between an escaped zoo gorilla and a grizzly bear."

"Yes he did, and in that same discussion, he pointed out how endangered species would end up affecting everything from the timber industry to farming. He was right about that."

"But he wasn't right about Bigfoot."

"That's not my point."

"Did he mention aliens?"

"Yeah, but he was joking about them."

"Maybe he was joking about the end of the world too."

"I don't think so."

"Did he mention anything else you would consider absurd?"

"Zombies."

"I rest my case."

"I know most of what he says sounds crazy—aliens and zombies—but there's something to consider here. What happens if this story isn't just tabloid nonsense? They've got scientists talking about it now. I told you there's real concern at the hospital."

"Something strange is going on," Mary allowed. "I admit it, but what does that have to do with Ed's crazy stories?"

"Crazy? Maybe, but what we're facing is crazy. And he was serious, a lot more serious than usual."

"So you want to take him seriously about the end of the world?"

"If humans can't reproduce anymore, isn't that ultimately what we're facing?"

"That's a long way off, and only if this story is even true. I still think it's some big hoax."

"Hoax? For what?"

"Maybe they're afraid of negative population growth. Look at us. No kids here. Maybe that's happening too often. Time for a unique marketing ploy."

"This isn't a marketing ploy. This could be a real problem. No more pregnancies mean no more births. No more births mean no more people."

"Ellie down the street is pregnant."

"She's five or more months in," Ray pointed out. "They're talking about conception. She conceived before this all started happening. Conception stopped, and it seems to have stopped for everybody about two months ago or more. No new patients for obstetricians... anywhere. Don't you think they'd notice that?"

"They'll find an answer. They always do."

"And if they don't?"

"Then there'll be a lot less traffic jams."

"I guess that's one way to look at it, but Ed seems to think this is going to get messy. Yeah, he's a bit of a nut, but behind every nutball idea he has, there's something else he figures out. He's got a way of looking at things. Hey, let's be honest. I've made money in the stock market because of him."

"No, you made money because you made smart investments."

"Investments I wouldn't have even thought about if I didn't listen to his crazy ideas."

"So what do you want to do now? Run off into a cave and wait for the end of the world? Carry a sign and warn everyone that the end is near?"

"No, but I think we need to be prepared. Have a plan in place."

"A plan for the end of the world? How do you plan for that?"

"I'm not saying we need to build some kind of bomb shelter, but it wouldn't hurt to just stock up on some supplies. Keep an eye out for trouble."

"If it makes you happy, I'll buy some extra canned food and put it in the basement."

"That's a start."

Ray's reply surprised his wife. Mary had been kidding about stocking up on food and preparing for some catastrophe, a ludicrous idea spurred on by the rants of their peculiar neighbor. She never expected Ray to take it very far.

"A start? Let's not get carried away about this. I don't want to buy a whole bunch of food that's just going to get thrown out."

"Don't buy perishables."

Mary sighed.

Ed walked over to her and surprisingly put his arms around her. He didn't show his affections often, but he sensed something in the craziness, something he felt before he even talked to Ed. He didn't want to frighten his wife. If anything, he wanted to comfort her, as much as he sought to comfort himself.

Still, he reached a point where he had to consider that maybe all the talk of people dying off wasn't mere nonsense. Maybe people weren't dinosaurs, but there had always been the threat of ultimate destruction. Doomsday clocks were nothing new. There was always someone worried about biological weapons or radioactive catastrophes. Maybe

something somewhere had gone terribly wrong, and maybe they were all about to pay the price for it.

"I don't want to scare you," Ray admitted, "and I know this all sounds like some kind of absurd joke, but something's very wrong here. I'm not worried about the end of the world. I'm worried about people. I've never been able to figure them out. I have no idea how to react to all of this, and I don't think I'm alone. Uncertainty. That's what we're all facing, and that's what makes people scared. When they're scared, they do stupid things. Let's just be careful. Okay?"

## Chapter 3

Less than a month later, Ray found out exactly how people would react. As he walked to the front door of the administration wing of the Summit Valley Medical Center where he worked, a security guard called out.

"Ray... Mr. Breckford! I can't let you leave."

"Someone needs me for something?" Ray asked, clearly confused by being stopped at the door.

"No, you can't go out there."

"What are you talking about, Jack? I'm just going home for lunch."

"Don't you know what's going on?"

"No, I've been in my office all day. End of the month reports. Haven't even checked the news this morning."

"You haven't seen the markets?"

"The stock markets?"

"Yeah, they've crashed. All of them."

"Crashed?" Ray repeated. It was no small word, and even as he had spent the past few days wondering about some impending calamity, the revelation of a sudden and ominous reaction caught him off guard. "Why? What's going on?"

"Some guy... some analyst for a financial news show started ranting about what's going to happen. Wasn't good. They actually shut him down, screen just went dark, but it was too late. He said a lot, and people recorded it. A video of him was uploaded and it went viral. Every time some site deleted it, it would just show up again."

"And the markets crashed? How bad?"

"Most down over fifty percent."

"Half their value?!" Ray exclaimed, unable to imagine such a vast decline.

"More. All in just a few minutes. It was all just one big massive sell off. I guess what this guy said spooked everyone. They've shut them down, stopped trading. But it's out of control."

"People are panicking?"

The guard hesitated.

"Look, I'm not sure what's going on," Jack confessed. "There's rumors of stuff, maybe riots. I haven't seen any video of looting or anything, but I've got a report..."

"What's the report?"

"We've been told to secure the hospital. No one is supposed to leave. If you're here, you have to stay."

"But I'm not a doctor or a nurse. What can I do? I should get home."

"I understand that, but I don't think it's safe to leave."

"Is there anything going on outside?"

"I've taken a few looks. Everything looks okay here, but who knows what it's like a few blocks from here."

Ray took a quick glimpse outside the front windows. He could see beyond the main parking lot and driveway. The street leading to the hospital was empty.

"Where's the traffic?"

"Like I said, no one is supposed to leave the hospital."

"But what about everyone else?"

"You really haven't seen any of the news, have you?"

"No, what the heck is going on?"

"The president has declared a national emergency. Everything is supposed to close. If you're home, you have to stay there. If you were on the road, you were supposed to go directly home. If you're at work, you're supposed to stay until the building gets clearance to evacuate. Local authorities are supposed to determine who gets to leave and when."

It was a great deal to digest in a single moment. Ray had spent the morning working on month end financials. He had been dealing with budget revisions as well. He had locked himself in his office and went into a zone of concentration. He had almost lost track of time, but his stomach reminded him it was time to eat. Eating was suddenly the last thing on his mind.

"National emergency? All over some newscast?"

"If you had seen it, you'd understand. It's more about this strange plague, or whatever it is that's out there."

"You mean no pregnancies?"

"Yeah, the guy just about put a real number on what it meant. Talked about how it would destroy our economy faster than anyone could guess. But he was questioning why the market wasn't reacting. I guess he wanted it to fall. Looks like he got his wish."

Ray still couldn't connect all the dots. The information was coming at him like water from a busted fire hydrant.

"So the market crashes? We've had crashes before."

"I guess, but what about this plague thing? First a plague and now a crash."

"I don't think there's a plague out there," Ray corrected.

"There's something going on," Jack fired back, clearly annoyed that his opinion was being discounted. "It's been on the news. You don't want to call it a plague? What would you call it?"

"An anomaly."

"Yeah, well, this *anomaly* is what the guy on the news talked about. Made it clear it was big. Real big. And the crap hit the fan."

Ray tried to grasp the enormity of the event. He wondered what was really going on. He couldn't imagine how one tirade on a financial news broadcast could lead to a national emergency.

"Anything else going on besides the market crashes?"

"Not sure. Rumors and stuff, but hard to say what's real. That's why they've called out the National Guard and put restrictions on travel. They want to clamp down on this before it gets out of hand."

As if to emphasize the security guard's point, the thunderous roar of a low flying helicopter rolled in from somewhere out of their view. As it grew closer, the windows began to shake. When it finally faded, Ray revealed a growing anxiety.

"National Guard, travel restrictions. This sounds like martial law."

"No, it hasn't been officially declared. But we are under emergency orders... like a lockdown when there's a shooting."

"Can they do that?"

"I guess so, because they have."

"So you're not going to let me leave?"

"I can't let anyone leave, not until I get clearance. Maybe you should go back to your office. I can't believe you didn't hear the announcements."

Baffled beyond words, Ray muttered an explanation for his unawareness and continued to mumble to himself as he walked back to his office.

"I had my door closed. Can't hear them that well. Don't really listen too much when I'm focused on work. National Guard? Markets crashing? Half their value? How could they lose that much? Aren't the breakers supposed to kick in?"

He wondered how much he lost in savings, but only for a moment. For whatever reason, he suddenly thought of his conversation with Ed and the end of the world. The losses in his retirement account swiftly faded away like the roar of the helicopter's engine.

"I've got to see this video," Ray remarked to himself as he ignored the concerned expressions of those he passed.

Before he reached his office, he pulled out his phone. He decided to call home first, tell his wife what had happened, but the network was busy, overloaded by everyone else trying to make a call at the same time. He knew trying to download data would be just as useless, so he went to his desk computer.

Hospital servers had priority during emergencies, and though he felt bad using it to see a video, he needed to know what was happening. Connections were surprisingly slow, but with a little patience, he was getting through.

His first few searches brought up broken links. The video had clearly been uploaded and then removed. He finally found it on the fourth try and queued it up for play. After long agonizing moments, his screen was filled with a man in a suit shaking his head with disgust. The audio came on nearly at the start of his tirade.

*"...a farce. No way does this reflect reality. Markets are supposed to give us a view into the future. So what's the deal here? Are the markets being manipulated? Or is everyone just ignoring what's going on and what it really means?*

*How can everything be unchanged? The markets are basically frozen. How can that be unless someone wants it that way? Don't hand me that nonsense about other indicators. Interest rates, economic forecasts, housing data, unemployment; it's all meaningless at this point.*

*Here's the real deal people, the economy is going to bust. Not just ours, all economies. And it's not going to take thirty years, ten years, or even five. We're lucky if we can hang on for one.*

*Think about it. In twenty years, we won't need back to school sales. Not one. We won't even need schools. No more teachers. In ten, we won't need new playground equipment, orthodontists, or even grammar schools. In five, every daycare business will close its doors. Diapers are gone in three. Maternity clothes? Why make any more?*

*Don't any of you get it? Every month that goes by another industry is going to have to shut down. And it will never stop. Very soon there will be no need for preschool toys, infant clothes, baby formula, cribs, high chairs, and car seats.*

*Even people running to healthcare stocks are making a mistake. Sure there'll be old people, but what about the money that's made for vaccinating kids or prenatal care. That's all vanishing as we speak.*

*And that's just humans. We're looking at all mammals. No more cows. There goes the dairy and beef industries. Where are the fast food restaurants going to get the meat for their burgers and tacos? What about the pet industry? No more puppies and kittens means no more vet visits and no more pet supply stores.*

*Who's going to invest in the future? There is no..."*

Before the analyst finished, the video went blank.

Ray stared at the dark rectangle on his computer screen. That was the future. Nothing. No more babies meant no more kids. No more kids meant no more teenagers, not necessarily a horrible idea for him, but it wouldn't end there. Everyone would get old and die. Then there would be no one left. No one but the birds, insects and fish.

It was a dark future, just like the blank screen before him. A financial news network reporter obviously figured that out and realized people were ignoring the truth. The reporter gave them a full dose of it, and it caused a panic in the stock market.

Ray wondered how many people tried to stop it, wondered where that financial reporter was at that moment; probably not a good place. It didn't matter. The balloon of ignorance was popped and consequences were sure to follow.

Ray thought once again of his neighbor. Ed said it was going to get messy. He just witnessed the first spill.

## Chapter 4

Ray was thankful he didn't like parking garages or security lots. He preferred parking in spots far removed from wherever he was headed. At the supermarket, he parked in the last space in a corner. He had to walk a bit farther, but he could always find his car and he never worried about someone backing into his bumper. The same was true for where he worked. He left his car in a gravel lot meant for overflow visitor parking. No one watched it; there was no gate, no security booth, and no fence.

In order to make it home, which was what he decided to do, all he needed to do was get out of the building, and that was the easy part. He knew which emergency doors would signal an alarm and which ones were silenced to allow maintenance workers to leave without having to trudge all the way to the front entrance.

He left his office with a stack of papers in his hand. Nothing else. He left his briefcase under his desk after he emptied the important contents into his pockets. He perused the papers as he walked down one hall after another, just another manager more interested in work than the nonsense going on outside.

Upon reaching a corner stairway, Ray raced down two sets of stairs and exited out a seldom used side entrance. It was only good for leaving the building. It would lock when it shut, so he wouldn't be able to get back inside. He didn't care.

As he walked briskly towards his car, he felt a pang of panic. He wasn't worried about the possible mayhem in the streets, didn't think about riots or looters. For some reason, all he could think about was hospital security. He envisioned them racing after him and dragging him back inside, demanding to know why he left... why he broke the rules.

He wanted to laugh at himself, thought he was being childish, worried as if he was some teenager trying to skip out of school. He was an adult, a manager at a hospital. All he wanted to do was go home. What were they going to do? Shoot him?

As he reached his car, he finally allowed himself to look back. No one was following him. Either they didn't see him or didn't care enough to chase after him. He jumped in his car and drove off.

He finally did laugh to himself, actually feeling like a kid that got away with some small prank. He had beaten the system, scoffed at authority, and congratulated himself for acting on his own. The good feeling lasted about a minute.

As he drove through town, he couldn't believe the lack of traffic. It wasn't just near the hospital. Every street was empty. It was as if he was traveling through a ghost town.

He started to feel as if there were a thousand eyes upon him and there was nowhere to hide. Any hope of getting away free and clear ended with the flash of red lights behind him.

Ray pulled over quickly, turned off the engine, and waited for the cop to appear near his window. The patrolman, however, decided to remain near his own vehicle.

A voice blared out from some unseen speaker on the cop's cruiser.

"Exit the vehicle and walk slowly to the rear of your car. Keep your hands in plain sight."

The enormity of the situation hit Ray like a giant wave that catches sunbathers off guard. A national emergency had been declared. Travel had been restricted. He wasn't skipping out on work or dealing with some strip mall security cop. The police had pulled

him over, and it wasn't for a moving violation. He had ignored emergency orders during a national crisis. He wondered if they could shoot him as a looter.

Ray carefully exited the car, making certain not to make any sudden movements. He looked back at the cop. The officer was already out of his patrol car but standing behind the open door of his cruiser. Ray couldn't see the cop's hands, and wondered if he still had his sidearm holstered or if it was already drawn. Ray didn't raise his own hands over his head, but he put them far out to the side with his palms forward.

When Ray reached the rear corner of his car, the cop called out another order.

"Move to the trunk and put your hands flat on the vehicle."

That meant Ray would have to turn around. He wondered if it would be better to be shot in the back so he never saw it. As he bent slightly over the trunk of his car and placed his hands on the warm metal, he felt a vulnerability he could not describe. He heard the cop's footsteps on the pavement right behind him.

"Are you carrying any weapons?"

"No, sir."

"Any drugs on your person?"

"No, sir."

"Anything at all I should know about?"

"I just have my wallet and my phone... and some papers in my pocket. I left my keys in..."

"I'm going to search you. Do not move."

The cop did so and then took a few steps back.

"Turn around," the officer ordered.

"Do you have ID in that wallet?"

"Driver's license and a..."

"Let me see it. Remove it from the wallet and hand me the license only."

Ray did exactly as he was asked.

After looking at it, the cop asked what Ray thought was a ridiculous question.

"Your name is Raymond Breckford?"

The license had Ray's name printed in the center along with a fairly current picture. He wondered if the cop had a problem with facial recognition. He almost asked, but remembered he could still be considered a looter. He decided to give a simple answer.

"Yes."

"Where are you coming from?"

"The hospital, Summit Valley Medical Center. I just left a few..."

"Were you injured... sick?"

"No, I work there. I have a work ID in my wallet as well."

"Let me see that."

Ray removed the badge from his wallet, another laminated card with his name and picture. He wondered if the cop would ask him to confirm his name again. He didn't.

"Where are you headed?" the officer demanded.

"Home."

The cop eyed Ray with obvious suspicion.

"Your workplace hasn't been cleared for dismissal. Why did you leave?"

Ray didn't want to say that he decided to ignore the travel restrictions and orders to remain at work, so he stretched the truth without making any obvious misstatements of the facts.

"I was taking up important space. I figured if there was an emergency, they'd probably need room and wouldn't want everybody just hanging around. I'm nonessential personnel."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an accounting manager. I work in the finance department."

"No one was cleared to leave the hospital. Not visitors and not personnel. Not even nonessential personnel. What are you doing on the road?"

Ray tried to stick to his story without admitting guilt.

"Like I said, I was going home. I didn't want to get in the way. I figured the hospital might need room. It's not like I'm a doctor or a nurse. I'm just a numbers cruncher."

"They would have cleared you to leave if that was the case. Did you act on your own or did someone ask you to leave?"

"I acted on my own."

"How did you exit the building?"

"Excuse me?"

"Hospitals are priority emergency centers. Guards receive specific instructions. They should have stopped you at the door. Did anyone give you permission to exit the building? Did a guard allow you to leave? "

Ray didn't want to get anyone else in trouble, so he decided not to reveal his discussion with Jack the security guard.

"I went out a door that wasn't monitored."

"An emergency exit?"

"Maintenance."

"Why a maintenance door?"

Ray had to dance a bit faster.

"It's a side door I use a lot. It's closer to where I park."

It was a small lie—he hardly ever used that particular door—but it was a lie that wouldn't be easy to check. Ray believed the cop didn't have time to verify his story, but then the patrolman asked a direct question Ray didn't want to answer.

"Did you know about the travel restrictions?"

Ray tried to hide a grimace. He doubted he did a good job. He spoke quickly, and once again, tried to stir in portions of honesty.

"I heard a lot of stories, but I wasn't really sure about any restrictions. Actually, I missed most of the announcements. I only found out about the market crash less than an hour ago."

"An hour?" the cop questioned, clearly not believing the account, even though it was the most truthful part of what Ray had stated.

"It's true. Really. I was working in my office, focused on my work. It was when I headed out for lunch that I started hearing things. I wasn't sure what was going on. I still don't. Listen, I wasn't trying to break any rules."

"You broke a lawful order when you left the hospital and got in your car."

"I just thought I should get out of everyone's way. They said we should stay home. That's where I'm headed."

"You were only supposed to go home if you were already on the road. These roads are to be kept clear for emergency vehicles. You didn't stop at a cash machine or a grocery store, did you?"

Ray didn't want to be viewed as a possible hoarder. He never had any intention of adding to potential panic. He held open his wallet. He had a paltry few dollars.

"I didn't get any cash, didn't even go to the bank. See? And there's no groceries in the car. You want me to open the trunk? It's empty."

"Stay right where you are."

The cop took a wide path around Ray and peered into both the front and back seats of Ray's sedan. He stood quiet for a long moment until he finally walked back to Ray and revealed a frown.

"Did any of the guards at the hospital tell you to stay put?"

It was another question Ray didn't want to answer, one he had really hoped to avoid. He wanted to escape arrest at almost any cost, but he didn't want to get anyone else in trouble for his decision to leave. If he lied to the cop about what happened when he initially tried to leave the hospital, it could backfire on him, or worse, end up costing Jack, the security guard, his job.

Just as he was about to admit his guilt for knowingly leaving the hospital when it was clearly under some kind of lockdown, fate intervened. A call came over the cruiser radio regarding a disturbance at a convenience store. The cop's frown turned into a scowl, but he had run out of time and had to make a decision about Ray.

"I'm going to let you go," the patrolman allowed, but he was clearly not happy about the circumstances. "Go directly home. I'm going to call in your plate. If you're found stopped anywhere but your residence, you'll be arrested on the spot. Do you understand?"

Ray nodded, but the cop had already turned and stepped lively back to his patrol car. Strangely, Ray didn't feel quite as much relief as he thought he should. Instead, he considered the event that had saved him.

*Disturbance at a convenience store.*

He wondered if it was just a disturbance or something more. It was possible someone just got tired of standing around waiting to be let go, but it was also just as possible that the rioting and looting might have already started. Thoughts of violent outbreaks were far more incentive for him to get home as quickly as possible than the cop's warning.

### **A Final Note from the Author**

**Slow Fall: Counting Down** does not end here. The entire book is available for sale at many on-line ebook stores. For more information on obtaining the rest of the story, please visit [www.sitelane.com](http://www.sitelane.com).

If you have a comment or question about *Slow Fall*, or any of my other books, please feel free to send me a note. Also, please let me know if you encounter any difficulty with the formatting. Contact information can be found on my web site at [www.sitelane.com](http://www.sitelane.com). Please consider my other novels, including the *Delver Magic Series*, *Soul View*, *Soul Chase*, *Counterproductive Man*, *When Do I See God?* and *Alien Cradle*.

Jeff Inlo lives in New Jersey, USA with his wife, Joan, and their dog, Jilly.