

THE FALL GUY

BARBARA FRADKIN



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Summary: Handyman Cedric O'Toole is set up to take the fall for a murder he didn't commit. He'll need all his inventive power to save himself. (RL 4.0)



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CHAPTER ONE

The first hint of trouble was when I saw the big black Buick roaring down my lane. I didn't recognize the car. But the way the guy drove, he was either showing off or too stupid to realize he'd blow his shocks in six months. Too late, he slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop in a spray of gravel, flattening my front gate. It was an old gate, hanging by a piece of chicken wire, but still...

A few choice swear words came to my mind, but died when the guy unfolded

himself from the car. Six foot and easily two-fifty. Beer gut and a couple of extra chins, but I doubted that would slow him down much.

He wiped the dust off his bumper and inspected it. That seemed to take forever, as if he was daring me to start something. I didn't, even though I could feel my blood beginning to boil.

Finally he shrugged, reached into his front seat and took out an envelope.

“Are you Cedric Elvis O’Toole?”

I should have just said yes, but I didn't like his tone. Besides, I hadn't been called that in so long I'd almost forgotten it was my real name. What can I say? My mother had always expected Elvis to sweep in and marry her, but he died the day I was born. When she got over her shock, she decided Cedric would make a better name for a doctor anyway.

When you're from a scrubby backcountry farm, who was going to set you straight?

I've been calling myself Rick ever since Barry Mitchell laughed out loud at roll call the first day of kindergarten.

"Who's asking?" I said instead.

"Jonathan Miller from Hopper, James and Elliston, Attorneys at Law."

That was my second hint of trouble. There's only one law firm in the township, and Hopper and his pals aren't it. But before I could even reply, he slapped the fat brown envelope in my hand.

"Consider yourself served."

"With what?"

"A summons to appear in court."

I let the envelope fall to the ground. A million thoughts raced through my head. Had the tax guys finally caught me? I'm just a simple handyman trying to give myself and my customers a break on the occasional job.

Not the big ones that require permits or guarantees, just the little fix-its like painting the shed or repairing the chain saw. I need that couple of bucks way more than the tax man does.

“What for?”

Mr. Fancy Car smirked. The guy had no class. Take away the blue suit and the skinny tie, and he was just a goon. “My job is to deliver it, not read it.”

He was standing there, hands in his pockets, like he was waiting for some answer. I bent down and dusted the thing off. It felt thick enough to hold down a tarp in a gale. I started to sweat. Legal documents—in fact, just about any document—made me sweat. But I tried to look cool as I tore open the flap and pulled out a stack of papers. They looked very official, like the ones I got for this piece of scrub when my mother died. She called it a farm, but no one had been able to grow anything on it except weeds for years.

I could see the guy looking around, taking in the scrap heap of rusted cars and engine bits all over the yard. I liked to invent things. Who knew when a broken lawn mower might come in handy? There were more bits of engine and metal inside the sheds. When I ran out of room for my inventions, I built another shed. The result wasn't pretty, but it had been a few years since I'd tried to impress anybody.

I did keep a few chickens and a goat, but they didn't exactly improve the look of the place. And out back on the sunny side of the barn, there was a vegetable patch I was pretty proud of. When you're an inventor still looking for that big break, you don't have a lot of spare cash to throw around in supermarkets.

Thinking about money brought me back to the papers in my hand. Even without reading them, I knew this was going to cost me money. I scanned the

front page and made out the words *plaintiff* and *defendant*. Then the name in bold letters right in the middle stopped me cold.

Jeffrey Wilkins

2 Wilkins Point Road

I'd just done a job for Jeff Wilkins. A big job, building a new deck on his fancy waterfront cottage. We'd squeezed it in just under the size limit. So no permit, no paperwork, no taxes. My mouth went dry.

I put on some bluster. "What is all this about? Somebody complained?"

The smirk grew wider. "Don't you read the papers? Watch the news?"

"No," I snapped. I never read the paper. My jerry-rigged tv antenna did a fine job of getting me the hockey games and nature shows I liked to watch, but I never bothered with the news. Who wanted to know what big-city drug dealers and snake-oil politicians were up to anyway?

The Fall Guy

Then he said the words I was most afraid of hearing.

“You might want to get yourself a good lawyer.”

ADVANCE READING COPY

Barbara Fradkin is a child psychologist with a fascination for how we turn bad. She is best known for her gritty detective series featuring Ottawa Police Inspector Michael Green. She won Arthur Ellis Best Novel Award for both *Fifth Son* (2005) and *Honour Among Men* (2007).

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