

# Downfall

## Chapter One

Carol Hart lived alone. She had not had guests in weeks. But she'd had a visitor. She looked again at the rack containing her kitchen knives. It had been moved. In the other rooms, nothing major was out of place. But there were several small things. She could have sworn she had hung her bathroom towel differently. And the coats hanging in her closet were swept slightly to one side. The wrong side.

Was she losing her mind?

She looked up suddenly, scanning the small apartment. Who on earth would want to invade her living space? There wasn't much here for her; what would there be for anyone else? At least she had the view. Stuck in a strange city with a crappy apartment and a load of pain, all Carol had left to ease the turmoil was a spectacular vista from the twenty-third floor, overlooking downtown Atlanta and points north. Family problems, unemployment and, above all, the unrelenting anger never took a holiday. Even the revenge she'd helped to take on her tormentors, so long and careful in the making, had proved to be nothing more than a cheap, dirty high, like a whiff of glue in a dingy basement. All of it had left her precisely nowhere.

It had left her here.

Carol walked out and sat on the cheap plastic lawn chair on her balcony, the place she had spent so many hours, planning to take flight, to make good the escape that had so long eluded her. As the late-night traffic below her meandered by, she stood up and stretched, feeling slightly light-headed. She knew she should return to her job postings and nightly glass of Chablis. She sat down at her dinette table and looked at the employment ads on her laptop but had trouble focusing on the screen. She drained the rest of her wine, then let out a little yelp when a knock sounded on her door.

She got up and approached the door cautiously. "Who is it?"

"It's me," said a familiar voice.

She looked through the peephole and exhaled.

Carol admitted her visitor, feeling relieved but puzzled.

"Stu," she said. "I'm glad to see you."

The man she knew as Stuart Merrick smiled. "I happened to be in town and thought I'd stop in to say hello."

"Well, have a seat. You want some wine?"

"No, thanks," said Merrick, a nondescript man in his forties.

Carol sat down across from him, now beginning to feel dizzy and sick.

"How's life, Carol?"

She looked around. "What can I say? It sucks. In pretty much every way. Oh, and—I want to ask you because you know about security-type things, right? To top it all off, somebody has been through this place."

"Without your knowledge or permission?"

She nodded.

“Anything missing?”

She gave a short laugh. “What do I have that’s worth taking?”

“Who would want to break in?”

“I don’t know. Some crank or sicko, I suppose. Somebody with a key—a maintenance guy or something.”

“Or somebody skilled at security-type things.” He smiled.

Carol’s relief at seeing Merrick was turning to unease. “Right.” She forced a smile, then turned serious. “You don’t suppose this would have something to do with our . . . project, do you? We messed with those people pretty bad.”

“We did, it’s true.” Merrick thought about it. “It’s hard to say. Do you feel violated?”

“Damn right I do.”

“Just like those executives in Chicago did when we broke into their offices.”

She shifted in her chair. “Why are you here, Stu?”

He didn’t respond. He watched her calmly.

On impulse she asked, “Is Merrick your real name?”

“As a matter of fact, no. It’s actually Swatt. You’re not looking well, Carol.”

“I don’t feel well. Who are you?”

He continued to watch her as her unease changed to horror.

He stood up. “I think you know who I am.”

“What—what do you mean? I mean, what business do you—”

He waved off her objections. “Carol, it’s time.”

“Time for what?”

“Everything has a price. When you got your revenge, did it feel good?”

Exasperated, she began to get up, but once again felt too dizzy to stand. “What do you want, Stu?” she asked quietly.

Merrick shook his head sadly. He had never taken his eyes off her. “The Chicago project was a good one, a worthy endeavor. You did well, Carol. Dick and Terry, too.”

She took deep breaths, her mind racing.

Merrick said, “You’d think people would know it when their time comes. But they never seem to.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Denial is natural. Understandable. But it never changes reality. Never.”

Panic gripped her. “Look, whatever problem you’ve got, let’s talk about it.” Her head swam. She forced herself to her feet, staggered, braced herself against the table. Then she understood.

“The wine,” she said.

Merrick nodded. “You’re a creature of habit—same wine every night. I added a little something to it—that was the main reason for my visit yesterday. It’s nothing that will show up in the tox report, though.”

“The tox—God, no,” she said. “We can work this out, Stu. Just tell me what I can do. We can talk about it.”

“I’ve given you a gift, Carol. You see, when I’ve made my decision about someone, I give them a choice. Those who cooperate are allowed a peaceful and painless end. Those who resist . . . suffer the consequences. In your case, the wine has reduced your power to resist.”

Carol thought about trying to bolt for the door. She knew that theoretically, she could still make the choice to resist, to the best of her ability. But she was long past that point, long beyond hope. And then it hit her.

“Oh God, Terry. And Dick. You’re going to...”

He nodded. Then he walked over, reached out, caressed her face.

“Please! My God!” She tried to stagger toward the door, but her knees buckled. Now that she had found the desire to resist, she no longer had the ability.

He caught her and swept her up into his arms, carrying her out to the balcony. “What was Chicago all about?” she asked. “Why did we do it? Who was behind it?”

“Not much point in explaining the plan now,” he said. “But I can tell you its name. And it’s an appropriate one for this moment.” Merrick smiled. “It’s called Downfall.” With that, he lifted her over the railing and deposited her into space.