

DOWNHILL

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Chapter 1

The edge of the kitchen counter was slowly getting covered with tiny shards of ice. Sam was getting more and more pissed by the minute, and his wife's sarcastic words echoing in his head didn't help. "*I can't believe how clumsy you are, honey, seriously!*" When he finally managed to crack and chisel out four truncated blocks of ice, he threw them into a glass and flooded them with a double gin, almost a triple. Despite being a gin and tonic guy, Sam didn't make a big deal out of lacking the latter one. He had a big, fat gulp of straight gin and walked back to his home office, eased by the thought that whatever mess he had left in the kitchen would melt anyway.

"*Hey man, you're back? What took you so long?*"

"Nothing, just the ice gave me a bit of a hard time."

"*Hard time how?*"

"Popping the cubes out of these shitty trays is a pain in the ass."

"*Ah. I thought you been waiting for the water to freeze.*"

"Piss off!"

Reception this far from town and in the hills was not the strongest. Hence, the quality of the video call was more like Sam's high school exit exam in history—a soft-hearted C-. He's always had better sense of numbers and figures, than dates and events. But Dylan needed Sam's assistance to rectify a rejected application for a project fund. Not a typical

1 emergency, but Sam's dense daily schedule and the
2 closeness of the deadline made it urgent. Before getting
3 home, Sam had phoned Dylan to tell him to prepare the
4 papers, emails, and everything else they needed to get
5 it done tonight. It took them about an hour to finish it.
6 But it wasn't the poor internet signal to blame for this
7 length, neither was the amount of work required. Some of
8 this time was spent with having a little fun, like suggesting
9 obscene pictures as attachments, a rather enthusiastic
10 analysis of the daily sports results despite their lack of
11 expertise, and even a negotiation over Sam's fee. For the
12 latter one, tonic surprisingly wasn't offered nor requested
13 despite its absence.

14 *"Okay then, talk later. And thanks again!"*

15 "Yeah, yeah, fine, bye, goodnight!"

16 Sam hit the end call icon, grabbed his glass, and stood
17 up, stretching his parts a bit.

18 Samuel Hayes owned several properties, including a
19 penthouse downtown, a humble beach house, and a few
20 others spread across the state. Most people wouldn't pick
21 this house as a first choice, yet this was the place Sam
22 most preferred to spend his free time. Even the not so
23 free. For him, this was the room to carry out the part of his
24 job that required him to sit at a desk in front of a computer.
25 He could never really tell why he liked it so much. It
26 would've been convenient to blame his countryside
27 childhood for his close to none liking of big city life. But
28 he believed that, no matter where you grew up, at some
29 point you'll desire to live in a quieter, more spacious place.
30 Sam, however, didn't choose farming to make his living,
31 so keeping cities out of his life entirely wasn't really an
32 option. But whenever he could, he stayed away from the
33 concrete jungle.

He had no problem with concrete itself, as the unique style of this house clearly demonstrated. Rather, it was the noise, the rush, and mostly the crowd since you didn't get to choose who was in it. This was the reason he considered this house, especially this room, his headquarters. He called this room his workroom when he had to refer to it from time to time, but it was more like a combination study, bedroom, and gym. In the middle, there was a workstation made up of a walnut desk and a dark-grey swivel chair.

After his brief stretch and a few paces, Sam felt the blood starting to flow back to the numb parts of his body. Given that he was 6'2" and had a relatively thick physique, his body parts had huge distances between them, so his blood had quite a task bringing the life back to his entire body. Sam stood by his desk, enjoying the view and the calm, as he waited for the numbness to subside. It was quiet except for the hissing of the rising wind outside, the buzzing of a case fan bearing in the laptop, and the clinking of keys in a pocket of Sam's pants.

Even when he was calm, Sam occupied his free hands with the contents of his pockets, an old habit from his school years. Keys and coins endured the treatment, unlike the poor tissues, receipts, and old parking tickets, which tended to suffer major damage when Sam wasn't so calm. Once, Sam's wife, Lindsey, had called him out about the trash hiding in his pockets when she had discovered some before washing his pants. Sam had delivered a rather pointed reply: *"At least I'm not popping my fingers until they're numb or chewing my fingers until they bleed."* Lindsey never raised her voice about this issue again.

While Sam's left hand was molesting his keys, his right hand was stirring the last sip of diluted gin and ice. As he

1 brought this mix to his mouth, all of a sudden, a strange
2 noise hit his ear. A small explosion reduced to a louder pop
3 just as a sharp pain ripped into his back, forcing him to fall
4 to the ground between his desk and the sofa. He felt his face
5 smash against the floor. The lights shut down and the noises
6 stopped.

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Chapter 2

Austin was walking back and forth between the light-gray walls of the corridor. There wasn't much left in his fingers to pop, and you couldn't even light up a smoke in here. Sunken cheeks, eyes filled with red veins from sleepless nights, Austin was tall and lean, but the past few days had slimmed him down even more than battling pneumonia last year.

As the waiting began to feel like an eternity, he spotted a figure in a white coat approaching him. A tall, good-looking man, somewhere in his 50s or 60s. There are certain situations one can't really get used to despite years of practice, and Austin could tell this was one of those for the doctor the minute he stepped up to Austin and began to explain the situation. Austin listened silently and patiently for as long as he could while every fiber of his body protested against the doctor's words.

"What?"

"Believe me, we are doing everything we can . . ."

"You . . . you cannot be serious."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. There are still numerous tests we need to run to be able to say more. Because, as of this moment, we can't really tell what could cause this. It is very unfortunate. I'm very sorry."

Austin didn't let the doctor go right away, hoping he would say something encouraging. But he didn't. Encouragement only came from his unspoken words. Once the doctor was gone, Austin just kept standing there, helpless. No more

1 walking from wall to wall, no popping his fingers, no craving
2 for smokes, nothing. He had only one thought, and it caused
3 his throat and chest to shrink unbearably tight. The thought
4 weighed terribly on him and nested itself inside his head,
5 leaving no room for anything else.

6 *My daughter will not walk again?*

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Chapter 3

A pleasantly mild day shifted to an unusually cool night. In the valley, the descending darkness was mingling with last rays of light, but up here, the darkness had nothing to challenge it. And neither did the silence. Regardless of how fierce the battle between day and night, none of them carried anything this far that could supersede the silence. It was always in charge here. The city lights reached this far, but the noises did not. It was a place skirting the mountain ridges, a place where the birds were the primary noise polluters.

The view was breathtaking, whether looking down to the lit city or up to the unclouded, starry sky. But the enchantment of the valley and the sky did not affect Austin. All his attention was concentrated on the concrete house.

A burly myrtle bush hid Austin even though it swayed and flapped in the wind from time to time. His hands were shaking but not from the cold. He never had trouble with the blood flowing through his limbs, so his hands didn't usually shake even without gloves. But now, he was terribly nervous. If he had eaten anything, he'd have thrown it all up by now. Perhaps our body tries to defend us from just that by the lack of appetite.

Austin straightened and started to slowly approach the house. *I could still turn back*, he thought. *As long as I'm not spotted, I could go back.* But he hadn't spent weeks on end contemplating this move and preparing for this very occasion just to beat a retreat in the last minute.

1 The house itself didn't quite fit into its environment
2 insofar as concrete doesn't fit into nature, and its design
3 defied the usual style for a house built on a steep slope.
4 Instead of a light, elegant structure with thin stilts and
5 giant panoramic windows, this house looked more like a
6 rectangular concrete bunker and had to be buttressed by
7 massive pillars because the soil around it was gone. Where
8 glass panels might usually go, it had gray concrete walls
9 with a couple of windows here and there. The large room
10 in the front was the exception. Nearly its entire front
11 wall, from floor to ceiling and end to end, was made of
12 glass. Beyond that was a narrow balcony. Instead of a
13 handsome glass balustrade separating the balcony from the
14 abyss below, the gray concrete walls continued at railing
15 height.

16 Although the house was vulnerable to attack for its
17 aesthetics, its layout was indisputably practical. The
18 dimensions, mainly the height, had been designed to
19 accommodate the steepness of the slope, and the result was
20 that the rooftop and the road were level. A bridge connected
21 the rooftop and the road, providing enough parking space
22 for two cars as regulations required, without turning a single
23 cubic yard of concrete into a garage. It was a kind of reverse
24 layout, which made the process of arriving home by car
25 uniquely effortless, especially when it came to houses on
26 steep slopes.

27 The house was on a narrow road, which continued up the
28 hill beyond it, and the nearest houses were about three-
29 quarters of a mile away. Austin had spent hours on the paths
30 of the forested hillside looking like an ordinary hiker. As a
31 matter of fact, he wasn't really much more than that. Except
32 for the special attention he had paid to the lone, concrete
33 house through his binoculars.

That cool, starry night, Austin thoroughly checked the perimeter before crossing the road and starting to descend the scree slope toward the rear left corner of the house, where the only entrance was located. He moved very carefully so as not to release a piece of loose rock. He didn't want to make any noise just yet. He descended until he reached the top of the retaining wall that held back the soil. The entrance was almost within reach but not the door itself. A small, narrow terrace, just big enough to put shoes out, stuck out from the house there. The terrace railing was easy enough to hop over from the retaining wall. When he did so, Austin saw that the terrace was lit, intensifying the pressure on him. His plan was to make some kind of noise to lure Sam to the door. He thought that a rather ordinary noise would inspire a person to check out the noise without first grabbing a gun or a phone, so Austin had brought a small branch to tap against the glass door.

The door was also accessible in an easier way, and it was more concealed. Alongside the left wall, a stairway led down from the rooftop and was practically hidden from sight behind the second external wall. Austin hadn't even noticed it until he had once spotted Sam walking down from the roof to the door. For Austin, the darkest route was the most ideal, even though he hadn't spotted cameras during his surveys, not by his naked eye nor through the lenses of his binoculars. Still, just to be sure, he quickly scanned the area surrounding the door, checking every little spot he couldn't have seen from farther away. No sign of a surveillance system.

Stepping to the door, Austin raised his gun in front of him, the branch ready in his other hand. First, he slowly tried the doorknob, and to his surprise, the door opened. He paused, listening. Then he leaned over the railing, let the

1 branch fall over onto the scree slope, and carefully slipped
2 inside.

3 The house was almost entirely dark. There were no lights
4 on except in the large room. A bluish-gray light from the
5 night sky shone through the windows, providing some light
6 in the rooms not lit by lamplight.

7 Austin found himself in a short, narrow corridor that
8 continued to the left a few steps away. It was like a thin-
9 soled, reverse letter “L,” on the stem of which Austin turned
10 after a quick look around. On his left, there were two smaller
11 rooms, one of which seemed to be a bathroom. The wall on
12 the right had a huge arched opening that led to the living
13 room.

14 Austin focused entirely on the one room at the end of the
15 corridor—the large room that was attached to the balcony.
16 The door was ajar. He heard footsteps and light streamed
17 into the corridor from the doorway. Austin eyeballed the
18 open door and figured out that sticking to the right wall
19 reduced his chances of being spotted through the door
20 opening. Given the angle the door was ajar, he probably got
21 it just about right. Austin moved forward very slowly,
22 staying close against the corridor’s right wall. He was
23 determined, but the thought—*It’s not too late to turn back*—
24 did cross his mind. He’d taken five or six steps, his heart
25 pounding in his chest, when a beeping sound stopped him in
26 his tracks. *He must be busy doing something*, Austin thought.
27 He took one more step, and then he saw a figure through the
28 door opening. Full-face mask, black outfit, and, in one hand,
29 what looked like a long gun.

30 Austin stood frozen in place, petrified, only for a few
31 seconds, but long enough to gain a considerable handicap.
32 He started to move backwards along the right wall, the same
33 way he’d come. He barely had about seven more feet to

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reach the end of the corridor when the narrow strip of yellow
light flared out from wall to wall. The figure was opening
the door of the large room, and before Austin realized it, he
had stepped through the arched opening to the other side of
the wall into the living room.

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