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Downfall

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Downfall

Chapter 1

The neighborhood was quiet at 3:00 a.m. Bugs flew in the yellow halo around the street lights, and the half moon gave a gray cast to the coveted homes along the Boulevard. It was the kind of home his mother had dreamed of having, the kind that had always been out of her reach.

The air reeked with greed and ambition. The Avenger, as he liked to call himself, walked in front of those houses, carrying his load in a backpack, thinking maybe he should double back just to blow up some of the BMWs parked in the driveways. Wouldn't it be a thrill to watch from somewhere on the street as businessmen came out of those houses, brief-cases in hand, and slipped into their cars? If they all went up at the same time ... mushroom clouds of fire whooshing over each house in choreographed order ...

But that was a fantasy for another day. Today only one car would go up like that.

The Avenger strode around the corner to a street where smaller houses lined the road. Though they weren't as expensive and extravagant as those on the Boulevard, they were still out of his mother's reach. Destined to live in a rotting rat hole, she papered her moldy bathroom with pictures from *Southern Living*. These weren't mansions, but they were big and new. He was sure no mold grew on the attic walls. No cracks ripped the sheetrock in the living rooms. No paint peeled. No sounds of rats scratching through the walls. The people who lived here probably weren't business owners. They were the goons who worked for them, but they were still snotty and superior.

Steam fogged in front of the Avenger's face with every breath as he approached the Covington house. One lamp shone in a room on the side. Out of sight, he'd followed twenty-year-old Emily home a while ago. Now she probably lay tucked in her bed with some feather comforter that cost a mint, smug about her sobriety. Oblivious.

Like always, she hadn't pulled her car into the garage where her mother's car sat. Hers was on the driveway.

The Avenger set his package down beside her car.

Right here, under the wheel well ... that was the best place. He took the jar half-filled with gasoline and the roll of duct tape from his backpack and ripped off enough to tape the bottle under the car, careful not to cover the lamp cord coming from the hole he'd punched in the jar's lid. The gloves on his hands made it difficult work, but he didn't give up. When he'd gotten the bottle in place, he checked to make sure it wasn't leaking. The small amount of gasoline seemed stable. The bottle was angled so it wouldn't leak.

Now if he could just find the right place to connect the

other end. He pulled the lamp cord out from under the front of the car, then quietly opened the hood. It made a clicking sound. He froze, looking from left to right. No one stirred at this hour. He shone his flashlight to the place where he needed to connect the cord.

He held the small flashlight in his teeth as he found the spot in the wiring that would ignite his bomb.

The Avenger chuckled to himself as he closed the hood as quietly as possible, pressing down until it engaged. He checked to make sure the cord coming from under the car into the motor wasn't noticeable. If someone knew to look for it, it might be. But he doubted Emily would see it walking out to her car.

If this worked the way it was supposed to, the bomb would explode when Emily started the car. She would probably escape, but hopefully, she'd be wounded or burned. And she and her family would be terrorized. He'd make them homeless by making them fear their home, and that would just be the beginning.

He chuckled as he gathered his equipment. Then he dropped his gloves into his bag and walked slowly back up the street to where he'd left his car. He reveled in the sense of power his actions had given him. He would never be powerless again.

Too bad he hadn't had an audience tonight. That would have made it so much sweeter. But manipulating victims like chess pieces was almost as good.

It was cold, but the thrill of victory warmed him. He thought about the stash he'd left in his glove compartment, his reward for carrying out his plan. He'd wait until he got home, to the privacy of his basement, and when he was high, he'd go back and carry out the rest of his plan. And what a genius plan it was.

Headlights turned onto the street, illuminating him like a stage star. He pulled up his hood and looked down at the sidewalk as the car slowly passed. As soon as darkness enveloped him again, he broke into a trot back to his car.

There was still so much to do. He had to go take care of Devon, put a gun to her head, watch her bleed. He'd planned it for weeks, waited for the right mixture of courage and cockiness. He'd found it tonight. Freedom had been birthed inside him with one act of will. Now he could set everything right. He'd continue exacting revenge on all those who'd messed with him. So much fallout. So many consequences.

He was the great Avenger.

Chapter 2

Emily Covington had managed to slip into the house and down the hall to her bedroom without waking her mother, a major feat since her mom slept lightly when Emily was out. Emily hadn't meant to stay out so late tonight without calling, but one thing had led to another, and she'd wound up coming in at 2:00 a.m., tiptoeing like a high-school kid who'd broken curfew.

Now she had to cram for her test before she could go to bed. Why had she waited until the last minute?

"Emily? You're home?"

She turned to see her mother standing in her bedroom doorway, her hair tangled and disheveled from bed. "Hey. I didn't want to wake you up."

"Did you just come in?"

"A little while ago. Sorry I didn't call. I went to the choir

concert at school, and afterward some of us went to a movie. Then we hung out for a while in Ree's dorm room."

"Emily, it's three o'clock, and you have class tomorrow."

"I know. It'll be fine."

"Don't you have a test?"

"Yeah, but it's okay. Just go back to sleep."

Her mother just stood there for a moment. "Okay. Come give me a kiss."

Emily grinned. It was her mother's way of smelling her breath and her hair, to see if she'd been drinking or smoking dope. Emily went to her mom, kissed her cheek, and gave her a hug. "Get a good whiff," she said. "All you'll smell is popcorn and coffee."

Her mother let her go and stared into her eyes, as if checking her pupils for normalcy. "All right, but you're going to put me in an early grave with these long nights."

"Mom, if I lived on campus, you wouldn't even know when I came in."

"Well, you don't live on campus. You live here, and I worry. Go to bed soon, okay?"

"Okay." Emily went back to her bed where her books lay spread out, wishing she hadn't made her mother lose sleep, tonight of all nights. Her mom had a big presentation tomorrow at work, and she wanted her to do well. Her mother had been elated to have this job in Atlanta after they'd struggled so much in Jefferson City. Emily hoped her actions tonight hadn't messed her up.

She resolved to do better next time. The least she could do was call to let her mom know not to worry. But after all she'd put her family through, worry had become a way of life. Staying out so late only exacerbated old memories—and old fears.

But one day Emily would prove to her family that her life of addiction was behind her. Then maybe her mom could sleep better at night.

Chapter 3

Milly Prentiss heard the knock on her back door as she waited for her coffeepot to fill. Pulling her robe tighter around her, she stepped to the door and looked through its window onto the rotting back porch. The sun was just coming up, painting the small dirt-patched lawn a lighter shade of gray. She saw no one.

She heard the knock again. Looking lower, she saw the top of a tiny blonde head.

Milly threw the door open. Her next-door neighbor's four-year-old stood in front of her, barefoot and wearing a long gown. There was blood on her sleeves, and the little girl was pale as porcelain.

Milly dropped to her knees. "Allie, honey, what's wrong?"
"Mommy won't wake up."

Milly took the girl's hands. "What's this on your hands?"

The child looked down at her hands blankly, as if she hadn't noticed it before.

"Allie, what happened?"

"Mommy hurt herself in her bed. I shook her but she wouldn't come awake."

"Where's Carrie?"

"In her crib, crying. Mommy won't come."

Something thudded in the pit of Milly's stomach. She picked the child up and ran through the yard, her slippers soaking in the cold morning dew. She carried the girl through the carport and into the house, and heard the eighteen-month-old's angry wailing. She put Allie down in front of the couch. "Wait here, honey. I'm going to see about Mommy."

She left Allie in the living room and hurried past the kids' room, to the small bedroom at the end of the short hall. She saw Devon in bed, under the covers, her eyes closed as if she still slept. Milly turned on the light and stepped toward the bed.

The pillow was soaked in blood. Milly gasped and stumbled back. Her neighbor's face was a pale gray, her lips white. Milly forced herself to move closer, touch her arm. Devon's skin was cold.

Milly's mind went blank, and she stood frozen for a moment, unable to move. Carrie's screams penetrated her paralysis.

She had to do something.

She grabbed the phone next to the bed, dialed 911, and choked out the words. "My neighbor is dead in her bed. Please send someone."

Chapter 4

The morning was cold and blanketed with fog. Kent Harlan started into his second mile, his breath clouding. He had taken up jogging two years ago when he'd suddenly begun caring how he looked. Before Barbara came into his life, he'd just marked time, letting himself get thick around the middle. Since he'd started running, he'd lost twenty pounds. But he was still nowhere near her league. He wanted to look his best this weekend. The day he got down on one knee would be one of the biggest days of his life.

He hoped Barbara liked the ring.

The fact that she'd moved to Atlanta to be near him nine months ago had changed everything. He felt full of life and hope, with nothing but brightness on the horizon. He wouldn't have believed he could feel young again. He'd tried to take it slow for the sake of Barbara and her kids, allowing

them time to get settled here before talking more about marriage. But things seemed to be going pretty well. He couldn't wait much longer.

His cell phone rang, and he slowed and checked the readout. It was the dispatcher at the police department. He and his partner, Andy, were up in the homicide rotation, so he had to take it. He slowed to a walk and clicked on the phone. "Kent Harlan."

"Kent, we've got a homicide at 342 East Bailey Road. Female victim, shot in bed, apparently during a burglary."

"Okay," he said, still breathing hard. "Did you call Andy?"

"I'm calling him next."

"All right. I'll get right over there. Do me a favor and text me that address—I don't have anything to write with."

"Sure thing."

He clicked the phone off and dropped it back into his pocket. He picked up his step again and jogged the rest of the way home. He supposed he should be happy that he'd gotten a whole night's sleep. When he and his partner were next in line to get a case, he was usually disturbed during the night.

He showered, got dressed, and made himself a cup of coffee to take with him. There was no hurry. The first responder was supposed to secure the area, and the body would still be there when he arrived. But he didn't like for much time to pass between the 911 call and his seeing the scene. The more time that passed, and the more investigators who arrived, the more the evidence would be disturbed.

He got his wallet, his pocket change, his car keys. Then he opened the ring box and smiled at the diamond. It was whiter than white, a beautiful flawless stone he'd shopped for weeks for. He took the ring out and put it in his pocket. Just the feel of it made him smile.

It took him twenty minutes to drive across town to the crime scene, in a high-crime residential area where minimum-wage workers lived paycheck to paycheck. He saw the police cars parked in front of the house, and a few neighbors standing in their yards, as if waiting to learn what had happened.

He pulled as close to the house as he could get. Andy must not have gotten here yet; he didn't see his car. Kent got out and trudged across the dewy grass to the side door in the carport, where a uniformed officer stood with a log book.

"What've we got?" Kent asked.

"Woman named Devon Lawrence, thirty years old, shot at point-blank range in her bed. Her four-year-old found her this morning."

The murder suddenly went from routine to tragic in Kent's mind. "A four-year-old? Did the child witness the killing?"

"Doesn't look like it. She says she got up when her baby sister started crying, and went to wake up her mother. She couldn't wake her up, so she went and got the next-door neighbor, Milly Prentiss. Ms. Prentiss is the one who called it in."

"Where are the children now?"

"Next door, still with the neighbor."

"And the father?"

"At work. Miss Prentiss says he works nights at a convenience store. He hasn't been notified yet, but we ought to tell him soon, before one of the neighbors calls him."

Kent stepped into the house and looked around. Tiny kitchen and living room combo, worn, dirty blue carpet, a couch and one chair squeezed in. "Have you figured out the point of entry?"

"Ms. Prentiss said the back door was unlocked, but she

thinks that's because the child went out that way. She went in this carport door. She said it was unlocked, too."

Kent saw scratches around the strike plate that suggested someone had picked the lock. He stepped inside, looked around. A purse was lying on the floor, spilled out. No wallet. He scanned the other items in the room. Toys, a diaper bag, a dirty high chair, a flat-screen TV.

"Why would a burglar leave that TV?" he wondered aloud.

"Yeah. Looked odd to me, too."

Kent tried to make that add up. Could be somebody who didn't have a way to carry the TV away. Just wanted fast cash. But why here? What would make him think anyone in this neighborhood had wads of cash lying around?

He looked around for anything else. There was little of value here. The house was in bad shape, with peeling paint and brown leaks on the ceiling. The floor was warped.

He glanced up the hall, saw one of the other officers standing at a bedroom doorway. He headed that way.

In the bed, a young woman lay on her back as if sleeping peacefully, blood soaked into the pillow under her head. There was an entry wound at the center of her forehead. Her eyes were closed. She'd probably been asleep when she was shot. She'd never known what hit her.

At least it had been quick, and the perpetrator hadn't harmed the kids.

He pulled his camera out and snapped some pictures. The CSIs would take the real crime scene photos, but Kent liked to photograph crime scenes with his own camera, just to make sure nothing had been moved during the investigations.

He heard Andy's voice questioning the cop at the carport door. Kent glanced at the cop near him, still standing

back, looking a little shaken. “What do we know about the husband?”

“The neighbor says he has drug problems. Has been in rehab. They have a history of domestic violence, but the police have never been called about it. He’s on probation for a drug charge.”

So the husband had the history and the mental capacity to do this.

Andy came to the doorway and looked inside. “Morning, guys.”

Kent nodded at him, then turned back to the cop. “Did the neighbor hear the gunshot?”

“No. She says she didn’t hear anything until the kid knocked on her door.”

He pictured a four-year-old child running through the yard to get help for her mother. His stomach twisted. Surely a father wouldn’t murder the mother and let his child find her. But if he was strung out, who knew what he was capable of?

“Andy, let’s go talk to the neighbor. Then we’ll see what the husband has to say. He’s at work, supposedly. Hasn’t been notified.”

“You think he already knows?”

“Could be.” He clicked his phone on as he walked out of the house, dialed the department, and asked a police sergeant to run a rap sheet on the husband—William Lawrence, who went as Bo—and email it to him. He would try to open the file with his iPhone.

They crossed the yard and knocked on the door to the ramshackle house next door. A little woman of about sixty answered.

“Miss Prentiss?”

“Yes,” she said.

Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, her nose crimson.

She'd clearly had a bad morning. "I'm Detective Kent Harlan, Atlanta Homicide. This is my partner, Andy Joiner. Could we come in and talk to you?"

"Yes, but please—don't upset the children," she said in a low voice. "I've fed them and calmed them down."

Kent stepped into the house. The little girl sat at the table, coloring on a piece of yellow legal paper. The baby sat on the floor, playing with plastic blocks.

Milly went to pick the baby up. "Poor little thing was crying and crying," she said softly.

The little girl was still wearing her gown with bloody sleeves, and her feet were bare. "I need to talk to the child," he whispered to Milly.

She looked distressed, but nodded.

He went to the table, pulled out a chair. "Hi," he said.

The little girl looked up at him with soulful eyes as he sat down. Mucus had crusted under her nose. "Hi," she said.

"I'm Kent. What's your name?"

"Allie."

"Allie, can you tell me what happened when you woke up this morning?"

Her bottom lip puckered out, and tears filled her eyes. "Mommy died."

"Did you hear any noise?"

"No."

"Did you hear her talking to anybody? Did you see anybody in the house?"

"No. She wouldn't talk because she wouldn't wake up."

"So you didn't hear a loud bang?"

She frowned, thinking. "I dreamed about a loud bang sound."

"Dreamed it?" Kent asked. "Did it wake you up?"

"I don't know."

This wasn't easy. The child probably heard the gunshot in her sleep, but didn't wake all the way.

"What made you get up?"

"Carrie crying."

"Nothing else?"

She shook her head and went back to coloring.

Kent tried one more time. "Allie, did you hear Carrie crying right after the bang?"

"No," she said. "The bang was a dream, but the crying was real. It was later."

He'd know more when the medical examiner figured out the time of death. He looked up at Ms. Prentiss. "Ma'am, did you hear a gunshot?"

"No, but I have sleep apnea. I sleep with a CPAP, and it makes noise. I sleep pretty deep. I hadn't been up very long when Allie came."

"What can you tell us about Mr. Lawrence?" Andy asked.

"I don't like him very much," she said in a low voice. "He's had a problem with cocaine. Got arrested a few months ago, spent a little time in jail. Then they let him go to rehab. He's only been out a few months."

"Has he been using again?"

"Not that I know of. Devon told me he was doing good. That he was sober and going to work every night. She said he hadn't been mean lately."

The other officer had mentioned domestic violence. He'd probably gotten that information from her. "Mean, how?"

"I would hear them yelling sometimes. Couple of times I saw bruises. He broke her nose once, but even then she never would call the police. She finally did call them when she found a big stash of dope in her house and the baby almost got into it. Made her mad enough to turn him in. That's when he was arrested."

Kent met Andy's eyes. If the wife was responsible for her husband's jail time and probation, he might have gotten even tonight. "Where does he work?"

"At that convenience store at the Exxon station. It's called J.R.'s 24/7."

Kent hoped they'd learn more from visiting the husband and gauging his reaction to his wife's death.

"Do you think this person might come back?" she asked. "I live alone, and I'm nervous."

"We don't know, ma'am. But we're going to do our best to find him."

"But how did the person get in? Do you think it was Bo?" she whispered, glancing at Allie as if making sure she couldn't hear.

Kent didn't answer. "We're looking at all the evidence, but we don't have answers just yet."

"What am I supposed to do with the kids? I need to clean Allie up, but I can't get in there to get her clothes."

"We'll get something for her to wear, and have someone come and take care of them until we can get a family member to pick them up."

"No, that's okay. They know me. I baby-sit them a lot. I'll keep them until their daddy or grandma comes." She burst into tears and covered her face. "This is so awful. Poor Devon!"

He resisted the urge to comfort her, but he hoped someone would. When he and Andy stepped outside, he heard the teary-eyed woman lock her deadbolt.

"I'm betting on the husband," Andy said. "What do you bet he can't prove he was at work all night?"

"We'll soon find out."

Kent left Andy working the crime scene. Driving to the convenience store, he considered the possibility that the hus-

band wasn't involved. He felt the burning in his gut that he always felt when he had to break the news of a murder to a family member. It was the part of the job he hated most.

He found the place, an old, peeling structure with burglar bars on the windows. The store was lit up, and beyond the glass was a man behind the counter, sitting on a stool and watching the television over his head.

He got out of his car and pushed through the glass doors.

"You doin' all right?" the man asked as Kent approached. He looked sober. His eyes were clear, though he looked tired.

"Are you Bo Lawrence?" Kent asked.

The man crossed his arms. Defensive. Guarded. "Yeah, why?"

"I'm with the Atlanta Police Department, Homicide Division."

The man's face changed, and deep lines in his skin caught the shadows cast by the dusty light. "Homicide? What happened?"

"We had a call to your house this morning. Your wife had been shot."

Kent watched Bo's face. Bo swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. It was hard to say whether his face changed color—he was already pale. "Shot? She's okay, though, right?"

"I'm afraid not. She didn't make it."

Bo's mouth fell open, and he couldn't speak for a moment. He brought both hands to his greasy hair, slid his dirty fingers through. "But ... we don't have guns in the house. We don't ... who ... what happened?"

"It appears to be a burglary. Someone came in and shot her in her sleep."

He almost choked with his intake of breath. "The girls ... my children ... are they ...?"

"They're fine. Your daughter Allie found your wife."

He wavered as though he might faint, and reached out to grab the counter. “Allie? Who did this?” he whispered loudly.

Kent kept his voice steady. “We wanted to notify you and find out who we could call about your children.”

“Where are they now?” he asked, his face twisting in what looked like genuine anguish.

“They’re with Milly Prentiss, next door.”

He nodded. “Milly ... that’s good.”

There were no tears, but that wasn’t unusual. Getting news of a murder was shocking, and people responded in different ways. “Who ... who called the police?”

The question was odd. It wasn’t the first thing most people thought to ask. “Milly did, after your daughter went to her.”

“So ... did she see who did it?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I’d like for you to come to the station, so we could talk to you about this. Maybe you could give us some leads.”

He looked down at the cash register. “Yeah ... of course. I have to call my boss. I’ll have to close the store.”

Kent looked around. “How long have you been on shift tonight?”

At first, the man didn’t seem to hear. He stared into space, as if sorting through the news. “Uh ... since 8:00 last night. I’m working a twelve-hour shift.”

“Have you left at all?”

The man picked up the phone, but he didn’t dial. “No, not at all. I’ve been here all night. Haven’t even gone out to smoke. I’ve been trying to quit.”

Kent’s eyes went to the security cameras on the ceiling behind the counter. He could get the video and confirm that what the man said was true.

“Look, I know the first person you always think of is the

husband.” His voice sounded shredded, raspy. “But I swear . . . I loved my wife. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt her.” He brought his hand to his mouth, trembling, as his grief etched deeper into his face. Nothing unusual in his reaction.

After talking to his boss, Bo locked down the store and turned off all the lights. Kent retrieved the security video with no objection from him. Then Bo followed Kent out to the car and got into the front passenger seat. There were still no tears as Kent drove him to the station. When they got there, Kent watched the video footage. It confirmed Bo’s story. He had been at work all night.

The guy was probably just a grieving husband in shock, but Kent hoped he had some information that would lead them to his wife’s killer.

Chapter 5

Emily, you've got to stop staying up so late when you have school the next morning." Barbara slid the cereal box across the counter at her bleary-eyed daughter.

"I can't help it," Emily said in a hoarse, groggy voice. "I can't get to sleep any earlier."

"It's her nature, Mom," Lance said, chomping on his Cheerios. "She's a party girl to the bone."

"Shut up," Emily muttered. "I wasn't partying."

Barbara dug into her purse for lunch money for Lance and laid it on the counter. "I'm just saying, Emily, that you have to fight addictive behaviors like staying up all night when you have school. You have to learn to think ahead, not just do what feels right in the moment."

"It's not an addictive behavior, Mom. Everybody I know stays up late. It's a college thing."

“And that’s why half the student body drops out before they get a degree.” Barbara glanced at Lance, her sixteen-year-old. “Lance, promise me you’ll eat lunch today.”

He didn’t answer, just pretended to be engrossed in the writing on the cereal box.

“Lance, did you hear me?”

“Yes. But I hate lunch.”

“You hate *lunch*?” Emily asked. “That’s stupid. You hate gym or math or science. Nobody hates lunch.”

“They do if they have to sit by themselves.”

“I thought your girlfriend sat with you,” Emily said.

“April’s not my girlfriend. At least, not yet.” He brought his milk to his mouth, eyes grinning as he drank. He set the glass down too hard. “She doesn’t always sit with me. Sometimes she skips lunch. Why can’t I just be homeschooled?”

They’d been all through this. “Lance, you’ll make friends,” Barbara said. “Just hang in there.”

“I had plenty of friends in Jeff City.”

They’d moved here in January, after selling their house in Missouri. Lance had been recovering from a serious injury to his lung at the time, and he’d had a hard time fitting in after changing schools midyear. Since he hadn’t bonded with anyone by the time school was out for the summer, he’d had a long, lonely three months. Baseball used to be his pastime during those hot months, and it was a way to make friends, but since his lung capacity wasn’t back to a hundred percent and he didn’t know anyone well, he hadn’t signed up. Barbara regretted not talking him into it. “You were a popular guy back home, and you will be again. And you’ll be stronger for it. You’re learning new skills. Compassion for lonely people, for one. Good things can come of this. Moving here was right for the family.”

“No, it was right for *you*, so you could be closer to Kent.

I get that, and I like him and all. But I miss my friends. I never hated going to school before this. Those jocks treat me like the biggest dork in Georgia. I thought this fall might be better, but nothing has changed since school started back.”

Emily seemed to be coming awake now as she nursed her coffee. “They’re just jealous. Some cute new guy comes in and invades their territory, and the girls take notice.”

“April’s the only girl taking notice, and she treats me like a brother. Trust me, *they* all think I’m a dork, too. I came to school skinny and sick, and that’s how they’ll keep seeing me.”

“You’re not a dork.” Barbara leaned across the counter, touched Lance’s chin. “Look at me, son.”

He met her eyes.

“You’re a hero. A life-saver. You know who you are. Don’t let them convince you that you’re anything else.”

“Yeah, well, they think I made it all up.”

“It doesn’t matter what they think,” Emily said. “We know what happened.”

Barbara looked down at her son’s chest. His breathing was still more labored than it used to be. She worried about him. Sometimes she considered moving back to Missouri just to make his life easier.

But she could barely make a living in Jefferson City, and Emily had way too many drug triggers there. And yes, she liked living near Kent. They’d grown closer since she’d moved here, and it looked like they might have a future together.

She’d been adrift since her husband died six years ago. Kent had brought joy to her life and a new outlook. He’d also helped her land a job here working as an interior designer for an architectural firm. It was a dream come true—and she was good at it. She was making even more money than

she'd made during the best years of having her own business. She had so much debt from Emily's drug days and the decline in her business, that the extra income was much needed. Her head was above water for the first time in years.

"Can you at least give me a ride to school this morning?" Lance asked Emily. "I hate riding the stupid bus."

"Can't," Emily said. "I'm running late. I have to leave in a few minutes and I won't have time to take you. Test today."

"If I had a car my life wouldn't be so miserable."

Barbara smiled. "It won't be that much longer." He'd worked all summer mowing lawns to earn as much as he could, and she had agreed to match whatever he raised. But that still wouldn't be enough to pay for a reliable vehicle.

Thankfully, Lance didn't ask Barbara to take him to school. She had to go in early, too—to get her ducks in a row before her big presentation today. They were bidding on a new sanctuary for Three Roads Baptist Church, one of the largest Baptist churches in Atlanta. The architects depended on her to sell the deacon leadership and church's senior staff on her colors, finishes, stained glass, and ideas for the architectural details that would make it a glorious place to worship.

In spite of her fatigue from last night, she was ready. If nothing went wrong, they would surely get this account.

Chapter 6

Emily felt guilty walking out to her car. Lance stood at the end of the driveway, waiting for the big yellow torture chamber they called a bus.

She got in and put her coffee cup in the drink holder, her books on the seat. She adjusted her rearview mirror, turned the ignition—

A *pop* shook the car, startling her. Suddenly, she saw Lance waving at her, arms arching wildly over his head. Confused, she rolled her passenger window down. “What is it?”

“Fire!” Lance yelled. “Get out!”

Emily jumped out. Smoke, white and thick, floated out from under her car, and as she stumbled back, she saw the small flames, way too close to the gas tank. Lance dropped his backpack and dashed into the garage, then reappeared with a fire extinguisher.

Emily stood back as he sprayed foam at the origin of the fire under the car. It went out, leaving only a cloud of smoke.

Out of breath, Lance leaned into the car and turned off the engine. His cheeks were mottled red as he stumbled back. Emily gaped at the car, stunned. “What *was* that?”

She hit the concrete and looked under her car. There was duct tape stuck to the wheel well, broken glass scattered in the foam, the smell of gas. A cord ran from the duct tape to the front of the car. Lance bent down and crawled closer. “Dude, that’s a bomb!”

No way. Something must have come loose ... a wire ... a belt ... But duct tape? Emily moved into the foam and reached for the cord, but Lance grabbed her hand. “Don’t touch it. Call the police. They should see it just like that. Want me to call Kent?”

“No, I’ll call 911.” But she didn’t. Instead, she just crouched there, staring. A bomb under her car? Who would do that? It could have killed her if the flames had gotten to the fuel tank. Why would someone want her car to explode?

She heard the rumble of the school bus a couple of blocks up the street. “Bus is coming,” Lance said. “But I’m not going. I’m staying with you.”

Emily didn’t argue. She didn’t want to be here alone if someone was trying to kill her. What if there was another booby trap somewhere?

She got her purse out of the car and dug out her phone. Would the police even believe her, if they knew of her past? Her face had been all over the news here when she was missing two years ago, and lots of people still remembered her. Her DUIs in Jeff City would be on their computers like neon reminders that she used to live dangerously.

Swallowing the fear, she made the call to 911. When she

was assured that the police were on their way, she handed her phone to Lance. “Will you call Mom and tell her?”

Lance took the phone as the bus squeaked to a stop. He waved it by. The voices of the kids faded as the bus huffed past.

Emily’s mind raced as he called their mother. This couldn’t be real. Someone was playing a joke on her. It couldn’t be a real bomb, just a smoke bomb, something to scare her. There was no one in Atlanta who would deliberately want to hurt her, was there?

Back in Jefferson City, she’d run with a pretty rough crowd. She’d even made a few drug dealers mad when she went into their lair and dragged a friend out last year. But Jeff City was five hundred miles away, and almost a year had passed since then.

She heard Lance connecting with her mother. “Mom? You’re not gonna believe what happened. I’m standing here waiting for the bus and Emily gets in her car, and . . .”

Arms crossed, she paced up the driveway, avoiding the foam on the concrete, and tried to think. Yes, she had a few friends in the drug culture here, but only because she worked part-time at a local rehab. She’d needed a job when she moved here, but people were reluctant to hire her. Though she’d been cleared of any wrongdoing after her face was plastered all over the news, people weren’t entirely sure that she was trustworthy. Some of them couldn’t remember how the case had ended. They only knew that she’d been a suspect in a woman’s death.

Then she’d had the idea to apply at the Haven House Treatment Center not far from her area of town, and they’d hired her to work in the office on Saturdays. Some of the clients could be unpredictable if they were using again after graduating from the program. Some might even resent her

being part of the staff that controlled their lives for twelve weeks. But she was never in charge. She only checked visitors in and out, answered the phones, and searched and breathalyzed clients when they came back from passes.

Would anyone come after her now to *kill* her? She shivered, though the air was muggy and warm. Where were the police?

“Emily, Mom wants to talk to you.”

Sighing, she took the phone. “Hey.”

“Emily, what’s going on?” Panic, anger, and accusation rippled in her voice.

Emily bit back the urge to defend herself. “I don’t know. The police are on their way. The fire department, too.”

There was a pregnant silence, then her mother blurted it out. “Emily, what have you dragged us into now?”

The words hit her harder than the bomb had. She heard sirens in the distance. “Mom, I don’t know what’s going on! I didn’t drag us into anything!”

“People don’t put bombs under your car for no reason! Have you been hanging out with those people again?”

“*What* people?”

“Drug dealers! Crazy addicts!”

“Mom, you know I haven’t.”

“I knew when you were staying out so late that something wasn’t right. And working in that place with all that temptation.”

Emily couldn’t take anymore. She saw the fire trucks turning onto her street. “Mom, I’ve gotta go. They’re here.”

She clicked off the phone, knowing it would only set her mother off, and walked to the end of the driveway to meet them.