

Downhill Fast

By Dana Summers

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

When I was young, a flight of stairs would never have stopped me from murdering someone. I'd have taken them two at a time, swift, smooth, and quiet. But now, as a full November moon washes over Eddie Cole's front steps, and Orlando falls moaning into another impossibly wet night, the cold finger of doubt taps my shoulder.

I ask myself why I'm in this run-down neighborhood with a piece in my waistband, scoping a target. I'm trying to retire, ditch the killing. Because killing involves planning, the right time, the right place, the right weapon, legwork, and research. I'm sixty-eight now, not a kid. But Johnny Maretti threw me this bone, and like an idiot, I couldn't say no. I almost didn't take Johnny's offer, but staring at my apartment walls was getting old, and the money was hard to refuse.

Some people call me a heartless killer. I prefer the term contract specialist, a trash collector. Off a pedophile? No problem. Kill a rapist? My pleasure. Terminate a carjacker? Consider it done. In short, I dispose of garbage the justice system leaves by the curb.

Eddie Cole fits the bill. He is a low-level slime, a real prizewinner, who had taken liberties with Johnny's eleven-year-old intellectually challenged son. How mankind can cough up a phlegm ball as vile as Eddie should puzzle me. But it doesn't. There are monsters among us, and always will be, the nut job that shoots up a school or wipes out a movie theater or runs down pedestrians. Sometimes loopholes in the law permit these vermin to escape the courtroom. Sometimes I'm waiting for them outside, hired by vengeful husbands or wives or children.

Johnny could've taken care of this particular rat himself and enjoyed every minute, but the risk of doing time was too high.

Eddie Cole and me? We have no connection.

I inch my clattering walker along the Pine Hills sidewalk. Pine Hills, affectionately known as Crime Hills, is one of Orlando's premier graveyards. As punctual as a Rolex, the area produces bodies with stunning regularity. I stop periodically to catch my breath and loosen up my fingers. My well-rehearsed disguise is fast becoming my reality, age slowly closing its callused fist around me little by little, day by day. And the one absolute that can't be denied echoes in my head: Time is undefeated.

I'd left the cool comfort of my car five minutes ago, and already the ninety percent humidity has soaked my shirt. Palm fronds ruffle in the drooling breeze that coats my face with sweat. The night is cooling down from the melanoma sun that had fried the city all day. I move past crisp lawns, cracked walkways, and dented mailboxes. The tiny siren of an attacking mosquito whines in my ear, and the smell of the oil-stained road rises to greet me.

Behind me, at the end of the street, two cars rev their engines. Angry voices challenge one another. I smile. Step right up. Diversions are welcome. Life in Crime Hills rambles on as per usual. The seedy neighborhood settles back into the cradled paws of whatever creature rules the shadow world, the world normal people avoid. My world.

Gritting my teeth, I lift the walker over a curb. A friend with many talents engineered the modified device. She'd filled its flip-up seat compartment and hollow aluminum legs with concrete, creating a formidable weapon. I've been known to improvise. Like the time a hit went south at a pet shop in Belle Isle, and I shoved Carlos Herrera's head into an aquarium full of venomous snakes. Herrera was a worthless loser, who liked to beat the hell out of strippers. Eventually, he picked the wrong girl, Baby Lamont's girl. Nobody screwed with Baby's girlfriends. Given Carlos's proclivity, I was happy to introduce him to Senor Rattlesnake. Never fired a gun. Never left a print.

Anyway, the walker modification is natural for me, but now the damn thing is a lot heavier than I expected. I force the contraption past a group of men, hunched over the glow of a flaring match. Their cigarette smoke curls toward the splatter of stars.

One man has the predatory look of a wildcat. His hooded eyes follow my progress. Inside, I smile. I may look like an old Pinto, but in my mind, I'm a new Ferrari. I amble on, a harmless geezer living on the edge.

Halloween is long gone, but reminders of the night remain. Forgotten pumpkins shriveled by the heat, grin like toothless hags from doorsteps. Cardboard skeletons hang curled on front doors.

My breath is long and ragged. My cigar throat rattles like a Model-T. Maybe I'll cut back to two a day.

Eddie's place is a broken down two-story with a ramshackle, swaybacked porch that dips and tilts and hangs onto the house with splintered fingernails. A single light struggles through a grimy window. As if on cue, the front door whines open, and Eddie saunters out and leans on the rickety railing. His cigarette blooms and a cloud of smoke floats skyward. He turns his head. In the dark I feel his eyes on me. Then he plunks down on the top step, and looks up at the moon, unaware that Johnny knows about his perversion, oblivious to the fact that he is about to join the universe he sits admiring.

At first, breaking into the house had been my plan. The element of surprise is a good thing. But a shot from the sidewalk will be easier. And so will the getaway. Morphing back into the feeble septuagenarian minding his own business will be smooth. *Didn't see a thing, Officer. My eyes aren't what they used to be, Officer. If I think of anything, I'll call, Officer.*

Plus, this way I can avoid those damn stairs.

I hobble nearer, uneven steps, stopping to breathe, selling Eddie the total package. Up the street, the cars get louder. Voices get fierier. The squeak of a tire spinning on pavement interrupts the sound of crickets and frogs. More shouts and threats.

Another three steps and I'll have the best angle, a straight on shot to an unarmed man from five feet. I take my time. Rushing now will break the spell. One more step. I stop and huff in oxygen.

"You okay Gramps?" Eddie laughs. "Maybe I should call Uber."

Like I said, I don't know Eddie, but I know his type. Over the years I'd seen armies of them come and go, cocky, pushy, overconfident. The kind of guy who thinks he

can screw with an eleven-year-old kid, the kind that winds up on the receiving end of a bullet.

The gun under my shirt calls to me, but my arthritic fingers ain't answering. I whip it from my waistband. My wrist hits the arm of the walker, and like a rookie, I let the .38 slip from my hand and drop to the sidewalk.

Both of us freeze.

The few seconds of silence that follow seem like eternity. Eddie shoots to his feet. The cigarette hits the stairs. Ashes catch the breeze.

My brain plummets into panic mode. My options are few. Eddie is fast. The gun is close. Headlines stream through my head: LOCAL CRIMINAL SHOT DEAD IN PINE HILLS. Think. Improvise, like Carlos and the snakes. Only this time it's my intestines that are writhing.

Eddie races down the steps. "Son of a bitch."

When he reaches the sidewalk, I swing the walker and connect with his right temple. He hits the ground, one hand holding his head and the other reaching for my gun. I swing again, but he rolls free. The .38 has disappeared into his fist. Another slam of the walker brings a scream as Eddie stumbles to his feet, blood streaming into his eyes.

Up the street, the screech of tires fills the night. The two cars, smoke billowing from their undercarriages, rocket toward us.

Eddie raises the gun. Faint window-light plays off his twisted features. Muscles screaming, I level the walker's four legs into his gut and push hard. Eddie squeezes the trigger. The bullet sizzles through what's left of my hair. Another push. Another shot goes high. Arms pin wheeling, he trips off the curb.

The cars tear closer.

Eddie loses his balance and falls backward. A horn blasts. The headlight of the racing Cougar catches him under his right armpit and flings him over the hood. The second car, a Mustang, clips him head-on and runs over him with a sickening thud. The drivers slam on their brakes, fishtailing down the street in an oily blur, the Mustang connecting with a telephone pole in an ear-splitting crack. The hood of the vehicle folds back, like a smoking accordion. In slow motion the pole splits in two sending the top half crunching onto the car's roof, wires sparking and hissing. Under the wreck, coolant pools.

"The hell's going on out there?" someone yells.

People stream from houses, shouting on the street. A number of dogs join in the chaos. The Cougar leaves rubber and disappears around the corner. Immersed in the smell of steam, the Mustang sits trapped under a tangle of buzzing wires. People yell warnings to stay clear. Someone shoots a photo of Eddie's mangled remains. Another talks on a cell phone. Others, knowing the cops will soon arrive, sprint into the night with fluttering shirttails.

"What was he doing in the street?" a woman bellows.

"Must be drunk," another answers.

Step right up. Diversions are welcome.

I drift to the back of the crowd. Nobody notices as I wobble away into the shadows like I'd done so many times in my life.

I tell myself that, yeah, things weren't perfect, but I'd gotten the job done. I still had it, whatever it was. I could still take care of business. Okay, I'm not what I used to

be, but I'm still a dangerous guy, still an efficient killer. I keep that thought as I try to remember where the hell I parked my car.