

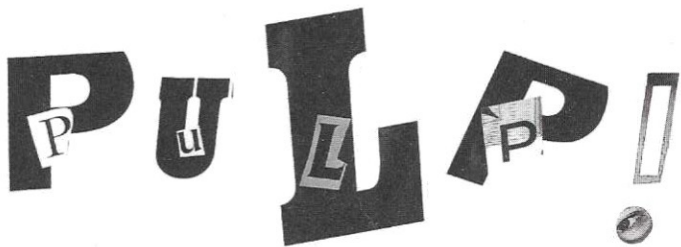
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PULP!

Pulp!
By Davis Dunham
Issue 5, Chapters 13-15



Readers,

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Davis



Chapter Thirteen

Almost two weeks went by with very little happening but the expected. Magnus spent eight hours a day scanning documents that revealed themselves to be ledgers before jetting over to Ridgewood to give what he could remember to the machine at Shredex. Money in, money out—Magnus had never seen such a meticulous record of one's spending, though, he supposed, most of his spending was for some kind of recreational intoxicant, food, or a book, and few totals went above twenty dollars. He couldn't usually afford anything higher.

"Did you notice anything funny about these ledgers?" Dilbert asked one night. The group sat around Dilbert's computer screen, he and Magnus with mugs of coffee and Barry with a flask of whiskey, watching as the computer cycled through shreds in an attempt to recombine them. It was surprisingly effective once fed keywords.

"Yeah, scanning them one by one makes me want to shoot my brains out," Magnus said.

"Funny, kid. No, I mean the names. They're all more or less high-profile people."

"So?" Barry asked. An unlit cigarette bobbed between his lips. Dilbert had eventually put a ban on smoking in the office, and the interaction left both men with a distaste for the other that was yet to reveal itself as temporary.

"So," Dilbert said, spinning in his chair to face Barry, "it's kind of funny. It's the sort of people you'd expect to be McKinley clients."

"Wow. Red alert: mystery ledgers may refer to *clients*."

Magnus couldn't say he was entirely displeased by the tension building between his two partners. His last solo interaction with

Barry—besides seeing him out of the corner of his eye, overseeing his daily trip from Baxter Street to Ridgewood—had left its own bad taste in his mouth, and it wasn't just the flavor of the bummed cigarette.

Dilbert didn't particularly enjoy working with someone unless, as he saw it, they were already working with him. In this way, he took after the politicians in his family. In terms of his relationship with Magnus, this panned out wonderfully. Neither liked admitting that they needed a hand, but both knew they couldn't accomplish their shared goal—knocking these upper-crust assholes off their high, high horses—without the other. Barry, however, was a drunk who annoyed folks for sport like golf, counting a higher score the lower number of offenses it took to piss someone off. It was safe to say he and Dilbert were not fast friends.

"Okay, smart-ass. Ask yourself this. Why would Wilson McKinley need a private record of all his business transactions?" Dilbert asked, tilting his head to the side as if addressing a dog.

"Maybe he's just meticulous like that," Barry responded, taking another swig from his flask.

"Maybe if you put down that cheap piece of 'stainless' steel for a few minutes," Dilbert said, pointing to the flask "you'd be able to think about it harder."

"No can do, pardner. This here is my thinkin' juice."

For his part, Magnus was surprised the drunk had been able to hold on to something long enough for it to get so dented and scratched—something he didn't have to pull over his head or fasten with a belt.

Dilbert nodded, somewhere between resentful and resigned, and turned back to his computer. "These aren't payments for the digitanks themselves. They're something else. I just can't figure out what yet."

As tensions rose in Ridgewood, Magnus, much to his surprise, began to find his scanning work relaxing. All alone, no one arguing about which was more important: taking a criminal off the streets or taking a criminal network out of the running. Either way, they were the underdogs. Dilbert's weakness was that his gripe was personal. Barry prided himself on not letting anything get personal; he just let it drive him crazy.

After the first few days, Damon didn't even check on Magnus as he worked, just stopping by at 5 o'clock sharp to pick up the hard drive from the computer terminal and send Magnus down with a bag full of shreds—shreds Magnus would be reviewing the next day, once they made their way across downtown Manhattan, Brooklyn, and part of Queens. So, Magnus was quite surprised to hear Rafferty's voice instead of Damon's bouncing between the cinderblock walls of the document room as the clock counted the first minute of the hour.

"Hello, Magnus Riverthwaite. Long time, no see. Care to get a drink?"

Chapter Fourteen

Certain things from bygone eras leave holes in the modern day. For instance, where in the world could one still patronize a mid-century lounge and get a highball-table service—as suggestively clad, petite women danced choreographed routines on a stage? Perhaps a strip club—more or less—though that kind of establishment lacked the class suggested, with partial success, by the retro joint Rafferty ushered them into that evening.

Sitting in their corner booth, Magnus felt like Humphrey Bogart in an outfit Humphrey Bogart would rather burn than wear—in character or out. A live band played low-tempo, swooning jazz,

the sensual nature with which they touched keys, levers, and slides taunting the audience, making it impossible to think about anything but how they wished they were touching one or more of the dancers in much the same way.

Magnus looked around. Dancers in small but tasteful outfits, actually designed and tailored costumes that he could picture being donned in smokey, perfume-filled dressing rooms in front of mirrors framed with blanching, incandescent light. Waiters in smart suits with silver trays and starched white towels over their arms. Bouncers who functioned more like enforcers, wandering the floor, dressed like the patrons, keeping an eye out for trouble. Compared to similar spots in his favorite novels, the place was only missing a roulette wheel.

"Don't see many joints like this, do you?" Rafferty asked. He smiled over the edge of his glass.

"Not outside of movies," Magnus said. Rafferty laughed—a genuine but not good-natured laugh.

"Who needs fantasy when you can afford reality?" he said, gesturing around him. "Nothing really goes out of style. It just gets more expensive."

Magnus pondered this—mainly how he was reasonably sure it wasn't true—until one of the dancers making the rounds of the floor stopped at their booth. She was tall, with tan skin, long, dark hair, and eyes that looked like jewelry-grade amber held in place by long, false eyelashes. Her outfit was black with a white spat on the front, reminiscent of a cartoon rabbit. Rafferty pulled her into his lap.

"Meet Carla," Rafferty said, briefly looking away from the woman's high and tight breasts to address Magnus. "She always finds some time for me when I stop by."

She coughed, and a deep, raspy voice echoed out of her chest—not in a sexy way. She spoke like Barry. “You stop by almost every night, big guy.”

Who needs fantasy when you can afford reality, Magnus thought. With that, he laughed. Rafferty was not pleased by this development, but he held his smile in place, tightly. He nodded. The woman, however, found the young man amusing. She winked at him and put a cigarette between her dolled-up lips.

“Tell me, Magnus,” Rafferty said, after turning his lip up at the smoke, “what do you think of your work? Enjoy it?”

Magnus nodded. “Sure, sir.”

Rafferty laughed. “No need for the ‘sir’ here, kid. Unless you’re trying your hand at flattery.”

Magnus swallowed. “Why would I do that?”

“Exactly, sport. Exactly. You’re well on your way to affording all this on your own.” The woman in his lap looked like she could make a spittoon ring from across the room, and the red polish on her fingernails was grown out a quarter inch from her nail beds. “About work. What do you make of those ledgers you’re scanning?” Rafferty laughed. “Don’t act surprised. We both know what’s in that room.”

Magnus wasn’t sure how much modernity the transatlantic tit-for-tat from his favorite novels needed to function in the twenty-first century. He decided to keep it classic. If Rafferty was as out of the noir loop as he said, he wouldn’t recognize it.

“What do you care what’s in that room? And for that matter, what does she?” He nodded to Carla.

“Don’t mind her. She’s got a special condition—her memory

resets each time you slip her a few bucks.” She threw Magnus a disinterested smile. “Now tell me, what do you think of it? The ledgers.”

“I don’t think of it,” Magnus said.

“Don’t lie to me. I see some of myself in you, if I’m being honest. And the part I see? It’s the part that doesn’t spend a whole lot of time minding its own business. How do you think I made my way up the ladder at a private intelligence agency?” He laughed. “Let me ask it this way: what do you know about the name McKinley?”

With each new word that came out of the man’s mouth, Magnus trusted him less and less. He looked around—no man who frequented a joint like this, spoke like that, and bragged about his own slyness could finagle his way up the ranks at a place like Pinkerville without knowing damn well what he was doing. He watched Rafferty take another sip of his drink; there was a man who knew exactly what he was doing at all times. How else could he calculate which risks to neglect? A chill went down Magnus’s spine. Apparently, dropping the artifice was now a risk Rafferty found worth taking.

“I’ve seen it on a few of the documents. That’s it,” Magnus said.

“I’m sure you did, kid. In fact, I’m sure you’ve seen it on all of them.”

They sat in silence for a minute, or as much silence as one can get in the middle of a lounge act. Once the applause stopped and the girl in the spangled minidress walked backstage with her line of male dancers, Magnus spoke.

“Yeah, I guess I have. What about it?”

Rafferty wrapped his arm more tightly around Carla’s waist. His hand dangled between her legs, right where the front of her

costume disappeared.

"Have a little fun, won't you? Can't you tell I'm playing with you?" He laughed and looked at Carla. She raised her eyebrows and scanned the room, her cigarette hanging limply as it neared its end.

"Maybe I don't like being played with. Maybe I'd rather just go home," Magnus said. The chill down his spine grew colder. He felt like a mouse realizing, as the cat's claws closed in, that divining the predator's motivations was of secondary importance.

"Oh you won't be going home You're coming with me back to the office."

Magnus swallowed. "Why's that?" The next act filed out onto the stage—a woman dressed like, of all things, a mouse. Magnus swore he could hear the men in the crowd start to howl.

"Maybe it's time you dropped the dumb act, kid. I know you know more than you're letting on. I've known since your Scandinavian friend knocked my guys off you on your first day. And, what's better, I know something you don't know."

Magnus swallowed. The dancer on the stage spun halfway around and turned her head to face the crowd over her shoulder. She mimed shock. "What's that?" Magnus asked.

"Your friend isn't quite so nimble when he has a few drinks in him. Or more than a few." Rafferty raised his eyebrows and took another sip of his own. "At least that's what my guys told me after they tied him up. Apparently, when he didn't see you leave through the service entrance like you normally do, he thought it would be prudent to sneak in and see what was going on for himself." He laughed. "Who could've seen that coming?"

"He's not my friend."

Rafferty finished his drink. "We'll see about that. Come on. There's a car waiting outside." With that, he smacked Carla on her black, satin belly, rolled her back onto her feet, which she barely seemed to notice, and stood up. "Unless you'd prefer I give the call now." He gave little time for consideration before heading for the door. Luckily, Magnus didn't need it.

Chapter Fifteen

Barry was about as old as dogs come, and the last new trick he'd learned involved taking a sip of Jim Beam without pulling the cigarette out of his mouth. When he was younger, his mental plasticity had been notably high—that's what his teachers said, though not in so many words. He took to new ideas quickly, which would've put him in an excellent spot as a young, developing leader if his reaction to other children not taking to the same ideas quite so quickly hadn't been to ridicule them, kick his feet up, and suck on the end of his pencil. It seemed he'd never gotten over his pacifier, and based on how he acted even with its replacement, no one had the nerve to see what he was like without. From there, cigarettes at thirteen were a logical step.

Soon enough, his classmates caught up with his intellect, though never his intuition. He dealt with this newfound unremarkability by leaning into the quality that still made him stand out: his insolent attitude. When he wasn't the only one receiving academic praise, he found that he wasn't really interested in receiving it at all. He barely graduated school due to poor attendance and a litany of missing assignments.

If Barry was an honest man, he would've admitted that the dynamic between Magnus, Dilbert, and himself was bothering him. If he had been an honest kid, he would've admitted that boredom drove him to piss everyone off—just to have an interpersonal

playground to run through; gauging reactions was an excellent amateur personality test. More or less, he was doing the same with his team now. Coming to America, tracking down Anton McKinley, figuring out how to get leverage on him—it had been all-consuming. He was focused, activated. But now, even though the case was still moving along, he was on pause, watching the nerd and the kid, who shared their own common cause, make steps at their own pace. Barry had always found that mischief was an excellent way to speed people up and remind them that their actions, whether they liked it or not, were up for his approval, simply because he said so.

However, he was not an honest man. He was a man of vices, specifically drink. So, he drank about it. The first day, he hadn't known how long he'd be waiting, and he hadn't come with enough supplies. Each following day, however, he knew exactly how much to bring. There was no real reason for him to wait outside the McKinley building, to follow Magnus to Ridgewood on the train—he just liked it. It was busywork, and any work he could do while drinking was okay with him.

He had slipped into a pattern, one involving a great deal of watching, waiting, and following. So, when Magnus didn't emerge from the McKinley service entrance by six o'clock that night, Barry knew something was wrong. Truthfully, he'd known something was wrong when Magnus hadn't emerged by 5:05, but he figured he'd give the kid a chance. When his flask tipped up empty at 5:58, the next hour mark seemed like a good line to draw in the sand.

However, his cognition was more affected by the alcohol and boredom (though he would phrase it as boredom first and alcohol second) than he understood. Anyone could've told him that sneaking in through the loading dock was a bad idea; unfortunately, there wasn't anyone there to do so. He made enough noise stumbling around—though still surprisingly cogent for how much he had drunk—that it didn't take Rafferty's goons long to find

him. Their boss had his suspicions on the Norwegian's reaction to a change in Magnus's routine after his gangsters told him about his habit of hanging around the building.

When Barry awoke, his hands and feet were numb. His chin was on the floor, his head tilted to the left, and all he could see before him was concrete and four pairs of shoes: dirty Converse he deduced were Magnus, rich brown leather oxfords he, despite never meeting him, figured were Rafferty; the remaining two he had seen on his way down.

It's funny how it's often in atypical situations that people find themselves most using cliché—perhaps to bring a bit of normalcy to the proceedings.

“Hello Mr. Bergh,” Rafferty said. His knees, chest, and finally face entered Barry's field of vision; he was much more handsome than Barry had expected—devilishly so. “Nice of you to join us.”

* * *

“When two early birds fight for the same worm, it comes down to which one pulls harder. Unless one of the birds gets killed.” Rafferty smiled. The drive from the lounge to the office took only a few minutes, so Magnus hadn't had time to adjust to the shock. Seeing Barry lying on the floor of the loading dock, tied at the hands and feet, hadn't helped.

“Your man here is trying to snatch up a worm I've had my eye on for a long time, and pulling hard enough to shake him off sounds so, well, *hard*,” Rafferty continued. “So—” He gestured to the goons, one of whom pulled a gun, a heavy Mauser, and pointed it at Barry.

“No!” Magnus yelled.

Rafferty smiled and glanced at Magnus over his shoulder. “So he is your friend.”

Magnus gulped.

"What is he having you do?" Rafferty turned and grabbed Magnus by the front of his shirt. "What is he having you do?" he yelled. His eyes and lips twisted into a snarl Magnus thought fit much more naturally on the man's face than any of his false smiles ever had. Still, Magnus remained silent. Rafferty released him, dusted himself off, and returned to equilibrium. "Tell me now or I'll kill him," he said. The goon cocked his gun.

"I'm supposed to remember all the documents I scan," Magnus said, his tone pleading. "I'm supposed to tell him what they say."

"Why? Tell me why."

"I don't know."

Rafferty pointed to the goon with the gun, who raised his eyebrow.

"I don't know, really! He wants to screw over the McKinleys. Honest!"

"What's in it for you?"

"Nothing! Nothing really."

"Wrong answer."

"Stop! Stop. No, no, I'll talk." Magnus swallowed. Sweat dripped down the line of his spine and into the waistband of his underwear. If he'd had room in his mind to think about where this all started, with detective novels and a temp agency, he would've cursed Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, the temp agent—all of them. Lucky for them, however, he really only had the presence of mind to deal with the issue at hand.

"Clout," he said. "Clout. I...I studied journalism. I'm a writer. I

thought it would all make a good story."

Rafferty looked at him, his brow furrowed. "You're here on *spec*?" Magnus nodded. Rafferty laughed, tossing his head back and taking a stroll to stand behind Barry, facing Magnus over his prone body. "You," he said, pointing at Magnus, "you are a fucking idiot."

He continued. "Idiots. Idiots, all of you!" From his gestures, this seemed to include his goons. "Do you know how long I've worked for this? I started as a freelance accountant for a traveling carnival. A traveling carnival! I might as well have stayed there for all the good you lot have done me. One of the towns we stopped in had a forensic accounting firm. A few years later, I was at Pinkerville. Now look at me! Sunk to the level of holding idiots—*Idiots!*—at gunpoint in a loading dock. And it looks like said idiots are doing a better job at tracking the money than I am!" He ran his hands through his hair. "How humiliating." He sighed. "How fucking insulting."

He kicked Barry hard in the kidneys. He smiled and did it again. From the Norwegian's reaction, the self-administered anesthetic had worn off. On Rafferty's face grew the smile of a man discovering a new passion: near sexual pleasure in physical violence. A lifetime of threats and manipulation; if he'd known how good it felt to beat someone up, he would've done that from the jump.

A few minutes later, with Barry even more bloodied and bruised, Rafferty placed his foot on top of the Norwegian's head and spat. He looked up, smiling, proud of himself. *These goons better start looking for work*, Magnus thought. *Who needs a maid when you mop up yourself?*

"I'll give you a choice, kid," Rafferty said. "You recognize the men to your right, I presume?" He laughed, panting. "Boy, you sure love talking about people behind their backs. You think

your mother will still send you money each month if she sees the messages you write about her to your therapist? And that's not even the half of it." He smiled. His hair had come loose from its gelled coif during his kicking spree, falling in front of his face in a way that made him unexpectedly ugly. "Also, kid, come on. At least meet the therapist over video."

He brushed the hair out of his face. "Come to my side. Help me. I'll find someone else to be my scapegoat. Writing on spec..." He laughed. "I might actually kind of like you. If you don't—" He gestured to the goon with the gun, who mimed firing one off into Barry's brain.

Magnus looked to his partner. God, how different he seemed now, curled in the fetal position, tied up, bloodied—somewhere between drunk and hungover, though that seemed, for once, to not be one of the Norwegian's top concerns. Magnus thought he could see tears dripping from his eyes to the floor, though it could've been sweat; he'd do him that favor. He looked to Rafferty and nodded.

"Good choice. The man lives, though not without a few lasting reminders to stay away—from me, from you, from all of it. And your private information stays, well, *private*," Rafferty said with a wink. He waved, and the goons grabbed Barry by the armpits, dragging him through the loading dock and out onto the street.

Watching them go, Barry's body limp between the gangsters, either from physical abuse or psychological dejection, Magnus found he had little room for panic left with all the space taken up by pity. For the first time in a long time, he felt a genuine, intrinsic desire to help someone. Even taking his motivations for clout, for fame, out of it, he couldn't see his partner lugged off like that. He may have climbed into bed too quickly with the asshole, but he'd gotten comfortable, lumpy mattress and all, and he wasn't looking to switch to another room now. Either way, they were in the same crumbling hotel. He hoped it stood long enough to see Barry again. For that matter, he hoped Barry did, too.

Magnus felt Rafferty's hand fall on his shoulder. The man smiled at him, gloating. If he didn't know better, Magnus would've guessed he was having fun.

"Come on, sport." Rafferty's steel grip pushed Magnus farther into the loading dock, toward the service elevator. "Let's get back to work."