

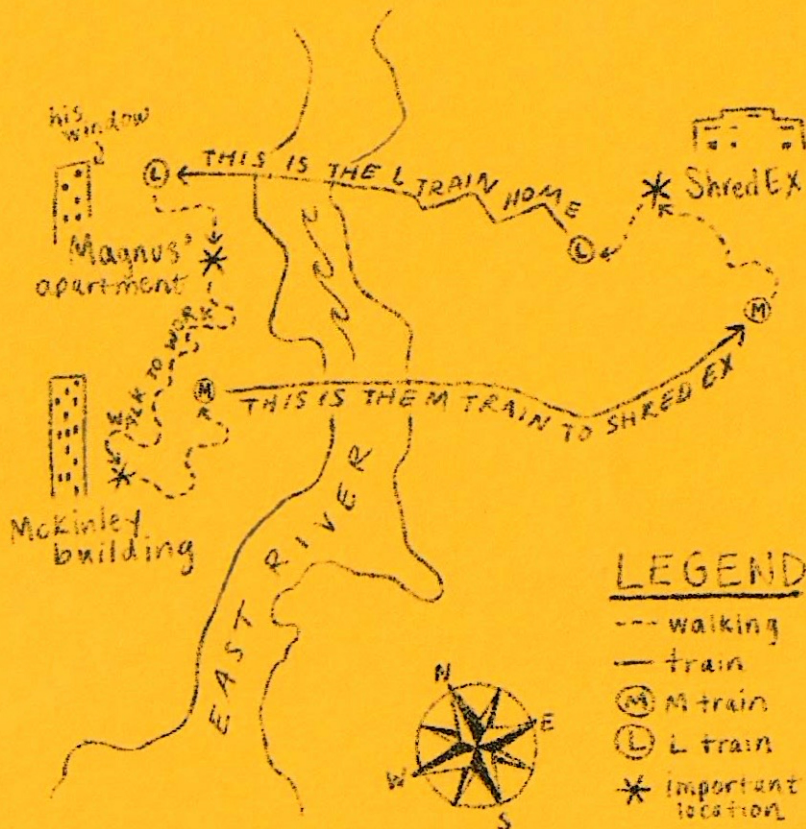
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Pulp!
By Davis Dunham
Issue 8, Chapters 22-24

MAP OF RELEVANT LOCATIONS FOR PULP!



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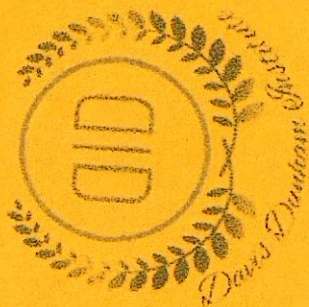
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Chapter 22

Magnus heard two steps and a gun clatter to the ground.

“Dumb old man,” he heard in Barry’s voice. He peeked one eye open. There Barry stood, hunched down in front of McKinley to look him straight in the eye—also to make fun of him a little. He leaned over farther than necessary, looking upwards into the old man’s face with an expression as if to say, “Aren’t I dumb?” and holding his arms rigid in simple limpness down his sides; he loudly went, “Doy, doy, doy,” like a schoolchild portraying their idea of a particularly stupid person.

“You are dumb,” he repeated, and kicked the cane out from under McKinley, who fell off to the side, like a passenger on a slowly capsizing cruise ship, before colliding rather lightly with one of the shelves to the right and landing on the floor with a dusty thud.

For good measure, Magnus supposed, the Norwegian called to the old man one more time. “Stupid man. There is three of us and you are old.” He looked at Dilbert. “Two of us. But you are still old.” The old man moaned and fluttered his eyelids. This had the general effect of making him seem like a sickly child.

“You are dumb, too?” Barry said, turning to Damon.

Damon gulped. He held his gun straight out with both hands, pointing it at Barry. “I am not dumb. I am the head of this building’s security.”

“Head and ass,” Barry said. He strode forward and, without pause, took the gun from Damon’s outstretched hands. He threw it on the ground next to the old man’s and kicked both far back into the stacks. Damon froze, mouth agape, swallowed a lump he’d just found in his throat, and nodded.

“This is all very silly,” Barry continued. “We will take the files

now.” He motioned to Magnus, who picked up the box and looked between the parties—the two unconscious lumps on the floor, the one shivering security guard, and the blonde monolith lording over all.

Unfortunately, this lording did not last long. A loud bang echoed off the cinder block, and an accompanying force tore the box out of Magnus’s hands. The shot had the opposite effect on him as the papers—he froze. He hadn’t moved by the time the plume settled.

“You are a horrible security guard, Damon,” a voice said. The speaker’s shadow lurked in the doorway where Wilson McKinley’s had waned, only this one was tall, strong. The arms swung like pendulums, driving the man forward into the room.

He stood at least as tall as Barry, the heels of his loafers matching those of Barry’s Doc Martens. This theme persisted across the appearance of both men; underneath, the hardware was more or less comparable—height, stature, hair, complexion—but the styling of the new arrival was considerably more refined: tailored slacks and a well-fitting knit polo under a brown cafe racer with a pair of aviators tastefully hung in the chest pocket.

His left wrist wore a thick, almost luminescent silver watch. In his right hand hung a dense, dark metal pistol, which he raised laterally and fired. Red spray burst from behind Damon’s head, and he fell weak-kneed to the floor as if his spine had been pulled out. A puddle spread from his forehead.

“God, how happy I am to be rid of him. Easier than firing him, really.” The new arrival laughed and held up the gun. “Though I suppose it’s ‘firing’ either way.” He seemed to get a good kick out of this, banging the gun against his thigh like a plaything. “Anyone else looking to get fired?”

Wilson McKinley moaned again from the floor.

“Shut up, dad,” the man said, spitting the word. “I’m clueless as to how you thought you’d handle this. Telling me to wait in the hall. You are a weak, old man. Could he even cock the thing?” he said, looking at Barry, who shook his head. “No, no. That’s what I thought.” He swung the gun, clocking Barry upside the head in a backhand maneuver. The Norwegian’s knees buckled, but he saved himself halfway down, drawing back up to his full height with a groan. Blood trickled down his temple.

“Do you know who I am?” Barry asked, lowly and slowly, as if summoning something.

The man laughed. “My guess? Some dumb fool who thought he’d make it big off another man’s work. Haven’t you guys all heard?” He stood with arms outstretched, gesturing to the whole room—the whole tower. “This is the most secure building in Manhattan.”

Barry cleared his throat and spat a bloody glob onto the floor. “You may recognize me from Oslo.”

This seemed to do the trick. The man turned on Barry with an upturned lip. He stepped forward, pushing the gun into Barry’s chest hard enough to force him to step backwards. “Watch your mouth, you foreign freak. I’m not in that worthless country anymore and you can’t prove anything.”

“I am satisfied with the current proof,” Barry growled. He tilted his upper body forward and stepped against the muzzle pressure, forcing their captor back a few paces himself. A flash—fear, confusion, or both—shot across the man’s face before his gloating snarl returned.

“Judge, jury, and—,” the man said. “Oh, and what? Exe—,” he started, pulling the gun slightly away from Barry’s chest and gesturing with it. “Executioner?” He smiled. “That role’s filled.”

Barry smiled himself. “For now.”

It was at this point that it occurred to Magnus that Dilbert had been down for a very long time. He pointed to his friend. "Can I," he started, getting the man's attention, "can I check on him?"

Their captor shrugged. "If you care."

Seeing as he did, Magnus crossed to Dilbert and checked his pulse, which was beating just fine. When he glanced at Dilbert's face, he saw that his eyes had flicked open, full of fear. His breath came in short pants.

"Dilbert. Stand up," Barry said, half-turned to face them. "Dilbert. I know you can hear me. This is stupid. Stand up."

Without much comment, the middle manager gathered himself, rather prim in his embarrassment, and rose. "Hi," he said, waving at the man with the gun.

"Hi?" the man with the gun said back, bewildered. "Does this seem like a meeting to you? I will kill you." He moved the gun toward Dilbert but had a second thought, jutting it back to Barry, who cocked his head smugly at the perceived compliment. Dilbert began shaking. Magnus listened to see if he could hear the man's teeth chattering. His chin jiggled below his mouth like a jellyfish.

"He will not kill us," Barry said to his friends. "Yet." There was a moment of silence. Barry turned to the man. "He is a very bored man, entitled bastard that he is, and, at the center of it, he thinks this is fun. If he could, he'd push out his claws and bat us around the floor like mice."

The man smiled. "I must admit, I would," he said. "I quite like that idea, actually." He regarded Barry. "I recognize you now. That girl in Norway. You're her..." he said, pausing to think, "brother?" He smiled. "You were."

The Norwegian swallowed. Magnus shook his head. "No, no," he

said. "He was her friend." He turned to Barry. "Right?" However, the Norwegian seemed to be unaware of anything in the room except the man standing in front of him.

"No, no, I don't believe so." The man's smile broadened. "That's why they wouldn't let you on the case, right? Why you followed me around the city in your private car, tried to break into my apartment? You know, it was partly his conduct that got me sent back to the States. Got him fired, too, I believe."

"Unpaid leave," Barry said, growling nearly to the point of inaudibility. His hands shot up, jetting for the gun, but the man reacted fluidly, jerking it back before pushing it into Barry's face.

"Unpaid leave you're spending here," the man said, "making friends. Enjoying yourself?" He laughed. "I suppose I have the information in these boxes to thank for getting me home, too. I got you beat, Sven. We've got the whole fucking world hostage."

Magnus could tell from Barry's expression that he wanted nothing more than to snatch the gun and shoot the man in the head. However, it occurred to him how important the infliction of pain may be to the Norwegian; perhaps he would prefer a slow takedown involving many painful, individual shots in various non-fatal locations before, as Magnus found himself picturing it, crawling up behind the man and snapping his neck—especially now that he knew the extent to which Barry was really affected by the crime he'd crossed an ocean to solve. In hindsight, it should have been obvious; his drinking and dedication orbiting each other in a descent into madness, his stunt trying to break into the McKinley building, even his uncouth jokes about the crime itself—all belied a personal connection. Coincidentally, Magnus was quickly finding it much easier to sympathize with personal involvement.

"My name is Barry. Bergh."

"Tell that to the undertaker."

"You are the one who should prepare."

Whether the line contained some foreboding kind of foreign wisdom or it was another of the Norwegian's Spaghetti Western bilingual misinterpretations, it was effective. Their captor pulled his head back, scrunching his nose as if caught by the odor of something distasteful. Magnus realized his general affect, more than anything, was one of petulance; despite the fact he was clearly past fifty, his face and body stood in the stature of a spoiled child—as if, at any given moment, he could whistle and a team would arrive to finish the job.

The man smiled again, his eyes set out of the expression like sharks' eyes, the curve of his mouth hung like a lure. "I'll get right on that."

"You're Anton McKinley, aren't you?" Magnus asked. He'd forgotten he was physically there—a material body, in as much danger as Barry's. Now that the eyes were on him, he found this much easier to pin to the forefront of his mind.

"Your pet idiot finally caught up," Anton said.

Truly, Magnus thought, I've never met a worse person in my life.

The puddle from Damon's forehead had become a stream, reaching Magnus's shoe. He raised his toe, drawing tendrils of the sticky fluid that snapped like threads. Without sparing a thought to realize what it was, he felt a tear fall down his cheek.

Chapter 23

Rafferty had long been interested in the classic concept of the lock and key. How simple, in his opinion, both the mechanism and its downfall were. Turn one way, safety; turn the other, open season.

And for the downfall? Lockpicks, crowbars, guns, even a thick boot on the end of a heavy leg—all would work. But his favorite part was the, in his opinion, false sense of security the regular Joe went to bed with at night, having neither a good idea about nor a real fear of the fact that the safety of himself and his family, his possessions, was barely less reliant on the decency of others than it had been before the loaded clunk of a deadbolt turning.

Is it any surprise, then, that he chose for his abode in New York City one of the tastefully aging buildings surrounding Gramercy Park? He could've chosen any of the litany of buildings just minutes away, saved tens of thousands of dollars (he positively would not rent) and found a way into the locked park himself. He had the resources, and strolling through somewhere he was not welcome, watching those that felt safe in their exclusivity have no knowledge of the frailty of their prized privacy, was, more than anything, an aphrodisiac for him. However, as he'd learned quickly: a criminal who stretches himself too thin gets shredded. He intended to make enough off his McKinley plot, and its Pinkerville follow-up, that the bump in list price to have a key of his own, a real one, was a mere drop in the bucket.

Speaking of keys—no one had one to his apartment but himself; not even housekeeping. Much to his dismay, this resulted in being rudely awoken by a loud series of knocks on his front door in the middle of the night, though the alternative—an intruder in the place—was not more appetizing.

"Up all night yesterday making that runt scan files," he muttered, storming to his door while wrapping his bare chest in a robe. "As they say, no rest for the wicked." At this, he paused for a quick, self-flattering laugh before putting back on his standard expression of displeasure and swinging open the door. No need for the peephole—he knew who it was.

"Well? What is it?" Rafferty demanded from the goons panting in the hall. One compulsively checked his watch; the other stared at

their boss with a bead of sweat dangling from his eyebrow. The drop fell, causing the goon to blink rapidly and rub his eye like a child.

"The building, sir," said the lead goon. "You should come."

"And why is that?"

"We were watching like usual. The kid let two older guys in, which we were going to run and tell you about immediately, but this one here needed to finish up a call with his girl first." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at his partner.

"It's her birthday," the partner said, finding his toes suddenly interesting.

Before Rafferty could lay into them, the lead continued. "But—thank God it is. The guard, Damon, came down a minute or two later and let his own two guys in—one ancient and one fashionable."

Rafferty sighed. So, it was happening. He'd anticipated something like this. The only thing he couldn't make sense of was the kid letting in two men at the door—the Norwegian and who else? As for Damon's crowd, that he could figure out quite easily. He swung the door the rest of the way open and stepped to the side. After a few seconds of fearful hesitance, the goons entered.

"The men the kid let in," Rafferty said, pivoting to face the goons by blocking the door. He intended them no harm, but, what could he say, he loved the feeling he got watching them realize they had no way out except through him. "Describe them to me."

"One was gigantic," the second goon said. "Big as an orb."

Rafferty skirted the urge to comment that "orb" is not a universal unit of measure but in fact a shape and tried the other goon instead.

"He was quite large, boss. Four-hundred pounds, easy."

Rafferty nodded. "And the others?"

"An old one and a, well, younger one, though that's not saying much. The old one was old, as in going on a century. The younger one was middle-aged, maybe fifty or sixty."

Rafferty nodded again. "That'll be Wilson McKinley and his son. I figured that oaf was still loyal to them." He walked partway to his room before stopping. "Is there anything else?"

The goon swallowed. "Yes, actually. We followed them up. There were shots." Rafferty requested clarity with a slow shake of his head. "Gun shots."

"Did you see who?"

"No, sir. We came here when we heard them. We thought you'd want to know."

"Not that I'd want to know who shot whom," Rafferty said, raising his voice to a yell as he approached them, "just that I'd want to know *someone* shot, what, someone *else*?"

The lead goon nodded. "Yes, sir."

Rafferty regarded both. "You should be thankful you are not paid to think, you idiots. That being said," he backed up slightly, "you were close to right. Wait here. I'll get dressed." He crossed toward his room.

"Oh, and another thing," he said, his hand on the door frame, without turning. "Tell your girl happy birthday from me."

The door slammed. The lead goon let out a pregnant puff of air and wiped his forehead. The other grabbed the nearest receptacle—an

antique vase—and vomited into it.

As he got dressed—something simple for the occasion, just a navy wool suit and a striped tie—Rafferty found himself thinking about the respect he had for the old man: little, but more than he had for most. Going on one-hundred years old and still trying to handle his affairs himself—there was a good amount of dignity. Not that that was the kind of dignity he was after; he planned on aging, gracefully and alone, somewhere well-staffed and otherwise private.

He cinched his tie and set to lacing his shoes, dried globs of the Norwegian's blood still on the toes. He laughed. With any luck, he'd add to that work tonight. He'd never hit anyone before, not even as a child; he'd always been one for manipulation and intimidation over violence. However, he had to admit—the rush of hurting someone physically was hard to ignore. He pictured a corpse in the building, blood draining from its bullet holes, which he, absent-mindedly, pictured fingering lightly. Nearing middle age, he was having a change of heart. He'd spent his life chasing the ever-moving goal post of embarrassing a never-ending string of substitutes for the physically powerful boys who'd tormented him in school. Perhaps they had been right all along: it really did feel good to beat someone up.

He pulled a gun from his bedside table and swung open the door. He didn't feel bad for the old man—one-hundred years was long enough—or, for that matter, his son, the Norwegian asshole, or the apparently massive man who had somehow escaped his notice. It was just too bad the kid had to die, too.

Chapter 24

There had been many firsts in Carla's life: first dance on the pole; first job in a classy joint that only required she sit on the laps of

her customers, not dance on them; first time she'd decided two-hundred dollars was worth her pride. Nearing forty, which, she could feel, meant nearing the end of her first career, she knew more firsts were coming—she'd seen it plenty of times over the years—but she hadn't guessed the first of this new string of firsts would be taking her first steps, voluntarily, into the police precinct for downtown Manhattan.

“To what do we owe this pleasure?” the desk officer jeered as she walked in.

She cleared her throat. “I'd like to speak with Officer Stanton, please.” She hoped the desk officer couldn't hear the heels of her classy pumps jittering against the floor. She tried to hold her leg still—her whole body, for that matter—as the Pavlovian panic of the police station set in.

“He isn't with you?” The officer glanced behind her.

She gulped. “No.” *That damn kid*, she thought. *I should've asked for five hundred.*

The officer furrowed his brow. “So...,” he started, “what are you doing here?”

“I'd like to see Officer Stanton, please.”

“Voluntarily?” The officer did nothing to hide his shock, the privilege of which turned her nervous attitude on its edge, souring it to insolence.

“Yes, voluntarily, if that's okay with you. If what's okay with you even fucking matters.” She figured he seemed like the kind of guy looking for a little schooling. Having regained a bit of her confidence, she cocked her hip to one side and raised her eyebrow.

The officer rolled his eyes. “I didn't know I was in the presence of

such an upstanding citizen.”

I'm about as upstanding as you are, she thought, eyeing his comfort in the seat he looked to be merging with. However, she figured she'd dished enough attitude to make her point without sacrificing her position, so she decided to keep the thought to herself.

What had Rafferty let slip over the last few weeks? His plans, or enough of them that anyone with a brain—a class of people she was sure he did not consider her part of—could figure the rest out. More than that, she'd even caught mentions of some place called Pinkerville—a place or a school or something—and how that's where his sights were set next. The more she thought about it, the more she realized she'd found herself, for better or for worse, in a not-too-shabby position: a pompous, rich asshole—handsome to boot—paid her in hundreds to stay silent, building her distaste and boredom at the same time; then, a cute kid—a good kisser, she bet, with those lips—found her and offered double the going rate to visit her old friends at the precinct and forget all about the confidence she'd been paid to keep.

She remembered something her father said, before he got locked up, when he was on one of his drink-raged Communist rants: the only people who truly profit off war are arms dealers—they make money off both sides, no matter who wins. She wished he was there now, with her and the four-hundred dollars in her bag waiting to prove him right.

“Carla,” the desk officer said, apparently not for the first time. He eyed her. “Stanton will see you now.” He motioned toward the relevant office, a superfluous gesture. She knew the way.