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Chapter Twenty-Five

Magnus had wished many times to see a new side of Barry. He hadn't gotten to know someone new in a while—he was much more in the practice of losing relationships—but, from what he could remember, it normally involved seeing the person in a variety of situations, getting to know how they react, and discovering if you like it. (Depending on the situation, whether he liked it was irrelevant, though he always made note.) Getting to know Barry, Magnus had really only seen one side. Sure, it was an expanding side, which grew in its horribleness with each new conundrum, but it is easy to grow tired of a flat personality, especially if it's also a mean one.

However, “flat” can be synonymous with “still,” depending on how you look at it—perhaps kneeling on a riverbank, looking upstream into the sunset. To Magnus, Barry seemed of the “still waters run deep” variety—as if a softer, more intimate side would come out in just the right situations, only there was a storm brewing overhead that whipped the surface into something nasty—and dear God, imagine the monsters within.

For the first time, Magnus found himself wishing Barry would release whatever demons undulated within that Nordic sea—as long as they wet their whistles with this new McKinley instead of him. Unfortunately, all personal demons currently being exorcised by the Norwegian apparently had a strong desire to stand at attention and stare, focused to the point of devotion, at the man brandishing the gun.

“Did you not hear me? Get moving!” Anton gesticulated with the gun, indicating the path to the door. “Hej!”

The only movement on Barry's face was a slight quiver of his lip that Magnus heavily doubted, knowing Barry as he did, usually preceded tears. However, he quickly adjusted his conclusion: he decided not to doubt that the expression had preceded many

outbursts of tears, just to doubt that those tears ever came from the man making it.

"I am not Swedish, you cocksucker." Barry let the words slide from his mouth with the reflex action of vomit—slow, noxiously visceral, disgusting to all parties.

In response, Anton fired. The bullet blew through the lower-right corner of Barry's abdomen, above his hip. Barry grunted and stumbled, much deeper than when struck across the face minutes before, and disjointedly placed his hand over his hip, which he leaned over slightly, breathing gulpingly as if drinking.

Anton's face twisted in frustration. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why can't you let well enough alone?"

"There is not well enough for both of us to drink," Barry grunted, each word its own beat. For once, Magnus was not tempted to laugh at the Norwegian's flub. The new saying actually made sense, relatively, given the situation; additionally, he worried drawing any attention to himself may result in death, a fact evidenced by the blood showing through the back of Barry's shirt and dripping down the front of his leg.

Anton pointed the gun back in Barry's face. "You're crazy." He laughed, throwing his head back and affecting the laugh to be much larger than it was. In the broad laugh, Anton took his eyes off the gun, but Barry did not. He stood, frozen, eyes dead set down the line of the muzzle, right into, once the laughing man's head returned to its starting position, Anton McKinley's eyes.

"*You're crazy,*" Barry returned.

Yeah, but you're currently not, Magnus thought. *That's the problem.* Why the hell hadn't Barry jumped the asshole yet? He'd seen him yell at strangers for less. The gun was right in his face—surely someone like Barry knew how to grab a pistol from the fist

of a trust fund asshole about to hit the federal retirement age, even when sporting a bullet hole.

Apparently, Magnus was mistaken. McKinley took a step forward and pushed the muzzle into Barry's chest, whose legs buckled, sending him first to his knees before the force of the impact aggravated his injury. He groaned and fell limply to the side, favoring his injured hip, and held himself up with one hand.

"Just like I thought," Anton said, stepping forward. "Pussy."

Magnus found himself shocked at the man's vulgarity. "Dude, chill out," he said, forgetting to debate the merits of staying silent.

Barry groaned from the floor. "Kid, shut up."

"No, no, keep going!" Anton pushed Barry over with his foot and turned to Magnus. "You've got a problem with me?"

Magnus gulped. "Yeah, I guess."

"Don't," Anton shouted, "look away from me, you little loser, when I'm talking to you." He took another step toward Magnus.

"Sorry," Magnus yelped, looking back at him quickly.

"Yeah you fucking are. Don't you ever talk to me like that again." He hit Magnus upside the head with the gun, much lighter than he did Barry. Still, Magnus felt the blood dripping down his face before his hand reached his cheek.

Anton fired again, this time into the ground. "Apologize again."

"I'm sorry!" Magnus yelled. He looked at his feet and, in a panic, looked back up, which made their captor smile. When he met the Norwegian's eyes behind Antons legs, he found new belief in telepathy: they were both clearly cursing the other for getting them

into this situation. Rafferty listened to reason. Anton McKinley, raised on a diet of liquid gold smoothies and tickled awake each morning by naked women holding ostrich feathers, had nothing to lose—or, more properly, he had so incredibly much available to throw away that feeling the pain of whatever injury these idiots, as he saw them, would cause warranted little more than an Advil or an ice pack, at worst—metaphorically speaking.

“What do you want?” Magnus asked, his voice wavering.

“This is my fucking building, asshole.” Anton leaned in close.

“How dare you ask me that. What do *I* want? What do you want? What does he want?” He pointed at Dilbert.

“I—, I—.” Dilbert burst into tears. “I do much better behind a desk!”

“When I finish with you, you’ll be behind a desk for good. Actually, no, you won’t. Your skeleton will be a lovely home for some deformed, mutant crab scuttling on the floor of the East River. All of you.” He gestured across the group. “You,” he said, pointing back at Dilbert, “you’ll be apartments.” His phone buzzed.

“Screw you, man,” Dilbert cried.

“No, *fuck* you, bitch.” McKinley looked up from his phone and pointed to Dilbert and Magnus. “You two, grab him. We’re going up to *my* office.” He spat on his father. “Cameras just told me that we have visitors.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

For such a recent—or, realistically, soon to be—inheritor of the penthouse office atop the McKinley building, Anton seemed mighty comfortable in the space. His feet were up on the desk in seconds, and a cigar snuck from his breast pocket soon after.

If Barry hadn’t been injured, maybe it would all be different; once McKinley got comfortable, he would lead a charge against their captor, knock him to the ground, and take the weapon. Then, they’d grab their files and go—not to the police, but to the press: the printing press at ShredEx, where they’d make copies to disseminate—to the general public, and to their hearts’ content.

But, Barry was injured. In fact, he was becoming quite pale, even sitting, and his breaths, though they didn’t sound any shallower really, had a hollow, breezy quality that made Magnus worry for how much oxygen they really supplied. Magnus certainly didn’t know what to do in a situation like this, and Dilbert—who was now sitting as well, dabbing his brow—had surely shown himself to be nowhere near as capable of handling the situation as he had portrayed himself to be. Caught in the sticking place of desperation, Magnus did what anyone too scared to make a move does: he watched the enemy closely.

Just two or three feet away, across the wide, mahogany desk, who did Anton McKinley remind him of? Up close, he was not nearly as handsome as his dress and styling liked to suggest. The skin on his face was thick, and it had long, deep furrows in it, like the fatty side of pork belly. His eyes were a cloudy gray, the whites dim and opaque due to tobacco use, and his lips were a cobblestone gap. All of this, but his outfit was impeccable, still, and his hair, though it moved naturally, always returned to its default position. Seeing the polish the new head of Digitank brought to his position behind the desk, Magnus found the root of the familiar feeling being roused in him: out of all people, Anton reminded him of Rafferty. Twenty or so years older, face deeply lined from the prolonged exposure to drink his younger counterpart was making a good head start on, but this man had the same debonair air, the same alarming confidence—though his came with a wild-eyed unpredictability that, given the gravity of the situation, Magnus had no trouble calling insanity. Rafferty, at least, thought before he shot, just as much as he thought before he did anything. Anton caught Magnus’s eye and smiled, and Magnus pictured him in another life, sipping highballs

in a pinstripe three-piece suit with a switchblade taking a short break in his pocket.

As if summoned by Magnus's thoughts, Rafferty burst into the room, his goons close on his heels. All three held guns.

"Alright, boys," Rafferty started, triumphantly. "Let's—"

"Took you long enough," Anton interrupted, fiddling with the muzzle of his gun.

Rafferty blinked. "Ex—excuse me?"

"Take the stairs or something?" Anton didn't look up.

"We—. We—. Don't talk to me like that, you asshole."

"I only see one asshole here, and I don't have a mirror."

Magnus disagreed entirely; at that moment, he could see many assholes.

Satisfied with whatever gunk he was trying to pick off his gun, Anton extended the business end of it toward Rafferty, who matched the move by homing in more closely on his target: anywhere between McKinley's hairline and eyebrows. McKinley cocked his gun, an apparent mistake; Rafferty, gun already cocked to accompany his hot entrance, adopted a briefly pensive expression at the noise before raising an eyebrow and firing a shot right where he'd been pointing. McKinley toppled back into his chair, a bloody hole in his forehead.

Magnus leapt from his seat, his arm extended to the now deceased purely out of shock. Dilbert screamed at the noise. Barry was unconscious.

"What a doozy," Rafferty said, enunciating each word alone. "I've

never killed anyone before." He took in a long breath and blew it out tightly between his lips. "Once he cocked the gun, I realized I was just going to end up killing him anyway, so I figured why take the risk he's a good shot? I've read enough about him to know his tendencies." Rafferty locked in on Magnus. "He just seemed so awful."

Magnus gulped; laughter and tears had gotten wrapped up together with some snot in his throat, and he had to get rid of it somehow. "He," he stuttered, "he was."

Rafferty began to pace. "I have decided my fuse has reached its end. I am no longer tolerating any inconveniences. Do you know how long it has taken me to be here? To climb all the way up here—high up enough, not only to get to choose this contract, but to set myself up to take over Pinkerville soon after? And you fools think you can get in my way? No!" he exclaimed, walking back in the other direction. "It's worse than that. You don't even care about getting in my way, you just can't seem to get out of it! And here you are, dancing in my way like a wild turkey on Highway 33—and I'll run you over, too!" He charged at Magnus, who recoiled—equally from the threatening action and the disturbed grimace on the man's face.

"Take him," he said, nodding at the goons and gesturing to Dilbert. "I'll handle this one." He smiled at Magnus. His goons crossed to Dilbert, who let them hold his hands behind his back and pin a gun to his head.

Like most great ideas, this one came to Magnus in an instant. He let out a self-invigorating, terrified yell and leapt at Rafferty, who fired again in reaction, narrowly missing Magnus's shoulder. These loud noises—at least the fourth and fifth of the night, by Magnus's count—knocked Dilbert out yet again, who simply couldn't handle another gunshot in such a short time. Soon he was on top of the goons, who groaned exhaustively under the weight. By the smell of it, one of them or Dilbert had wet himself.

However, Rafferty was still mobile. The fast thinking had to continue. So, Magnus did what he always did when caught in a tight spot: he lied. First, though, he had to grab the gun in Rafferty's hand and point it upward to avoid a shot in the chest. "You're too late. I've been sneaking files out the whole time. That room—it's empty."

"You don't really think I'm that stupid." Rafferty spat the last word, spraying saliva as they struggled for the gun overhead.

"Risk it, then. I only made one digital copy. I hid it, and I sure as hell won't tell you where."

"I'll search every inch of this building."

"Have fun." Magnus strained to speak with all of his core strength bracing against the constant pulling of Rafferty's longer, stronger, taller arm. "I didn't say I hid it in the building."

All he needed was the one moment of shock.

He grabbed the gun out of Rafferty's hand and clocked him across the face with it—an action he repeated until the man was on the ground. Next, he ran to Dilbert, under whom the goons were beginning to rustle. He kicked the guns from each of their hands, taking one, and stood above the group on the floor, each gun pointed at one of the goons and his eyes focused dead on Dilbert.

"Dilbert," he yelled. "Dilbert!" Nothing. "Dilbert, wake up for god's sake!" Still nothing. He kicked Dilbert in the crotch, lightly, which, thankfully, roused him with a shout. He rose per Magnus's instruction and crossed to Barry, who was still unconscious, while Magnus held the goons on the floor with the guns.

"Take him and go!" Magnus yelled. "To the van!"

Dilbert picked Barry up in his arms like a child. "Run?" he asked.

"Yes, run!" Magnus yelled. "I'm right behind you. Go!" Dilbert nodded and sprinted through the doors.

Thank God for large men, Magnus thought. *And, just this once, thanks to Him for guns, too.* Speaking of, he made sure both of his were cocked and gave the goons another look. As the shock of being in control of the situation washed off, he found himself filled with the joy of being able to shoot first, which sat as solid and heavy in him as a bullet. It was as if, somehow, all the dreams he'd had reading noirs as a kid had been printed out, balled up, and stuck in his gut; sure, it was uncomfortable, but, like a gun, no one else in the room had one. He postured at the goons, making as if ready to jump on them, and they flinched. He wished Barry was there—there, and in a condition to see what was going on. The Norwegian might actually be proud; and, Magnus realized, he might actually like that.

"Get your boss and come find us," he said, still holding the goons supine on the ground with their hands by their heads. "If he's as good as he says he is, he'll already know where we're going." He kept the guns aimed as he backed out of the door, turned, and booked it into the elevator.

God, what am I doing? he asked himself. He knew taunting them was a bad idea, but in this situation, this panopticon of bad ideas, each player trapped in his own little cell as they took turns throwing cakes in each others' faces—cakes and bullets, apparently—who could say? Maybe the only type of good idea left was an idea that ended it all—no matter who won.

The elevator doors rang as they opened, and Magnus sprinted through the lobby, which, he realized, was completely unsupervised now that Damon was tucked in for the Big Sleep upstairs. Yeah, the guy had been annoying, but he didn't deserve to die; save that treatment for the upper crust.

Dilbert pulled the ShredEx truck up front in a cloud of hot rubber

and smoke. The door swung open—Barry, on his side, panted with his hand on the handle. Magnus leapt in, and they sped off, south down Baxter Street toward the Brooklyn Bridge. It didn't matter what route they took; Rafferty and his friends would meet them when they got there.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Unfortunately, Magnus didn't know how right he was. By the time the team sped into the ShredEx loading dock, Rafferty and his goons were already inside—a fact none of the three were aware of until, with Barry stumbling between the others' shoulders, they found themselves in a rather awkward position when the garage door slammed down behind them.

"You know, the Williamsburg Bridge has less traffic at this time of night," Rafferty said, smiling. Again, he stood with a gun raised in their faces, one of his goons flanking him while the other, having moved to operate the garage door, pinned them down from behind. "It's a better route. You just take Metropolitan off the BQE."

Magnus coughed. "I'll remember that next time."

"So, what's the deal here?" Rafferty asked, gesturing between the three. "Separate." He motioned his hands apart, the gun making a low clunking sound in accordance with the shake. After a few seconds, Dilbert and Magnus got the drift, and so they did; slowly, they stepped away from Barry, letting him drop to the ground.

"What are you doing here?" Rafferty asked, stepping toward Barry. "Really."

"Who fucking knows," Barry grunted. "I was here to get that piece of shit, but now you've gone and shot him through the head because he annoyed you for a *second*, so this bullet in my hip isn't even worth anything in the end, is it?" He laughed, but the floor

had gone out of it. A bit of drool fell from his mouth.

"Right, right. You know, I checked up on you, after last time. That asshole killed your sister, didn't he? Got you kicked off the force back home, too, it seems."

Barry grimaced. "Unpaid leave."

Rafferty crouched, eyeing Barry up and down, focusing on his wound before flashing him a pitiful look. "You should've tried *un-pained* leave. Tell me, which hurts worse: being shot in the hip, valiantly, in the line of duty—my apologies, 'duty,'" he said, pantomiming with his fingers on the repeated word to showcase his characteristically patronizing sarcasm, "or finding out that you'll likely die from an injury that means nothing anyway, because I fucking shot him before you could?"

"Hard to tell," Barry grunted. "It's all a bit jumbled right now." He exhaled sharply. "I'll get back to you in a few days."

"No, you won't." Rafferty smiled. "And you," he said, looking to Magnus, "you really just came here as a temp? Got caught up in all this and thought 'Hey, that'd make a good story?' You're too goddamn stupid for your own good."

Magnus decided there was a compliment in there somewhere. He could hear the soles of Rafferty's oxfords striking the concrete floor of the warehouse with each step despite the fact the man had stepped out of the island of light near the garage door minutes ago. Now, his words and steps echoed sharply toward Magnus, each sound hitting five, ten, who knows how many times, reverberating in the silence left behind with the shredder turned off.

The torment seemed fitting to Magnus. As Rafferty was in control, it was unfolding just as he liked it: with him remaining completely unseen but very well heard. How much of his life had Rafferty spent like this, creeping in the shadowed periphery of some poor

schmuck's vision, only coming out once the wound was felt and the mark's vision started to tunnel?

"And you," Rafferty said, stepping out of the dark to the right of Dilbert and holding the gun a few feet from his temple. "I suppose you're wrapped up in this for a similar reason?"

Dilbert choked down a sob and nodded. "I was."

"Three people after one jackpot, and a bright-eyed journalist to write up the success story after, is that it?" Rafferty said. He turned and sank back into the dark. "That's too many men after one prize for me, boys—even more so since one of those men is me." The steps rounded the border of the darkness, stopping about thirty feet to Magnus's left. "And I certainly can't have someone keeping a record." He stepped into the light, a mock frown on his face, the gun pointed at the floor. "I hope you can understand."

Apparently, he'd had enough time before their arrival to find the light switch. Suddenly, the room was brilliant, as was everything in it—the dented but repaired metal of Dilbert's machinery, the well-mopped cement floor, even the tiny gold buckles on Rafferty's oh-so-fine leather shoes.

"You," he said, pointing at Dilbert with the gun as he sauntered to the center of the room, standing among the machines. "I need your help with this part. Tell me." He placed his hand on the Willinck family jewel: the custom-built, industrial-grade ShredEx paper shredder. "How do I turn this thing on?"