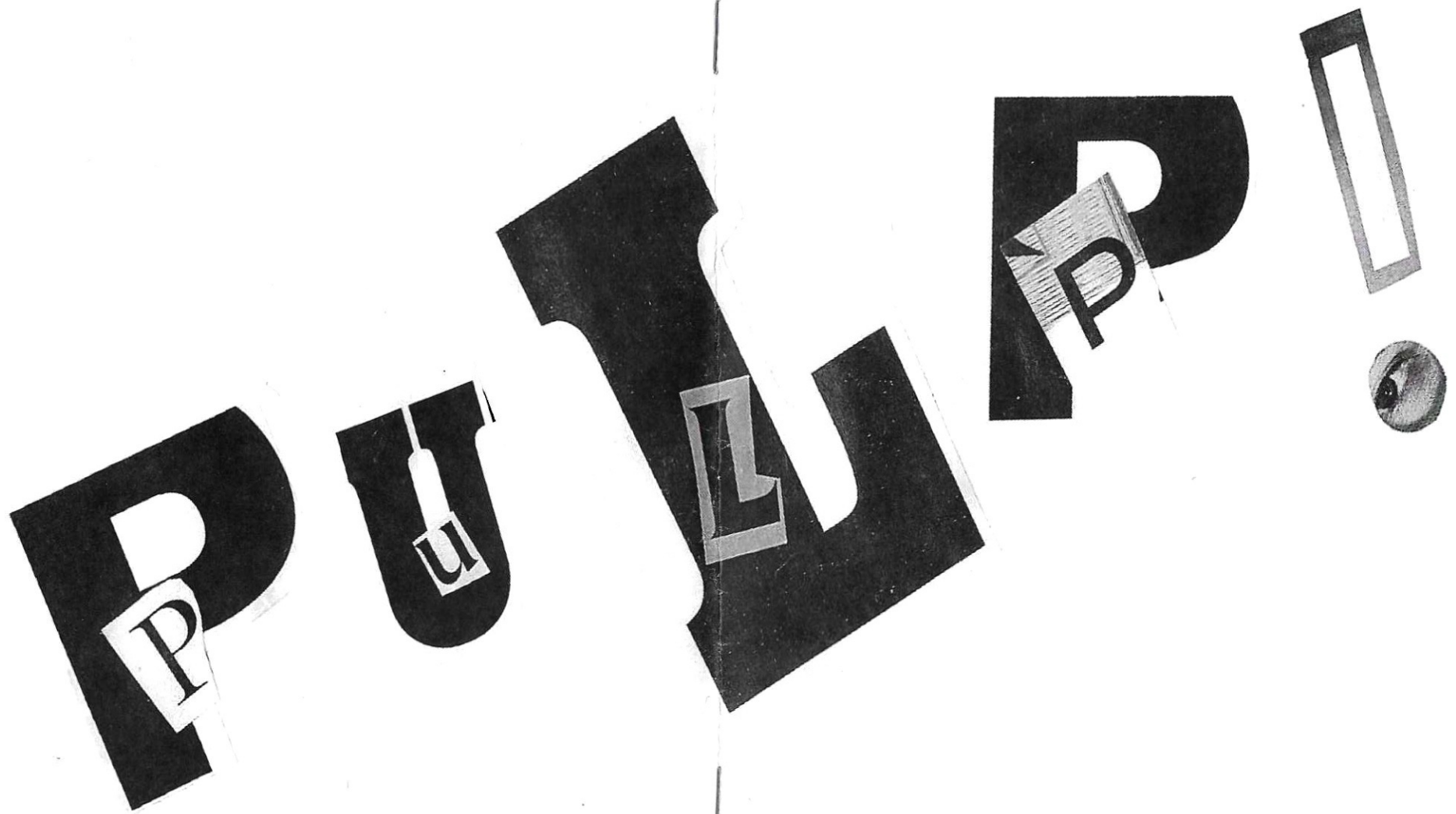


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Pulp!
By Davis Dunham
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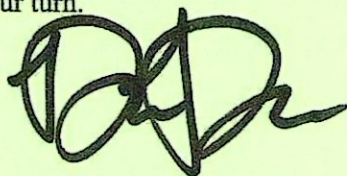
About the author

Davis Dunham self-published his first serial novel,

PULP!

at age twenty-six. You are holding it. He thanks you very much for holding it. You're likely holding a flyer as well. He thanks you for holding that, too. He did all the normal things one does over the course of this process—laughed, cried, learned to love himself better than before, etc.—but, more than anything, he entertained himself; he hopes he has entertained you as well. As a token of his gratitude, he's included his signature below, for posterity.

Though he could not be here tonight to accept this award in person, Davis would like everyone to know that he thanks those who helped him for that help, and he curses the rest—save a select few he would like to thank for steering clear. To the people who cut, stamped and stapled, including himself: thank you, he couldn't have done it without you. To the editor and book designer: he asks you to help him cancel his Adobe InDesign subscription—he can't figure it out. To the agent at desk twenty-one of the United States Post Office on 43rd and Lexington: seventy 2oz stamps and seventy-two “ounce” stamps are NOT the same thing! And to everyone else: this is chain mail—now it's your turn.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Certificate
Excellent
Taste



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Chapter Twenty-Eight

It turned out to be a simple on/off switch. After that, it didn't take long for them to direct him to the reconstituted McKinley files, at which he chuckled, flipping through the printouts in his hand.

"Impressive. You've gotten them all right. What program did you say you used for this?"

Dilbert answered. "A modified version of our address scanner." He and Magnus were on their knees with the goons and their guns behind them, and Dilbert's knees were apparently beginning to bother him. He winced, made small, jerky movements from side to side to get a better position, and winced again.

"Hm. Almost makes me wish I'd come up with it myself." Rafferty dropped the papers onto the conveyor belt behind him. A few seconds later, they tipped over the top, fluttering down into the shredder, which made a loud, whirring noise—much louder than necessary for paper, Magnus thought. Flakes fell out into a large canvas bag already overflowing with shreds.

"Oops." Rafferty smiled.

"Fuck you. Those were printouts and you know it," Magnus scoffed angrily. He looked at Barry from the corner of his eye, who didn't look good; his face had gone extremely pale, his eyelids looking too heavy to be lifted, and blood had soaked through the front and back of his clothes. Magnus tried to remember if there were any major arteries an inch above a man's hip.

"Actually, that's what I'd like to talk about first." Rafferty crossed to Magnus and dragged his gaze away from Barry with an index finger, making Magnus look up at him from his position on his knees. "You shouldn't even need digital copies according to what you told me. You've been sneaking files out for weeks, right?"

Magnus nodded, gulped. "Right."

"Well, where are they?" Rafferty stepped back and spread his arms. "Not keeping them in your other warehouse, I assume."

Magnus slumped.

"It's okay, kid." Rafferty stepped closer again, this time crouching. "You're swimming with the sharks now, and you lost sight of shore a long time ago. I wish for your sake you hadn't. Really—you had potential."

"I know you didn't get any files out of there," he said, standing and motioning to the shredder, "intact. You've put back together, accurately, about as many files as you've scanned—*painfully* few—which means, as I see it, you and me are on equal footing. Minus the gun to your head, of course."

He laughed. "That just won't work for me. I don't do 'equal.' I do 'all,'" he said, pointing at himself, "and 'nothing.'" He pointed at them. He took a breath and followed it with a petulant exhale. "I wasn't planning on killing anyone, but with the McKinleys out of the picture, this information puts me in a much better position than just having them do my bidding—until, what, they find some way to use me instead? If I can maneuver my way in as CEO using this stuff, Digitank is mine. Who even gives a shit about Pinkerville at this point? I saw what that kind of information could do for me at work, and I thought: some leverage over the McKinleys, a good foothold at Pinkerville I can use to climb up a few levels, get the respect I really deserve, and life will be, at last, equal with my expectations."

You don't have expectations, Magnus thought. You have demands.

"Who would've thought I'd be thanking you for pushing me over the edge!" Rafferty laughed, the sound echoing off the harsh corners of the building, coming back at Magnus a hundred times.

"I've done things in the last two weeks—the last two *days*—that I never would've dreamed. Because of you—you pushed me to it." He ran forward and shook a gun in Magnus's face. "Thomas Rafferty, with the power of those digitanks behind me? I would be unstoppable." He smiled again, that killer, spectral smile that could charm the hole on a golf course into moving—a little to the left.

"Unfortunately for you three, all the myriad risks associated with leaving you alive are just not *negligible*. Here's a simple rule of thumb if you want to stay alive around me: know less than I do, or act like it." He gestured to his goons. "Listening, fellas?" They swallowed and nodded.

"Shooting is just so boring, don't you think?" He peered over his shoulder at the machinery. "It doesn't really send a message. Think of the news tomorrow: McKinleys dead in building—I checked on the geezer; feel free to hold your breath there—their secret documents missing. The whole way across the city, in some random warehouse, three strangers just happen to fall into a shredder. I wouldn't count on the police making too many connections, especially not with the information about to be in my unadulterated possession—but people moving around down in this scene will. You see, no one wants to mess with a man who'll drop another man in an industrial paper shredder."

Magnus cleared his throat. "You're right. I didn't steal any files. But about what you said earlier, too. It's just not a good idea to leave someone around, with counter interests to yours, when they know what you do."

Rafferty's face fell, just a bit, out of its adrenalized rictus.

"That's why you're not going to like what I have to say next."

"What is it, you little shit." Rafferty raced forward and grabbed Magnus by the collar, pulling him to his feet.

"Remember that club you took me to? That dancer you liked—Carla, was it?" Rafferty's eyes narrowed. Magnus panted and kept talking, the words coming out tritely but at the panicked speed of a person being choked. "Though she thanks you for your *weeks* of patronage, she's decided a few hundred bucks to stay silent about such horrifying, criminal plans..." He shrugged, as best he could. "Well, she came to the realization that she just can't *neglect* the risks she's exposing herself to by being involved with a person like you. Nor will the police, I believe."

"Don't you say 'nor' at me, you little shit," Rafferty yelled, spitting in Magnus's face. "God. God! Fuck! I thought you'd make a nice little scapegoat, that I could pin it all on you, the hapless, disillusioned kid who thought he could get away with it. That's why I hired you. How dare you do this to me! How dare you?" He dropped Magnus but kept snarling an inch from his face. "Look at me. I'm a fucking *murderer*." He began pacing. "Damn that bitch. That slut."

"She's not a slut, she's a dancer, and just because she sits on your lap doesn't mean she loves you, dumbass. You see," Magnus said, watching Rafferty's face sour even further at the vague implication that Magnus might be, in any way, superior to him, "she's just trying to see how thick your wallet is." He smiled at Rafferty. "Mine may have been thinner, but it was way more desperate. Certainly wasn't the worst few hundred dollars I've ever spent."

"Funny, your misplaced gloating almost makes me mistake you for your friend. Just one thing: you're short a bullet." Rafferty wrapped one hand over Magnus's shoulder and used the other to press his gun a few inches above his hip.

At the reference to the Norwegian, both's eyes automatically shifted to where he lay on the floor—or, where he had been lying, as, though he hadn't moved, he'd found the strength to lift himself into a makeshift sitting position to free his hands, which were both overflowing with small, colorful metal disks. A few fell from

between his fingers and clinked against the floor.

"Thanks—Rafferty, was it?" he said, his voice shallow and breathy but with the effort of a groan. "I've gotten sober so many times that, even drinking enough to black out half of them, I still can't keep count. But, today, I am absolved. I ain't half as bad as you." With that, Barry gathered the last of his strength and threw the fistfuls of hard-earned sobriety chips at the goons, aiming for their legs and feet.

At first, it seemed like a mistake. They bounced off the men's lower bodies—those that didn't miss or fall short—and spiraled around each other, sometimes clanking and falling over. All Rafferty could do was laugh.

"Get him."

The goons set out, clodding toward Barry with confidence, but within a few steps both were down, groaning, after the slick bottoms of their leather shoes slid on the tops of the rolling, spinning chips like they were pearls. Barry smiled—a small, tired, proud smile—made a comment about their shoes being for sissies, in comparison to his Doc Martens, and rested back on the ground, closing his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

As Barry passed out, again, his friends sprang into action. Dilbert rushed to him while Magnus leapt at Rafferty. Magnus's hand went first for Rafferty's gun, directing it upward and to the side as fast as he could. A shot went off, careening over Magnus's shoulder. Behind him, Dilbert yelled and fell, audibly slamming into the ground and sliding forward a bit upon impact with a screech. The goons moaned and groaned beneath him.

After a few seconds of struggle, Magnus managed to wrench the gun from Rafferty's grip; both he and the older man were visibly shocked before Magnus cut the moment short by throwing the pistol beneath a piece of machinery. He swung his hand back, forming it into a fist, and drove it into the left side of Rafferty's chin in an uppercut that caused him to stumble backward, blinking.

"Holy shit," Magnus muttered. "I can't believe that worked." He shook his fist out, cursing horribly to himself at the pain, and advanced toward Rafferty.

"God *damn* it!" Rafferty yelled. "I'm going to relish sending you into that shredder, kid." His tongue, mangled from the blow, brought his words out butchered and bloody.

Magnus threw another punch. This one Rafferty blocked, clumsily, as if his arm was too heavy. Neither were gifted or experienced fighters. It occurred to Magnus that everyone else in the room was either unconscious—hopefully—or trapped under someone who was. No one was coming to help—either of them. No computers, no papers. No friends. No goons. No technology, aside from the massive shredder humming behind them as they fought. A dead broad on the floor and it could be a Chandler scene.

He raised his leg and kicked Rafferty in the stomach, which doubled him over. When he uncurled, Magnus grabbed him and threw him backward against the machinery. A loud bang echoed throughout the facility—not a gunshot, just the sound of the thin metal sheeting of the paper shredder reverberating from the impact. Rafferty righted himself and charged at Magnus, grabbing him like a wrestler, their heads, necks, and shoulders wringing against each other, trying to twist into a more favorable position. Magnus yelled and, without thinking, ran forward, trying to get the older man to let go by ramming him into the machinery again.

His aim was off, however, and, by the time the backs of Rafferty's knees hit the low point of the conveyor belt, he was yelling as well.

Rafferty held Magnus in a death grip, tearing at him less like he was a person and more like he was an idea Rafferty was desperate to rid from the earth. They fell onto the conveyor, twisting against each other. Periodic punches flew. Magnus clambered on top and head-butted his opponent, the report from which sent him staggering backward down the incline of the belt as it traveled toward the shredder. Rafferty used the moment to right himself, squaring up as best he could—face and body bloody, clothes torn. So far from the appearance of his usual self. He spat blood on the conveyor beneath them, and Magnus watched as the glob dribbled hopefully downward, against the race of the conveyor, before eventually tipping over the edge on the surface of a paper that, just like everything else, was always going to be destroyed.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, kid. I'm going to club your head in, and when you're just lucid enough to know what's going on I'm going to throw both of your companions into this goddamn machine. The last thing you'll see is the bones and hair of your friends pulverized by its teeth. Then, when I'm done, the only contact I'll have with this side of the International Date Line will be in the form of the occasional, big-ticket blackmail."

Magnus panted, trying his best to balance himself as the papers and the belt beneath him shifted. "I thought," he said, stumbling, "I thought you were taking over Digitank. Remember your whole speech?"

Rafferty smiled. "With jail, you're in for a penny, in for a pound, kid. A few days ago, I'd never hit a man. An hour ago, I killed one. Open victory would be nice, but don't be *stupid*—I can't go back to some kind of normal society. To them, one kill, four kills—it's all the same—I've seen the data. I might as well get my money's worth." He stumbled delivering the line but caught himself, nearly falling backward toward the shredder. His face twisted—relief and victory. His time wasn't over yet. "This is my final show, kid, and I'm planning on staying backstage, as usual."

Nearing the conveyor's end, both men gladly stepped onto the two small ledges that appeared on either side. Stabilizing himself more quickly, Magnus advanced.

"Check the newspaper tomorrow. What's left of you will be front and center." He began inching Rafferty up the belt path, who, from the look on his face, had realized the rare, situational weakness of the high ground. "Even in New York, half a man sticking out of a paper shredder makes the news."

After a quick pause for the necessary calculations, Rafferty snapped his gaze back on Magnus, smile gleaming, and tried his best to look contrite instead of desperate. "Slow down, kid. You're right, we can release the files. It should be black, white, and *read* all over, not black, white, and *red* all over." He looked, panicked, at the pile of shreds building beneath the mechanism and began to use his arms to maintain his balance, taking short, nervous steps backward as Magnus advanced.

Magnus stared at Rafferty nearly deadpan, his only expression a slight snarl in his top lip. *This is all his fault*, he thought. *He contacted the temp agent. He hired me. He infiltrated Digitank. This is only happening because of him.* They were now within a foot of the dropoff into the shredder's mouth.

"Kid, don't be rash. This is all a misunderstanding."

Magnus advanced. "You made this physical. No one hurt anyone before you sent those goons after me. You beat Barry up. You caught McKinley's eye. You shot Anton McKinley, and Dilbert. You —"

"Accidents!" Rafferty yelped. "Pure accidents. I'll, I'll make it right. I'm sorry!" He looked over both sides of the conveyor belt, but that way down didn't look much more promising than the one behind him: on each side there was only a thin gap between their machine and the next. Assuming he landed properly, not at

an angle to slam his skull against the machines' edges or have his limbs jam along the sides, he would still be immobilized, caught waiting for the police. Which would be worse, prison or death? He decided: prison would make someone like him short-circuit, bounded by cinder block and barbed-wire barriers that set a limit on his reach. The world-wide reach he expected. He demanded. He deserved.

"No, I—"

"I'm sorry, Rafferty," Magnus said, smiling as he crept another few inches forward. He'd started wearing Doc Martens, at Barry's suggestion, and though they weren't broken in and sometimes slipped on the metal, the stability they gave him with nothing more than their stalwart weight helped him move toward Rafferty with a new, intimidating, unrestrained confidence—found in a surety not of success but of being able swallow any outcome. It made no difference to him; he was dead either way.

"It's simple statistical analysis. Everyone else involved in this is dead or injured—two by your hand and two by another, who, by coincidence, happened to be your first victim. That, coupled with everything you *know*," Magnus said, emphasizing the word as if it should cause the other man shame, "makes you much, *much* too dangerous to keep alive. That's a risk, as I'm sure you can grasp, I just cannot *neglect*. Unfortunately, I—we," he said, gesturing around himself in a brief moment of steady balance, "can't take that risk. I hope you understand."

In that second when Magnus gestured, leaning himself ever so slightly out of his stable position, Rafferty lunged forward, his hands jetting for the younger man's neck. But—the heels of his Italian leather dress shoes just didn't have the grip needed for such a maneuver. They slipped over the metal edge at the top of the platform, hooking around the sharp lip and jerking his center of gravity backward. After a few terrified seconds of his arms pinwheeling, his eyes softened; his fear, in one last act

of cowardice, had fled, making him appear, for the first time, confused. He fell backward, sliding head-first into the shredder, which jammed somewhere around his shoulders. Material of various visceral shades of red and gray, liquid and solid, sprayed out of the base of the shredder, turning the top layer of shreds below into a glistening, red pulp.

Magnus, for his part, tried to grab the man. When he saw him falling, his first reaction was to leap backward, away from the lunge cut short. But, after it became clear the only direction Rafferty had ahead of him was down, he'd stepped forward again, barely balancing even with his boots. In the penultimate moment Magnus realized the absurdity of the situation and began to reach out his hand. Playing into this wouldn't help anyone. The police could handle Rafferty. That had been the plan originally, right? No reason to sink to his level. To kill.

Unfortunately for Rafferty, in the ultimate moment Magnus reasoned him just enough of a desperate scumbag—sniveling, rat-faced, professional hanger-on-in-shadow of the actually successful that he was—to hang on to one last thing: Magnus's hand. He pulled back and lowered his gaze. A horrid scream, making quick progress toward blood-curdling, came out of Rafferty's mouth before it cut off in a gurgle.

Magnus climbed down the conveyor, which had stopped, red alert lights and loud alarms blaring. He leapt to the ground once he got close enough, racing to check on his friends; no need to check on Rafferty, that outcome was perfectly clear. For the second time that night, he kicked guns from the goons' hands, this time confiscating neither, instead sending both underneath nearby machinery.

"Shit." Blood seeped out from under Dilbert. However, upon closer inspection, it all came from the undersides of the goons beneath him, the weight and slide of Dilbert's fall having driven more than a few of the chips into their skin. Magnus searched Dilbert for a bullet hole but found none. He patted the man's face.

"Dilbert," he said. "Dilbert, wake up. You're okay. I think."

The middle manager's eyes fluttered open. He muttered a soft apology, calling himself half a man, at which Magnus cried, wrapping his hands around the back of his bald head, and kissed him. "Dilbert, you're a whole six men to me."

He pointed at the goons. "Stay on them." Dilbert nodded and settled back in, bringing out a few moans from the oozing, semiconscious, twice-fooled pillows beneath him.

"Barry. Barry," Magnus said, slapping the Norwegian lightly across the face. "I knew you were awake. I knew you were here. Admit it—you saw me in the office." No response. He checked Barry's pulse—present, but weak and slow.

Magnus held the handsome blonde head with all the weight of knowing it may be the last time. Sure, the guy was terrible, but, unlike most terrible people, he knew he was terrible; he just hated that people could love him anyway. That had to count for something. Magnus looked at the pale face and, for once, saw it as fragile, the man's high cheekbones and sharp jaw seeming less like indicators of his strong will and more like the easily chipped edges of fine china.

"Wake up," he cried. "Please. I owe you a drink."

"I'm surprised he even made it that far," Dilbert said, now up a little on his elbow, which pressed into one of the goons' stomachs hard enough to make Magnus grimace. He pointed at the shredder. "The thing's only graded for cardboard."

Chapter Thirty

Barry had always looked best in black. That's how Magnus had

known him: black Levis, black Doc Martens, black punk or metal band t-shirt. Clearly, the man had a thing for labels. Perhaps that's why he looked so dapper in his black suit, even his shirt and tie black-satin, glossy. Magnus looked at him, his beige, freckled face, and realized that the man wasn't straight blonde but a light strawberry blonde. All done up, he looked almost peachy. Maybe that's why he always looked so striking with that neon orange lighter in his hand—it brought out the little bit of ginger in his complexion.

In the light beaming through the balding trees in Bryant Park, the orange lighter did just that. He swung it between his thumb and forefinger, on a loop like the hand of a clock, as he walked to Magnus, sitting beside him at one of the tables behind the library off 40th Street.

"I could barely handle all that festivity," he said.

"You should be happy for them."

Barry pulled out a cigarette. "Mind if I smoke a fa—"

Magnus raised his eyebrow. "How do you talk like a cowboy and still refer to cigarettes like that?"

Barry smiled. "My mum was British." He winked. "Every marriage is like a death. For the man." Barry let out a long puff of smoke.

"I can't believe you're single."

"So are you, pardner." He looked at Magnus from the corner of his eye, winked, and took another puff. "You got a whole lot of this to look forward to. I wouldn't count on seeing Dilbert around much anymore, with his new wife and family name cleared enough to satisfy him."

Magnus nodded. "Can I ask you something?"

Barry laughed. Magnus had the sense the Norwegian already knew what he was going to say "Don't you think it's kind of..."

"Magnus, in my life, I've seen a mother give and light for a man a cigarette using only her cleavage. I've seen a donkey skiing in Hemsedal on Boxing Day. I've seen many a woman love me, and I've seen them all grow to hate me, too. I've seen myself giving them the reason to." The man's face darkened. "I've seen many countries all over this world. I've seen them drunk, and I've seen them hungover, and few—very few—I've seen sober. So let me tell you—a woman like Carla marrying a man like Dilbert is far from the most preposterous thing I've ever witnessed. When I was ransacking your place, I saw a few things—"

"All right, all right." Magnus smiled. They both laughed at their knees. "I guess she likes working at ShredEx."

Barry laughed, almost yelling by the end. "Dilbert—that buffoon! I hope she doesn't pop too many corks on their honeymoon."

Magnus joined in the laughter.

"He liked what you said about him in that article," Barry said after they settled.

"It was all the truth. About you, too." Magnus bumped Barry lightly on the arm. "They offered me a full-time job. Probationary. The *Times*. Apparently all of the crimes I committed in the last few weeks unnerved them a bit."

"There weren't that many." Barry shrugged.

"There were enough." Magnus tilted his head and looked at his partner. "What day is it today?"

Barry smiled—the thankful, abashed, but slightly proud smile of those in the process of forgiving themselves. “Fifty-seven. In three days I’ll have my sixty-day chip.” He took a puff. “New record. New chip.”

“Congratulations,” Magnus said, trying to pay him as much genuine affection as he could without making the situation awkward. “Are you even legally in this country anymore?”

“I do not remember the terms of my entry here. I can’t really tell you how long I have.” Barry laughed. “I guess we’ll see.”

“Well, I’ll be around,” Magnus said. “For however long you stay.”

“I will always know where you are.”

Magnus grimaced. “Work on the phrasing, man.” He rose and patted Barry on the shoulder. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you.”

“When I want you to.”

“Right,” Magnus said, affecting doubt. Barry had never had much of a light foot before, but now Magnus wasn’t so sure. The new, sober Barry—maybe, just maybe, he could be slick enough. Despite himself, Magnus smiled. “Bye.”

As he walked down 40th Street toward the Hudson, still dapper from the wedding reception, Magnus felt what was for him a rare sense of pride. He knew it was all newsprint-colored glasses, the view of this world his new chances had given him. He’d scraped through a temp placement, bumped into a few conspiracies along the way, and, to end it all, landed a job—he liked to think a storied and successful career, one day—as journalist, too; all he’d had to do was kind of kill a guy. But, all in all, it had, for the most part, been worth it. Or it would be, soon; he had a lead on a municipal spending scandal in the public works department: a few leg men for the unions, who, as he watched the judge decree with his own

eyes, weren’t going anywhere for a while. Neither would Wilson McKinley; he breathed his last puff of dust on that document room floor—literally. Apparently, the mold from the files had spawned in his lungs years ago, creeping ever so slowly, and, in the end, the HazMat team had to take the whole crematorium down in a controlled burn. As for the temp agent—Magnus figured the best thanks he could give her was to never hear from him again.