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Chapter Seven

"Been here a while, officer?" Magnus asked once he caught up with Barry.

"What?" Barry growled over his cigarette.

"Have you been here a while. Like, in the States."

"Long enough," was all the Norwegian said back.

"You must really care about that girl."

"Firstly, she was a woman. Secondly, some of us don't need personal involvement to care when something bad happens to someone. And by something bad, I mean being murdered by an entitled, American prick for the stupidity to get pregnant with his child. Or sticking a finger up his ass." He rubbed his face. "I can't remember which."

The tall, pale, lean man coughed, and up came a wad of something so viscous that Magnus figured he'd be able to imagine himself swallowing it if he thought about it hard enough. Which, he was thankful, he didn't. Barry hacked again and scratched his nose. "Fuck."

"You sure you need to be smoking that?"

Barry stopped. "Listen, kid." He turned to Magnus. "You caught me at a good time. Actually, the other way around. I've been staking the building out all day, and I ran out of booze a while ago. The adrenaline from the fight got me sharp again, for a minute. That minute has since passed. So right now, what I need is a few of these sultry, seductive little fags—"

"Yo, what the hell?" Magnus's hand shot up toward the Norwegian's mouth, who again grabbed his wrist, this time with a

lot less pity. "You can't—," Magnus continued through gritted teeth as he wrenched his hand back, "go around her saying shit like that. We're in Tribeca."

Barry burst into a laugh. "Cigarette," he rattled, after taking an exaggerated, resplendent drag. He exhaled in Magnus's face as well. "A few"—again, he inhaled slowly from the cigarette and blew it over Magnus's face—"long drags," he said, elongating the vowel of the first word to the point of sounding like a cowboy, "on too many nasty, short—," he smiled, "cigarettes."

* * *

There are many bars in New York City, in Manhattan specifically, even just on the street Barry led them down alone; why, then, Barry chose to turn off their westbound trek to enter what Magnus could only describe as a joint so crummy, so dark inside and covered throughout with aging, enigmatic stickers and felt-tip graffiti that he, a barely employed twenty-something without even enough money to conceptualize how to spend it, would not slink into it himself, Magnus could not say. The cop, however, walked up to the bar and greeted the aging man lurking behind it with shaggy, black bangs peppered over his eyes and an indecipherable, cursive neck tattoo like they'd known each other for a long time.

Their drinks left a trail in the wetness across the bartop that made Magnus thank god he hadn't planted his elbows—normal practice in places like this, or as close to this as he ever saw. He didn't know how he'd afford to replace the phone he'd just lost, let alone either of his button-up shirts. Even with this, he felt out of place among the crowd. His shirt was still in one piece.

Barry passed something that looked like a quarter between his fingers on one hand, sending it across their tops by pressing down on one edge of the coin, letting it flip over the thin, blonde hairs on each finger, then catching it with the underside of his next finger precisely at the moment when Magnus thought it would tumble,

lose its delicate balance, and find itself moored in the bartop slime. He held it out between his ring and pinky fingers. "Take this."

Magnus did as he was told. He examined the coin—not money, it seemed, but a kind of token, with a raised triangle in the center. *To Thine Own Self Be True*, it read along the side.

"What time does it say?" Barry asked. After Magnus indicated that the item he had been handed was a coin, not a watch, Barry grunted. "The time. That's passed. How long does it say has passed."

Magnus flipped the coin around but failed to see what Barry was referencing.

"Hurry up, will you? I'm trying to take a drink here." The cop hit his fist on the bar. "Here," he said, snatching the item back from his partner. "It's on the bottom. Right here." He pointed to the text along the bottom that read *One Month*. "It's the wrong fucking one," he said.

From his pocket, he pulled those of the multicolored, metal tokens that he could grab—surprisingly few for the size of his hand—and let one or two tumble to the floor. He flung the rest on the bar and sorted through them with his index fingers like a street magician aiming to make a few bucks off the gullible public "This one," he said, retrieving one that read *24 Hours*. He shoved it into Magnus's chest and knocked back a greedy swig of Jim Beam that sent more than a few drops toward his shirt.

"You haven't drank for 24 hours?"

"Hadn't. Since eight this morning," Barry said. He burped. "They don't give them for smaller than 24 hours, so I make do." He slammed back another swig of the drink, ordered another, and began shoving the remaining coins back into his pocket.

"Make do?" Magnus asked.

"Men like me have sobered up more than once, you little saint. Somewhere along the way I figured, why keep going back to the meetings if all that sticks is the chip? See, that's the problem—chips don't stick when you drink. They gotta go. It's wrong for a drinking man to hold on to a chip, if he means it seriously. Each time I drink, I generously forfeit the closest chip to whatever schmuck happens to be standing next to me." He gestured at Magnus and coughed. "Looks like you're the lucky guy. It's mostly the 24-hour ones, but I made it to a week once. And I never run out, despite my"—he knocked back his next drink—"frequent relapses."

In college, Magnus had figured out over the course of many assignments—perhaps too many—that the best stories usually come from the most repulsive people, perhaps because they repelled those that would interview them. Their wells stayed full, like oil deposits in inhospitable places—only, instead of long treks with cumbersome gear or boat rides on treacherous seas, tapping the trove only required one to sit, listen and defuse the odd, sticky situation that cropped up between the pugnacious kinds that always, somehow, seemed to be involved. *The early bird may get the worm*, Magnus thought, *but the degenerate journalist tends to get the story*. He took an exaggerated sip but swallowed little.

Chapter Eight

Seeing as something was in it for him, and that he hoped the Norwegian would pay, Magnus quickly decided to make like a tourist and do as the Romans did. However, as he sipped on his third beer, he realized *he* was in fact the Roman in the situation—or, more properly, the New Yorker. He stifled thoughts of getting the Norwegian in line with hopes that the story would be worth it, and that he wasn't a violent drunk. For both, it seemed he would presently find out.

"I've got one of every kind," Barry said, opening his fist and letting coin after coin clank down on the pitted tabletop. Again, a few fell to the floor, and again he did not seem to care. "I keep quitting." He took a sip of his drink. "You ever met a man who's earned 54 one-day chips? Not just awarded in theory, but earned at a meeting where he claimed to want to get sober? Fifty-four times?" He took a drag of his cigarette, tilted his head back, and blew the smoke as far toward the ceiling as he could. Unsurprisingly, it was not far. "The sad thing is, it wasn't a claim. Most of the time I really meant it, or I thought I did, as well as I can remember." He coughed. "I'm sure I'll mean it again sometime. Then I'll wake up the next morning with a new chip in my pocket and a foggy memory as to how I got it, which, most of the time, I wash down with a little more Beam."

Magnus nodded. He himself was certainly not sober, but the other guy was leagues ahead of him in a race he wasn't looking to win, not in practice. The prize was all that attracted him, and that required remembering whatever he heard. So, for him, the beers kept coming, though slightly slower than his partner's Jim Beams, Magnus's shots of which flew right over his shoulder and contributed to the sticky film covering the booth directly behind.

"What caused it this time?" he asked.

"The girl. Woman. Shit. She was my friend's little sister. I don't really think she stuck her finger up that asshole's, well, asshole, but I did mean that he got her pregnant. That son of a bitch killed her, and he's getting away with it. I saw the tape. Not on my watch. Not while I've got a passport." Barry pulled his passport from another previously unseen pocket on his jacket and tapped it knowingly, as if he and Magnus shared a secret written only in its pages.

Magnus nodded to appease their urge to roll his eyes. "I've been thinking about something. How'd you know those guys were working for the plumbers' union?"

Barry burped. "Ask a dick for directions in broken English. Then, act confused when he responds, and he'll let you stand mighty close by looking at a map before he starts watching what he says. They caught on eventually, but I heard enough. Some Rafferty guy. Sounds like he's in deep with the plumbers' union—or most unions, I'd guess. Lending his guys out—"

"Hold up," Magnus said, sitting upright. "Rafferty? No, no, he's not in with unions. He's the guy upstairs. At the job. The guy running things." This time, Magnus was the one with eyes wide as if to say, *Are you getting it yet?*

"That may be," Barry said, knocking back his most recent bourbon and signaling for another, "but I'm telling you, he's in with the unions too—the plumbers' union specifically, but it sounds like all of them. My guess is he's somehow involved in managing this, this—," he paused, motioning repeatedly as if keeping a chest-sized balloon in the air, "—shit."

"Why in the hell would he have me jumped?" Magnus exclaimed. He leaned so far across the table that the acrid smoke from the Norwegian's Camels burnt the inside of his nose.

"Woah there, pardner," Barry said, giving a subpar imitation of a western American accent that made Magnus reconsider some of his earlier pronunciations as well as how much of his English education came from John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. "How the hell should I know. If he's your boss, maybe he was dissatisfied with your work ethic and tried to give you a mob-style layoff. You go back in there and figure it out. I'm here for McKinley."

"Wait," Magnus said, settling off his toes and back into the booth, which, he noticed upon his return, had caught some of the splashes from his waylaid shots as well. "How much do you know about what's going on in there?"

"Normally I'd like to be asking the questions, but seeing as you're

such a gifted interlocutor," Barry said, his dull tongue slurring the foreign word, "I'll oblige. I've been here two weeks. I know some company, some Pinkerman or Rosington or whatever, is digitizing the McKinley's records, and this coincidence of fate is not something I'm intending to pass up. It's the most open their doors have been in years, maybe decades. If Rafferty's the guy running it, Rafferty's the guy I'm getting through." The new bourbon hit the table, as did another beer for Magnus, who hadn't ordered one but had the sneaking feeling that fate had sent it to him—as a cherry on top.

"What's the plan?"

The man chuckled. He slammed a few bills down on the table—more than enough to cover the tab, Magnus noticed, though maybe the overage was for the privilege of smoking inside—and motioned for Magnus to raise his drink, which he struck with his own before downing it in one gulp. "Come on," he said, standing up. Magnus mimed chugging the rest of his beer and followed.

"You're wondering how we're going to get through that impenetrable wall of theirs?" Barry asked. "We're not. They're forfeiting everything we need all by themselves, at the end of every day. You just have to know a guy. And," he said, swinging open the bar's door and stepping out onto the now dark street, "in case you couldn't guess from my warm and understated demeanor, you're in the presence of someone who *always* knows a guy."

What a privilege, Magnus thought, following his golden goose, who, he had to admit, was rather talented at looking composed for a drunk, as he walked in a more or less straight line down the sidewalk. He wasn't sure how it felt yet, being known by the guy who *always* knows a guy—even when he was halfway across the world. But he was sure it would be worth finding out.

Chapter Nine

Dilbert Willink was a rather spastic balding man whose torso was slowly beginning to match the shape of his head. The equator of his belt opened wide enough for a redwood to slide through, provided it had two shapely roots. This came as a relief to him, as it all but guaranteed that he would never tumble to his death down the mouths of the steel-jawed shredding machines that whirled behind the wide, sliding window constituting the side of his office that faced the warehouse floor. Barry, sobered up slightly, sat low in one of the two chairs facing Dilbert's desk; his legs resembled those of an ant in their black jeans and Doc Marten pincers, jutting at an impossible angle from his slouched hips. Magnus occupied the other.

"Some boss you got, kid," Dilbert said. He leaned back in his chair and fingered a pen. In his uniform, he resembled a blue-collar Tweedle Dee that, somehow, got promoted to middle-manager Tweedle Dum. Though he was growing round, there was an energy and capability in his body that made it difficult for Magnus to avoid unease around him; he seemed capable of quick action in a way that Magnus's slovenly partner did not.

This, however, proved to be untrue, as Barry presently decided to take advantage of something his astute detective's nature had shone through his stupor to help him figure out: Dilbert was afraid of loud noises. For example, sudden, shocking claps from big, cupped hands, which jutted into his ears over the constant drum of the shredding machines and sent the pen in his hand to the ceiling and, after some seconds of grasping, his body to the floor. Over the crash and the sound of the shredders echoed Barry's drunken, self-satisfied laugh. The whole affair made quite the din

"How do you figure this Rafferty?" Barry asked Dilbert after he had righted himself. Barry's eyes beat from under his brow with a perplexing seriousness that Magnus was beginning to recognize as part of the man's character; he was always serious, even when

acting like a child toward a man that quite resembled a child himself.

"He's gotta go," Dilbert said, hiking his thumb to the left and letting out a long puff of air. His hand found the pen somewhere on his desk and brought it back to his nervous fingers.

"Couldn't agree more," Barry said, nodding. He gestured to Magnus.

"Absolutely agreed," Magnus offered. He didn't know where this was going, but he had no problem bringing Rafferty along for the ride. Especially as roadkill.

"I'll add him to the list," Dilbert said. With this, he reached in his desk drawer and pulled out an actual list, which he added to with a pen.

"You keep a list with you? Of what, exactly?" Magnus asked, leaning forward.

Dilbert finished writing the name with a flourish and looked at Magnus. "People to be righted." His expression on the word *righted* made Magnus feel like he had meant to say *killed*. Dilbert laughed. "Vendettas."

"You keep a hard copy?" Magnus asked.

"Son, vendettas of this scale deserve hard everything," he said.

The young man nodded. "So who do you have a vendetta against in this operation?" For his part, the Norwegian had offered very little information on the means intended to reach their ends or the company they would be keeping along the way: ShredEx facility; Ridgewood, Queens; manager there is a friend.

Dilbert turned his list around and read aloud as he dragged his finger down its surface. "Wilson and Laura McKinley. Danielle

McKinley. Bradley McKinley. Anton McKinley. And now, one more name: Rafferty.

"If it was up to my father, you would recognize the name Willink," Dilbert continued. "He was well known, for a while. Elected to the senate, believe it or not. I don't know if you remember." He looked at Magnus expectantly, who shook his head.

"Oh. Well, that's my point," Dilbert said, though he seemed to be disappointed. "My father was a staunch supporter of modernization and digitization in the senate and throughout his career, starting back when he was district comptroller. He jumped at the opportunity to store his secrets in McKinley's so-called 'digitanks.' They had a special ceremony and everything. It was supposed to mean something. The new modernity: digital and safe. Two years later, Wilson McKinley needed a favor, and dad declined. Someone started calling the house and reading aloud from his digitank. It terrified him. He went to bed jittering each night until he called up and resigned. Didn't even return to Washington.

"Now, look at me," he said, gesturing around his office with open arms. "The last son of a long line of movers and shakers, a shredder. I work for the son of a bitch, too—through a contract. I'm not under his thumb. But I take what I can get. Have to, these days."

"What are you getting out of it? This scheme, I mean. If you're down that bad, it's got to be something."

Dilbert turned his chair to Barry, who seemed to have nodded off. "Sharp, this one, isn't he?" he said. The Norwegian did not stir.

"Sharp, isn't he, Barry?" Dilbert repeated. Still, the Norwegian did not stir. Finally, Dilbert leaned across the desk, at which point Barry leapt into action, letting out a loud, resounding crack from his hands, leaping up out of the chair, and screaming at the man, who had jumped backward into his own chair before Barry had

risen out of his. By the time Barry started laughing, Dilbert was on the floor.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist." He crossed the room and helped Dilbert off the floor, installing him safely back in his chair. "I've had a few too many tonight. Speaking of." He pulled out a flask they had refilled on their way. "Care for a swig?"

Dilbert accepted the offer, taking his first sip as Barry settled back into his seat. As he took his second, Barry reached quickly into his jacket pocket and drew out a small, metal token, which he launched at the man. It clanked against the flask, spraying Dilbert with whiskey before the flask slipped from his hands, prompting him to play a game of hot potato with it, small splashes exiting the spout with each tap, until he caught it surely in his hands and sent an at best ornery look to Barry laughing on the other side of the desk.

"Now that one was just mean," Dilbert said. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face as if this was not the first time this had happened. "Smart one, no?" he said, pointing at Magnus, who wasn't sure whether to balk at the Norwegian's buffoonery or intervene.

"Jury's still out on that," Barry said.

"Then why'd you pick him up?"

"Who knows where he'd be without me. I saw them making a move, I made one back. Turns out it was a different 'them' than I thought, but it worked out just the same. He was already involved—he was either going to join them or join us. I didn't want to pass up the opportunity." He shrugged and coughed before lighting a cigarette, which clearly displeased Dilbert, though he didn't say anything. Barry tapped the ash into the circle opening of his magnetic paperclip holder and smiled at him.

"Why would your boss do that to you, kid?" Dilbert asked Magnus. "How do we know this one didn't," he looked from Barry to Magnus and back, "misunderstand?" He turned to Magnus after a long look at the detective.

"I guess we don't. I believe it, though, but don't know why. I got serious creeps from the guy. Total one-over energy, talking like he's always got something over your head. He threatened me a bit actually, now that I think about it."

"We'll circle back on that," Dilbert said. "See what else you can figure out tomorrow. For now, we need to focus on McKinley."

"Tomorrow?" Magnus asked. "You want me to go back there?"

The older men looked at each other and then at him. "Yes," they said in unison.

"Those people tried to kill me!"

"Relax, champ. They were just messing around. Hit you and took your phone, probably would've roughed you up somewhat. You would've been fine," Barry said. Come to think of it, Magnus did have a fuzzy memory of the Norwegian saying something about being convinced to join their cause—though, at this point, he couldn't tell which parts, if any, of what Barry said were true.

Before this, it hadn't occurred to Magnus that he might actually need to return to the office. After meeting Barry, he had refocused his story; conveniently, it now only included shadowing a drunken, hotheaded enigma, not working a 9-5. It had not occurred to him that, to be part of what the two men were planning, he would have to provide something as well. It seemed the fly on the wall had to bring something to the table.

"Go back tomorrow, scan as usual, and remember what you can," Barry continued. "Come here after and give us key words to help

us put it all back together.” He turned to Dilbert. “You have to admit, that would speed up the process.”

Dilbert mulled the decision over for a few seconds, as Magnus was sure often happened while he was fulfilling the noble duties of middle management, before examining Magnus with the new eyes of an interested party. “That could work. Could help. A lot.”

“Put what back together?” Magnus asked.

“See? I told you he’d be worth it,” Barry said, talking over Magnus.

“Could speed us up by weeks.” The man behind the desk tilted back in his chair and began to nibble on his pen. Barry, Magnus noticed, found it much easier to sit still this time.

“Put what back together?” Magnus asked again, looking from one man to the other as they eyed each other. “Guys, put what back together?”

Dilbert shot his eyes to Magnus and let his head follow. “Isn’t it obvious, kid?” He spun around to face the window. “The McKinely family secrets.”

Magnus crossed to the window, for the first time seeing in detail what was going on below. Paper tumbled from large dumpsters onto a wide conveyor belt, which fed it all into a large, menacing steel box. Out of the other end came endless, ink-spotted confetti.

“They shred them on-site first.” Magnus said.

“I know, kid. They’re aware of who I am,” Dilbert said. “They don’t trust me, but they like the idea of me working for them—on contract, I remind you. That’s why we needed a way to reconstruct the documents in the first place.”

The two opposite-looking men indicated for Magnus to return to his seat, to hear the rest of the plan—the measures and countermeasures they’d thrown together over cheap dinners and, at least for Barry, Magnus assumed, more bourbon—but he did not listen. He stood rapt before the window. Never in his life had he seen such a parade of paper—physical paper. Not documents he could access, not files from a streaming library, not even for free. Hard copies. On the death march. He convinced himself he could see small tendrils sticking out between the large masses of paper, the tails of the accounts he’d scanned and shredded just a few hours ago. They fell into the shredder. Secrets gone—forever; he couldn’t remember what they had said. He turned to the other men and tuned in. It was time to get to work.