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By Davis Dunham
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Chapter Sixteen

Rafferty stood with arms crossed and watched Magnus scan documents for two hours, clearing his throat emphatically if he saw Magnus take one too many glances at the content, before he decided his point was properly hammered home; either that, or he himself was getting tired. Magnus found it hard to imagine the robot waning, though the emotional breakthrough that led him to beat Barry in the kidneys, the spine, the stomach, and the neck brought out a new dimension in the tormentor that Magnus had yet to imagine. Up until that evening, Rafferty had been, it seemed to Magnus, a planner, a schemer. In this way, he respected him, even if he didn't like him; Magnus had always positioned himself to do the least amount of thinking possible. Now that he'd seen the mastermind lose his cool, add insult to injury, then a little more injury on top of that, he found himself considerably more worried about what Rafferty might do next. He missed the goons—at least there was a necessary translation between logic and action when they were around. Now, Rafferty could pounce without a second thought.

“Wrap it up, Deep Throat.” Rafferty had taken to calling Magnus by the names of various notable figures from American journalism: Deep Throat (though he seemed unknowledgeable of or unbothered by the fact that the Watergate figure was not himself a journalist), Barbara Walters, Walter Cronkite. Anderson Cooper. Once Rafferty ran out of steam, he settled back on Deep Throat. After a while, Magnus realized he was getting to know the man well enough to recognize his humor: he thought Deep Throat was funniest.

The train ride to Ridgewood was much emptier at midnight than it was during rush hour. How lonely the car seemed without Barry trying his drunken hand at surveillance. Once, he hadn't been properly balanced when the train suddenly took off and had fallen forward, hitting his head square on one of the poles. Once they'd arrived in Ridgewood, Magnus did him the favor of not mentioning the welt on his forehead. Barry thanked him by emptying his flask

in half the usual time, growing equal parts cranky and groggy as he sat—waiting, watching—while they collated strips of paper. Both told him he was free to leave; he thought if he left they might never want him back. How ironic that seemed now, as Magnus stepped into Dilbert's office, alone.

"They took him," he said without greeting. After clarifying the situation, he went to the water cooler in the corner, filled a paper cone with water, debated sipping it, and instead dumped it over his head. He did not handle great levels of stress particularly well.

"Well, that's unfortunate," Dilbert said.

Magnus stared. "Yeah, you could say."

"I do say." He leaned back in his feeble chair and patted his round belly. Perhaps Barry was rubbing off on Magnus; suddenly, he wanted to clap loudly, scream from his chest, and hop forward just to send the round middle manager to the ground. "What do you want to do about it?"

"Well, gee, I don't know. Maybe find Barry? Help him?"

Dilbert thought about this for a moment. "Let's be pragmatic here. What exactly would be the benefit of that?" Magnus's brow furrowed. He hadn't thought about it that way. Silence passed, then Dilbert continued. "He comes here and gets drunk. Once he's drunk, he gets belligerent, 'reminding' us," he said, emphasizing this with his fingers, "that he's in charge here. Let's be honest, he just gets in the way."

"This whole thing was his idea," Magnus said, standing at the edge of Dilbert's crowded desk. So many papers lay strewn across it that Magnus doubted the man had seen its top bare since he could also see his own toes. "He recruited both of us."

"And recruiters rarely stay around for the work, at least in my experience. Once the team is set up, they get their pay and hightail

it out of there."

"I'm more interested in payback than pay."

"Exactly—same here. That's why I'm wondering whether it's worth—," he paused, "bothering."

"Bothering?" Magnus said. "To rescue him?" Dilbert shrugged. "Where's your loyalty?"

"Loyalty?" Dilbert asked, righting himself in his chair. "My loyalty? Do you think I have loyalty to him? To you?" He stood from his desk, and Magnus, seeing the man standing for the first time in a while, was struck by how his height matched his width; he was massive. "My father built a name for our family. He cared about the common man. He cared what happened to people. He stood for that. Wilson McKinley took that from him. He took that from all of us. He took that from *you*," he said, pointing his finger into Magnus's chest. "Don't forget that. When he knocked my father from his seat, he didn't just hurt him, or me. He hurt everyone he could've helped. All so he could have even more. So no, I don't have loyalty to Barry. And I don't have loyalty to you, no more than I do anyone else. I have loyalty to my father and his mission, and to the people of this city, this state. That supersedes any loyalty that you're expecting." He settled back in his chair and puffed out a breath of air. "That you're demanding."

"How?" Magnus said, stunned. His legs felt wooden beneath him. He couldn't even raise his arms. All he could manage was a shake of his head. "How—."

"How could I?" Dilbert continued. "Listen, I understand it's hard for anyone else to have room to be an asshole when that one's around, but that doesn't make me a saint. I've never hidden my intentions, he's just overshadowed them. I won't apologize for liking a little light, even if all it does is help me find my way." He sighed. "I won't stop you, kid, from going after him. Hell, maybe

I feel a little guilty—I'll give you a leg up if you need it. Maybe you're right, maybe I should have a little affection for the guy, being a fool in a foreign land and all. But my point is this—ever heard how all is fair in love and war? Well, I don't love him, and war has some casualties. This isn't a no man left behind operation."

He patted his hands squarely on his desk, causing a stack of papers on its corner to quiver precariously, and looked up at his young coconspirator. Magnus could already see the guilt growing in the man's eyes—he'd meant what he said, but now that it was out in the open, he wasn't proud of it.

"Go home, kid," he said. "Get some rest." He looked at his desk, this time lowering his head with the posture of the dolefully duty-bound. "But remember—with these recent developments, I'm not sure how much use *you* are to me, either." He glanced at Magnus, tightening his lips as if to apologize for following tough orders, though Magnus couldn't see any commanding officer except Dilbert's own self-ascribed loyalty forcing his hand. He hoped the man would reconsider his allegiances—though, he had to admit, like Rafferty's scheming, there was something admirable about it. Magnus had never taken the time to appreciate such qualities in the people around him before. What a foreign concept: respect, independent of approval or affection. Perhaps he could grow to like the respecting in and of itself—or at least respect it.

When he got home, something fell off his doorknob, landing loudly on the cement floor of his building's rundown hallway. He didn't have to bend to see what it was; the pyramid on the coin's face, emblazoned with the numerals 24, could've told him whose calling card it was from miles away. The words he read—*To Thine Own Self Be True*—felt different this time around, now that the team was broken, Barry was missing, and Rafferty was all squared up on their scheme—mostly. Perhaps it was his self that he needed to be listening to.

However, he didn't have time to consider this—namely, running off and forgetting the whole damned arrangement—before he felt

a forearm press against the back of his neck, forcing his head forward into the door with a thud until his breathing became labored and his vision became spotty.

"Howdy, pardner," Barry's gravelly voice slurred behind him. This time, it was obstructed by swollen lip and neck instead of booze. "Thanks for the hand back there." The arm pushed harder, and Magnus succumbed to the pressure. He felt himself go limp without falling, hanging between the Norwegian's arm and the door, before passing out.

Chapter Seventeen

Being tied up in his own house was not a habitual experience for Magnus, despite a few messages he had sent and received on certain less-than-PG messaging apps. Frankly, he was surprised to find he even had the materials requisite to perform such an action; he had always assumed, should the event come to be, the other person would be responsible for providing the equipment. Now, lashed by his hands and feet to the one of his mismatched dining chairs that still had all of its arms and legs, he decided the experience was much less exciting than he had always imagined it in certain respects—and much more terrifying in most others. The sock stuffed through his open mouth that, thankfully, stopped a few millimeters shy of his throat certainly did not help. He prayed Barry had taken it off the pile of clean, folded clothes he'd never put away from the laundromat, but, seeing his hamper upturned by his closet, he was not filled with confidence.

"Good morning, bedhead," Barry said, crossing what little floor the studio apartment had to address Magnus.

Magnus was glad to see the Norwegian still fumbled his words; clearly, he'd meant "sleepyhead." Either moniker beat Deep Throat—despite the term's newfound relevance with the sock in

his mouth. He did what he could with his tongue to keep it from sliding farther back, and he realized that it was not folded over on itself and stuffed in his mouth but instead filled with something hard, like change.

"I've always heard that New Yorkers have this peculiar habit of letting anyone into their buildings. All you have to do is buzz," Barry said. "Do you know how unsafe that is? I walked up to this building—" His left ankle gave out beneath him slightly with each step. "*Hobbled* up to this building," he said, to Magnus's raised eyebrow. "Glad to see you still manage to keep an attitude even in such a compromising position." He circled Magnus, patting him paternally on the head.

"In Oslo, we are not in the practice of letting people into our apartment buildings without knowing who they are and why they are there. Perhaps you should have this discussion with your neighbor, the one across the hall and up two floors. They did not even use the intercom to see who I was. Very irresponsible." He laughed. "But, very handy."

The more Barry showed this side of himself—the gloating, glowering side, the side that lorded over people, taking, it seemed, joy in their submission—the more Magnus found himself chilled by how much it reminded him of Rafferty. The two men could certainly never be friends, but, Magnus began to realize, they would make wonderful enemies.

Barry yanked hard on the tail of the sock hanging from Magnus's mouth, who would've screamed at the sensation of the thinly-shielded metal grinding against the backs of his teeth if he was able to; his mouth had been hanging open for so long and made so dry by the ratty cloth that he could barely make a sound.

"Originally, I was going to beat you with this." Barry upended the sock, and what seemed like hundreds of the chips Magnus was beginning to know so well clanked to the floor. Barry laughed—

irreverant humor in the face of attempts at commitment. Most of the chips lay in a pile between their feet, but many rolled away, tucking themselves into corners and under what little furniture Magnus had. He was sure he would be finding them for weeks. He was similarly sure the Norwegian knew this, and that he was happy about it.

"Relax. Clearly, I've changed my mind," Barry said. "I thought I'd give you a chance to explain yourself. Plus, my anger somewhat subsided seeing you limp in that chair. You know, it's quite disappointing to go to tie someone up and find they only have one chair suitable for the job. Even that's a bit of a stretch. If I thought you were strong enough to throw yourself backwards and smash the chair against the wall, I would've just beaten you silly and left you here to rot. But what can I say—I'm a conversationalist." He smiled.

"Each one of these chips represents a betrayal." He looked to the pile at his feet. "Each time I take one of these—the one-day ones, the week ones, even the few month ones I've seen—I commit to something. And each time—*every single time*—I let myself down. I have failed *every time* I have tried to get sober. That is why I carry them around with me. It seems only fair to bear that weight. A few ounces for every self-betrayal." He bent down and sifted through the pile like seashells. "It doesn't take long to add up to pounds. Suffice it to say, I do not take my failures lightly."

If he had been able to, Magnus would've laughed at the Norwegian for his clunky pun.

"You may think that this means I'm numb to betrayal, that I expect it. But I do not." He took a step forward from the pile, still kneeling, gazing powerfully at Magnus directly in the eye. "I can always foresee self-betrayal—I'm the one that does it. But you," he said, resting his hands on Magnus's and squeezing above the lashings—a necktie on one wrist, an extension cord on the other—to heighten the pain.

"Why'd you do it, kid?" When Magnus didn't respond, Barry slapped him. Apparently, he found this pleasurable; he did it twice more. "Why'd you fucking do it, kid?"

Through his dry, bruised throat, Magnus spoke. "I said it so he'd let you go. I didn't mean it."

Barry slapped him again. Magnus felt something dribble down his chin; when it hit his lap, he saw it was blood.

"Prove it."

"I can't." Magnus coughed. Retched. He spat a glob of blood onto his lap. He didn't doubt Barry had gotten in a few good punches before he'd woken up. "Ask Dilbert. I went to him after. I asked him to help me find you."

Barry laughed shortly and stood up. "You didn't need much help in that regard, did you." He walked a loop around the room—as much of one as he could manage in the cramped space. "Let's say I believe you. What do you suggest we do now?"

Magnus coughed. "Get 'em."

Barry laughed. "We can agree on that." He crossed to Magnus. "You see, kid, I've had a bit of a change of heart. Suddenly, I like the idea of taking down this Rafferty—hell, that whole family, too—a lot more than I used to. I'm not too big of a fan of being the butt of the joke—or the stopper for some yuppie's foot. It's a matter of pride." He smiled. "My focus is still Anton. He'll answer for what he did. But there's room in my heart to hate another."

He released the bindings on Magnus's wrists. "You could say I'm a bit more sympathetic to your cause than I used to be. Let's go find Dilbert, kid. I want to confirm this little story of yours." He unlashed Magnus's ankles and smiled at him. "I have a feeling that

beating was just what we needed to fix our team dynamic."

Yours or mine? Magnus thought. Barry looked up at Magnus and winked. For the first time since they'd met, Magnus realized the Norwegian was perfectly sober.

Chapter Eighteen

When Damon was a child, his father purchased him a puppy—a German Shepherd mix, with a little Pitbull and hound—to raise as his own; as Damon matured, so should the puppy. Damon had come by his love of reading naturally: his father plunked himself down in his Archie Bunker chair each afternoon after many hours of working their farm and read. Mostly classic books about manliness, masculinity: the oeuvres of Jack London, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, even sometimes dipping into the tear-jerkers he remembered from his youth—*Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Old Yeller*—which he similarly made Damon read. They discussed the books at length, Damon with his dog at his side, sleeping, his father petting his own shepherd as they talked.

During his teenage years, men in suits came knocking on their door. The land, they claimed, had coal hidden deep in it, and they wanted it. His father refused, and the surveillance began. Before long, the neighboring farms were all bought up, and everything the family did was watched, recorded, and marked as either negligible or useful for blackmail—or, as Damon now knew to call it, leverage. Eight months down the road, his father sold the land and moved the family to the city. It wasn't even the surveillance that did them in. Eventually, the mining on the neighboring farms choked the river and sent so much poison in the air that what crops did manage to grow were stunted and black. His father's dog ate a fallen ear of corn and died. Damon saved his dog this fate—he took him out back and shot him the day the family left for the city. It was out of pity; he couldn't imagine the loping beast crawling sidewalks and

cement.

In the city, there's always someone watching, a sensation the young Damon wished felt new. Without his dog around, he realized how much it really witnessed: there wasn't anything in the first fifteen years of his life, minus the very first few that he himself couldn't remember, that the dog hadn't seen. Put against the surveillance of the developers, the constant eye of the city's windowed walls, he began to wonder: why had he trusted the dog? Slick city noirs were a logical step once he left his land behind—in fact, following recent events, they even felt close to home.

Now in his middle age, Damon was much more canny than most people realized. He took after his father in form as well as mind, and most city folk dismissed him without much thought—bumbling and reminiscent of the hicks many of them had purposefully left behind as he was—even all dressed up in his uniform. He didn't mind well-groomed assholes viewing him as an idiot—in fact, he liked it; remember, dogs see everything.

A list of what Damon had seen: the boy taking a bit too long a glance at each document that passed through his hands; the pompous dick in a suit lying about having read pulp noirs—he couldn't seriously expect anyone to believe he worked at Pinkerville and had no clue about Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler; for that matter, the same pompous dick clearly lying about wanting a bet on whether the dull-eyed kid could be trusted—now there was a risk even a grown-up farm boy could tell was far from negligible. Further, through a crack in the door, Damon had heard the slick suit preaching to his sad excuses for goons, as well as his rifling through the kid's phone, his planning on blackmail; how interesting Mr. McKinley might find that information. After a while, he stopped watching the kid entirely—clearly, the man in the suit was more of a risk. He'd seen suits take before—take and take and take—and he knew they never stopped.

Yes, the cameras were turned off before Rafferty brought the kid back to the building and beat his friend half to death in the loading

dock. But Damon had been watching. Say what you will about the suit; at least he got his hands dirty—or, more properly, his Italian leather shoes. And what a confession he'd made when he thought no one was watching—no one he wasn't paying, blackmailing, or beating. The kid and his partner, too; Damon had to admit, perhaps he'd underestimated him. How glad he was that his pay came straight from Digitank, not the wily subcontractor currently being paid to ransack the place.

Damon sat in his small office, surrounded by a series of screens showing every inch of the building. Conveniently, the loading dock stream was back online, and, save a small stain on the floor—a dark splotch in the footage, black and white like the movies—it was empty. He picked up his desk phone and pressed a single button—he only ever needed to call one person, and he hadn't, not in years.

Like a dog, Damon had stuck by, watching everything. Unlike a dog, he'd put all the pieces together and begun to act on his own. After a few rings, a receptionist picked up; Mr. McKinley would be right with him.