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Chapter Ten

As a consummate dreamer with little genuine work ethic, Magnus had been part of many schemes in his lifetime. For the vast majority of these schemes, he comprised the entirety of the relevant players; he was not a talented cooperator. When he was twelve, he'd planned to alleviate himself of the need to ever present in front of a class again (after spending grades one through six repeatedly learning that this was but an opportunity for enterprising young casanovas to point out all his flaws to the adorable young women they both had eyes for) by going after an autism diagnosis. All this resulted in was a doctor concerned that his mother's undiagnosed (but publicly acknowledged) narcissistic personality disorder was rubbing off on him at an express rate, as well as a slew of medical bills that insurance wouldn't cover.

At sixteen, he hatched a plan to relieve the shelves of his grandfather's liquor cabinet of their burden of booze—and replace it with the burden of watered-down booze. This endeavor was successful until, by sip three, even his inexperienced tongue could identify that something was amiss—especially once he recalled his sister's headaches due to “dust” after each overnight stay.

College had seen its various share of schemes: seven dead grandparents (two of which were genuine, and, he insisted, not manifested due to repeated prevarications); an attempt at an ADHD diagnosis, which he thought would come easily but still ended up with a doctor concerned that his mother's disorder was having a rebound effect that left him lackluster and unmotivated, though he supposed this could just be inherited narcissism manifesting in a distinctly self-pitying way; and various tries at counting classes toward multiple requirements through a complicated form duplication scheme that left him taking twice the normal amount of credits during his last semester. He had to adjust his earlier conclusions—based on his professors' expressions, he was not the only one pitying Magnus Riverthwaite.

So, when Barry and Dilbert explained the plan to him, he at first felt quite at home. It was just another scheme, something new to take his mind off the solemn truth surrounding him so he could once again live in a fantasy that games, tricks, and designs constituted the base of the world. (He should've seen that these tactics, though quite relevant for the uber-rich and uber-poor, as games and schemes are the only ways in or out of either situation, would never be effective for him; as a blue-blooded member of the middle class, he was predisposed to an ardent, striving nature that the rich convinced his kind was true success while tricking the poor into believing that success was something determination alone could achieve. Coincidentally, it was this ardent nature that his doctors seemed worried to find he lacked.)

However, as Magnus looked back and forth between the two men explaining the steps of the plan, he began to realize something felt quite different this time around. First and foremost, he was not in it alone. Even more than that—he wasn't the one who came up with the idea in the first place. How would that feel, playing a part in someone else's plan? He was open to finding out. He imagined it might feel nice, only being responsible for a portion of the success but, should things work out, still getting to enjoy all of it. Even in his quasi-narcissism (as he, ironically, referred to his condition), he could admit that there were gaps in his myriad attempts at trickery that it would've been nice to have someone else fill. Why, he wondered, couldn't he and his sister have teamed up to relieve their grandfather of his liquor stores? Less for each (though any at all would've been more for him), but misery loves company. Getting older, he'd realized how true it was that misery was just so miserable when felt alone.

Secondly, this plan seemed like it might actually succeed.

"Shredex mostly focuses on shredding," Dilbert said, motioning through the wall of windows over the warehouse floor, "but we round out the books with some regular printing, copying, shipping, et cetera. If it's paper, we can handle it—minus bathroom tissue."

At this, he clearly expected a laugh, which he did not receive from either man.

"We reprogrammed one of the address scanners from the shipping machines to analyze and sort scans from the shreds of paper we take in from McKinley," he continued. "Normally, we'd just grab the sheets and do what we want with them, but someone in that company had the presence of mind to do some checking, and McKinley decided to play it safe and destroy the documents before I have the chance to get my mitts on them. 'Destroy,' I say, in quotes," he said, using his fingers to hammer this home, "because I still have a trick or two up my sleeve. Theoretically, the reprogrammed scanner should be able to compile the strips back into cogent documents."

"That's where you come in." Barry spoke from his slumped position in one of the chairs. Magnus wondered how he could possibly be comfortable—but, then again, he supposed the world was a bit different for those six feet and above. "In our tests, the machine had a penchant for compiling strips into nonsense. They looked similar to whole pages, but they meant nothing. As long as lines and dots matched up across the shreds, the machine viewed them as compatible, which left us sifting through a lot of results marking them as useful or not useful."

"The joys of training technology," Dilbert said. A roll of his eyes made Magnus wonder how many times over his career the man had witnessed a computer try to assimilate man's nature into a series of ones and zeroes.

"With you," Barry continued, "we'll be able to cut that time down, hopefully by a lot. If we can enter keywords into the scanner system so it knows what to look out for, it'll be easier for it to assemble related shreds off the bat. Save us a lot of time. And all you have to do," he said, emphatically pointing at Magnus and tilting his head, "is remember what you see."

"Remember?" Magnus remarked. "I'm supposed to start scanning each day by nine. How am I supposed to remember what I did in the morning by the time I get here at six?"

"You don't expect us to figure everything out, do you?" Dilbert asked, leaning back in his chair that, Magnus thought, was remarkably sturdy for how thin its spindle was. Gravity certainly wanted the man on the ground.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Barry said, characteristically self-satisfied. Magnus wondered whether it was easier or harder to be trite in a second language. The Norwegian adjusted his slump in the chair to pull the cigarettes and lighter back out of his pocket, again to Dilbert's dismay. The neon lighter shone conspicuously against its owner's all-black getup that, alongside his pale skin and light hair, gave him the coloring of a killer whale. "Come here after work, tell us what you saw, then look at the pictures the scanner spits out and tell us if they're right or not. Simple as that."

Simple as that, Magnus thought. He must've been mistaken—he thought schemes were what you came up with to avoid work.

Chapter Eleven

The night was thick and inky in a way that forced to the front of Barry's mind that the sky was not just a limit put on top of the world but a substance, the base of which he and everyone swam through as they walked across the surface of the earth. It seemed wrong to him, that the air everyone shoved aside to move from place to place floated continuously in cycles, not only laterally but vertically, in sweeping upshifts and downshifts, through clouds, storms, and open skies, invisibly. He was fond of storms; they at least made movements of the air visible to the naked eye. He wondered if there was something poetic about that. Their destructive nature did not cross his mind—to him, the unseen being laid bare offered an end of transparency that, despite its irony,

always justified its means. Revealing the truth, to him, was always worth it.

However, Barry was made to reconsider this conclusion when the mist that fell through the night forced him to duck under the awning of a funeral home to light his cigarette. He was thankful that the cost of cigarettes was relatively consistent between New York and Oslo; due to heavy drinking being relatively expensive everywhere, he didn't have to recalculate his budget to support either of his hobbies. If someone asked him if he planned to stop in at some dive bar before climbing back to his apartment, he would've said no; if the same person were to knock on his door an hour later, they would unfortunately need to search the neighborhood for its most desperate watering hole instead.

With Barry's cigarette lit, Magnus figured they would continue down the street. But, when no footsteps followed him and the Norwegian's looming presence evaporated for the first time in five hours, he turned around to find the man leaning against the brick wall of the funeral home, his leg kicked up and head tilted backward. He watched Magnus silently from the corner of his eye and blew a smoke ring, which the wind and rain swept up and shot through with various minuscule, swirling holes.

"Listen, kid. We need to talk."

Magnus shook his head and returned to the cover of the awning. "I'm not a kid."

"Yes, you are. You think like a child. I can see it, and so can Dilbert," Barry said. "Let me make one thing clear. I am not a fucking babysitter. If you step out of line, you are out. I will make sure you don't have the chance to ruin this job." He took a punctuating sip from his hip flask.

Again, Magnus found himself wondering about the sources of the Norwegian's English education—classrooms, it seemed, were less

relevant than old cowboy and gangster movies. "I don't think like a child. I'm here to help," he said. He wondered if bumming a cigarette would cause the Norwegian to respect him more or less.

"That's exactly what I mean, kid. Kids are always there to *help*, if they aren't there to get in your way. What have you provided to this setup?"

"Were you not the one who came up with the whole idea? Remembering keywords, bringing them to you and Dilbert, reconstructing the documents?"

"You're right," Barry said. "Poor phrasing. I'm afraid my English can suffer periodically as the night goes on." He took a sip from his flask. "And as the drinking continues. What I meant was, what are you giving us that is indispensable? What do *we* need from *you*?" His emphasis rattled Magnus; it reminded him of Rafferty.

"I suppose you know someone else with access to the document room," Magnus said, matching the Norwegian's world-tired, dry affect. He decided to bum a cigarette.

As Barry held out his lighter with the flame aloft, he spoke. "No, I don't. But what you're offering right now is simply help. We would get the information either way, whether the recombination took weeks or months. You're just helping speed up the process. You're here to *help*." He turned his head with an acid smile and tucked the lighter back in his pocket.

"What's so wrong with that?" Magnus asked, fighting back coughs that the crinkle around the Norwegian's eyes told him did not go unnoticed.

"Take that cigarette for example," Barry said. "You're smoking because I'm smoking. It's raining, it's night. We're hatching a criminal plan—don't fool yourself, that's what it is. You figure, why not? Then I hold out my lighter and you think I'm helping you, but

there's a difference between helping someone and humbling them." He coughed. "Sorry, phrasing again. Humoring them. There's a difference between helping someone and humoring them.

"So let me take some of the humor out of it for you. This is not a 'why not' situation. Approaching this kind of scheme with that attitude leads to failure—every time. Takedowns are driven by 'why's, not 'why not's. As someone who's taken down and been taken down—both of 'em—I can tell you that from experience."

After a few seconds of silence and syncopated puffs on their cigarettes, Magnus slowly said, "Okay." Barry lit another cigarette and eyed Magnus to see if he wanted the same. When Magnus shook his head as nonchalantly as he could muster, Barry laughed and shoved his own recently lit cigarette into Magnus's mouth. "In for a penny, in for a pound, kid." Magnus wasn't quite sure the Norwegian had used the phrase correctly, but his meaning was clear.

"Here to help.' 'Why not.' You know what all this tells me? You're not focused. If you don't have a 'why' now, you'll get one somewhere along the way, and there's no guarantee it'll be the same as mine. So, as you stand there and smoke *my* cigarette, briefed on *my* plan to solve *my* case, ask yourself: how important do you think it is that your 'why' matches mine?"

Magnus coughed. Anyone could figure the Norwegian had a tough side, but it wasn't until now that he saw how intimidating he could be. Magnus reacted the way he always reacted to authority—rashly and impudently. He threw the half-finished cigarette at Barry's feet and stepped forward to snuff it out.

"I don't know if they cover this in the old Westerns and mafia movies you clearly spend too much time watching, but the English word you're looking for is 'reason,' not 'why.' 'Why' is a question, like why should I even help you with an attitude like that? Take months to put together all those sheets for all I care. Take years."

Barry's hand quickly closed around Magnus's collar and pressed him backward into the wall.

"You're pushing yourself to keep up with the pace I set to not leave you behind, kid. I've been going after this man for months. He killed my friend's sister. I don't care if I have to kill him to get justice. Hell, I don't even care if I have to kill you. That 'topple the family' idea? That's Dilbert's issue. The difference there is he provides a service I need in order to finish the job. The same cannot be said for you." He stared downward into Magnus's dilated eyes, searching for some sign of fear or comprehension that Magnus's upbringing had taught him to conceal, before letting go of his collar and stepping back.

"If your *reason*," Barry said, emphasizing the word like he would rather spit on Magnus's shoe, "is more in line with Dilbert's than with mine, that's fine, kid. That's fine. But let me tell you the same thing I told him. I will take you down if you get in my way. Just because I'm after a murderer, don't think I won't get violent. Just because you're after a blackmailer, don't think I won't do the same. And just because I fuck up my English when I'm drunk, don't think I'll take the time to think twice about you or Dilbert as I escort that privileged asshole back to Oslo in handcuffs."

Magnus couldn't help himself; he gulped. The Norwegian laughed. He lit himself another cigarette, tucked one behind Magnus's ear with a wink, and walked off into the mist. The puffs of his smoke rose limply before scattering in the wind and rain.

For his part, Magnus couldn't tell how much of the Norwegian's dysregulation was calculated and how much came from drink—or, if he was honest, emotional imbalance. He realized he'd climbed into bed, perhaps too quickly, with a man he'd met after a fist fight in an alley—a fist fight he hadn't been awake for. He wasn't there to solve a murder. He was there for his future—and that meant making a career off this corruption scandal.

He pulled the cigarette from behind his ear, laughed, and snapped it in half. He didn't have a lighter anyway.

Chapter Twelve

"Boys, I have always been quite prompt, quite direct, quite astute, and quite rude. I view the first three as some of my more charming qualities." Rafferty smiled. "The last I view as an unfortunate but compelling side effect. I learned about time and truth from my grandfather. He was a watchmaker. Time came naturally with the work, of course, but truth was sneaky. Eventually, though, I understood. Watches do not reflect the passage of time—they reflect our punctuation of the passage of time so that we can understand it. In that way, every watch is an act of trust between its maker and its wearer. Set a watch just a little bit slow, and you damn someone to a life of being constantly late. Set it fast, and they never miss a thing. Which leads me to a question: how fucking slow are your watches set?"

One of the gangsters in front of him looked down to his lap; the other cleared his throat. "We were fought off."

"Funny, it's almost like I pay you to fight back." Rafferty took a sip of his whiskey, kicked his feet off the heavy, wooden desk separating him from his disappointing—and soon to be former—hired hands, and crossed to the window. He always found speeches went over better when given to a window: firstly, the listener had to infer his facial expressions, meaning he was as scary as they were scared; secondly, his speeches tended toward the philosophical, and it was easier to sustain his train of thought without confronting the fact that he was conversing with an idiot.

"As someone who has never struggled to arrive on time, say what I mean, or assess the truth of a situation, not even when I was a child peeking up over my grandfather's work table, it was not until middle school that I realized others are not bound by such a

strong moral compass. Children lie. Either that, or they don't have the initiative to remember the truth. For months this troubled me. If the world as I knew it—my world—was guided by honesty, why was no punishment meted out to the liars among us? Had their grandfathers not taught them punctuality? Honesty?

"No, I found, they hadn't. In fact, I soon realized many adults do not display these qualities themselves. By the time I entered high school, this designation had climbed to 'most.' So, again, I ask you, are you part of the most or part of the few?"

The gangster spoke to Rafferty's half-turned head. "Well, our line of work involves quite a bit of dishonesty."

"Not to me," Rafferty yelled, turning rapidly and slamming his drink on the desk. Whiskey sloshed over the edges of the glass; luckily, the surface was free of papers. "Tell me, who was it that 'fought you off?'"

"Some tall guy," the spokesman said. His partner continued to stare at his lap. "Blonde. Buzz cut. He had been hanging around all day, but we thought he was a dumb tourist. He asked us for directions. He had a funny accent."

"Funny in what way?" The gangster did not understand, so Rafferty repeated himself—something he was not wont to do. The second time he spoke with much less patience.

"Funny like sing-songy. We were joking that he reminded us of a German rocker before he ran up and started throwing punches." The gangster raised a hand to his bruised eye.

"He was German?" Rafferty asked.

"No, no. It wasn't German," the other gangster responded.

"He speaks!" Rafferty's smile did not reach his eyes.

"My grandmother was German. It was Scandinavian."

"Hmm." Rafferty returned to his chair, immediately resuming his position of leaning back with his feet propped up, and stared out the window. He drank what remained in the glass. "Whoever he is, he won't get in my way if he knows what's good for him. This data is mine."

"Ours, boss," the lead gangster said.

Rafferty examined him with eyebrows raised. "You've got some nerve. Wrong. The data is mine. The pay is yours." He tossed a wad of cash across the desk. "That's it."

The gangster thumbed through the cash. "What about—"

"There'll be more when I get enough for blackmail. That little scrounger has the worst work ethic I've ever seen." Rafferty opened his computer, which he plugged into the hard drive Damon had brought up at the end of said scrounger's shift. "Two boxes in eight hours. How pathetic. Almost as bad as you."

"What did you want us to do, boss? You said no killing."

"I said not to kill the kid. He could still be useful. He was dumb enough to buy that lie about a bet between me and that idiot lug of a security guard."

"What lie?"

Rafferty drew back his top lip. "Don't worry about it. Count yourself lucky that I'm using him as my scapegoat and not you. Unless you'd prefer..." He let the sentence trail off.

Both of the men shook their heads emphatically. They'd been in the business long enough to see what happens to the unlucky.

Rafferty sat upright in his seat and picked up the cell phone on the desk before him.

"You're positive you got this off the kid, not the Scandinavian?" The gangsters nodded. "Well, let's see what you got." He unplugged the hard drive and replaced it with the phone.

"With all due respect, boss, what are you hoping to get from that?"

Rafferty spoke without looking up. "I have my foot in the door of the world's largest store of secure data. At this rate, the kid will take months to scan it all. Let's see if I can't find something in here to speed up the process."

From time to time, Rafferty wondered if his grandfather would be proud of him—scheming, lying, blackmailing. Acting in pursuit of naught but personal gain, and doing so excitedly. Waiting for the phone to decrypt, he found himself wondering this same question again, though he already knew the answer. Just a bit of snooping as a kid showed him that his grandfather wasn't as truthful as he seemed; in that respect, he and his mistress were a perfect match. A little more snooping, and the young Rafferty had found his father wasn't all he was chalked up to be either. None of it mattered—he'd long since decided that making the world moral was a lost cause. His fight was to make the immorality of the world work for him. The other kids at school had found it much easier to humor him once he started driving his father's Mustang and catering parties with his grandparents' liquor cabinet. Parties where his clandestine sobriety let him collect secrets from his drunken classmates—or, as he liked to call it, leverage. He had taken down the men of his family by age seventeen, and they had deserved it. He wasn't worried about doing the same for Wilson McKinley—or, as a matter of fact, any of his clients.

With a chime, the phone unlocked. He waved the gangsters out of his office. It was time to get the kid moving.