

Chapter 1

I wake up sober. My head buzzes with voices. My mind is too sharp. I gallop into the living room. I throw open the refrigerator. I drain the anonymous gin in one breath-sucking chug.

Ahhh, a dopamine rush of stasis.

I belch.

My watch reads 6:45 and after I knuckle my eyes it still reads 6:45. Too much sleep. Too too too much sleep. My mind still sober, it purrs out the numbers.

Three hundred sixty-seven...seventy two minutes...independent...twelve point four three seven...

I slam my head against the bridge of my palm, the bridge of my palm against my head to expunge myself, to purify my brain.

I have fifteen minutes to get ready. I piss, I shit, I remember to eat something, anything (I settle on a banana; I enjoy the texture), I take a swig of cheap grain alcohol for luck and necessity, I brush my teeth, lace up a starch white collared shirt, slip on deceptively stiff dress pants, and am poised at the doorstep as Mike came stumbling out, his eyes still rheumy from waking up.

“Headed out?”

A rhetorical question is answered with a rhetorical nod, a wry twist of my mouth that betrays the qualms of choosing such a high-stress job. “Sell-side acquisitions don’t wait for the sunrise,” I add with the appropriate level of dryness.

He shook his head good-naturedly. “I don’t know how you do it every morning, and with...” his voice was drowned out as he whirled the coffee machine into life.

I duck under the doorstep and float down the stairs, passing each floor of the apartment building in an increasing stage of alcohol-induced coziness. The last set of stairs spits me out into the early noise and bustle of seven AM San Francisco.

I stumble over to my car and jerk open the beaten-down Volvo’s door, the supposed sentimental link to my humble beginnings, and reverse out of the safe geometry of the parking lot and into the absurdity of human life and the hypnotic peals of Steely Dan’s “Do It Again” fill the car.

But only for a quick minute. I take two rights and a left, pull into an abandoned parking lot and settle down into my seat and grope behind me for the flask of whiskey. I gulp once, twice, and then rip my lips from the liquid.

I need all the sleep I can get for the real day’s work.

I awake again, this time at 13:00. I roll and fall, the impact driving the wind out of me, the bile rising in my throat. I had not been able to, as I had so often not been able to, keep my whiskey consumption to a few mere gulps. I am drunk a half hour before my meeting with Mongoose.

A regrettable state of affairs, but not one without a solution.

I pry open an innocent piece of plaster right behind my bed frame and a guilty baggie drops out. A quick crush of a small sliver against the back of my knuckles has me feeling well. Another one leaves me feeling even better.

I throw on nondescript jeans and a white shirt, wrinkled and even a little viscid. Perplexed, I spend a few seconds rubbing the material until I remember through a haze where last night's lonely masturbatory result ended up.

I keep it on. No need to follow my careful morning routine—drug dealers are not held to the same hygiene standards as investment bankers.

The meeting place is the usual one and my Volvo jolts into gear towards it as if by its own compulsion. Steve Winwood's "Roll With It" comforts me in its gush of familiarity as I levitate above the hot asphalt of the summer day.

The way that you love is good as money

I swear by stars above, sweet as honey

People think you're down and out, you show them what it's all about

You can make it, roll with it, baby...

I debate whether to arrive early or not. I settle on not and brake hard as I swivel in right behind a rusty, decaying hunk of a depreciated Jeep.

Mongoose was already there.

I step out and over the mottled shrubbery of this shitty-ass fucking abandoned park. Mongoose's narrow falcon frame is damning even from a distance. His two shadows, a pair of hulking silhouettes drenching him in shade from across the bench. My sharp eyes are certain I've never seen these two individuals before.

I scratch at my jaw. I have no inkling, that's a blatant lie I *do* have an inkling, as to how Mongoose could have sniffed out the discrepancy so soon, but my hands are already reaching for the shooter in my back pocket. In one swoop, I palm it across my mouth and suck its sweet succor straight out. A rush of calm takes me and I strut across confidently, my mannerisms already falling into the calm relaxed set that my mind protests.

Mongoose was already turning towards me before I halve our separating distance. The glint of his fastidious white teeth blinds even from a distance but the wide smile is there, the namesake evident in

his keen features. His cruel cruel grey eyes come into focus as I approach, and my earnest grin slips onto my inwardly sweating face, my ready mask.

“How’s it going, Mongoose?”

He shook my hand firmly, politely, silently and gestured towards the spot across from him, right between his goons. I greet both of them, and, unperturbed by their lack of response, saunter between them and sit down, as they professionally patted me down.

“May I perchance receive the hundred grand?”

I pull out the wad and toss it to him. As he rifles through it, I break the news with a nonchalant air.

“That’s only half. I’ll have the rest next week.”

“Excuse me?” His eyes squinted in disbelief and the goons tensed. The charade was convincing but I think I glimpse a distinct lack of surprise in those eyes.

“I’m sorry.” I grin. “It was a slow week.” A short laugh. My nerves bumble over into an anarchy of erratic emotion, my inebriation just an empty facsimile. I overcompensate. “Simeon had informed me that the uh the uh the payment that is to say the rest of the payment would suffice on the first. Or uh I’m sorry I meant to say the *first* would suffice-“

The hard smile of the glock bites under my right side. I smile back. These goons were more subtle than they looked, the drop of the leather jacket covering the weapon. The playground is a fitting ending, a happy ending if I can keep the cards up. My mind whirs but I remain at ease. Sudden movement would probabilistically help me towards my goal but if I was brave enough for that I would not need another man—another scum—to do my work for me.

Mongoose leaned back, a look of delight on his face.

“Jag, Jag, Jag...Jag.” Each utterance was punctuated with a remorseful shake of the head, the thin cheekbones in prominent view. “You seem to possess a certain intellect, an intellect that, mind you, would not be distinguishable in any hub of education, but your unfortunate choices in life have left you rubbing shoulders with so many poor, ugly, stupid *broken* people...” He paused. “It has led you to consider that an unprecedented, or rather unrealistic, amount of the finite amount of intelligence held within the world is distributed in your direction. Suffice it to say, this is a false belief as are often so many people’s own views towards their intelligence, its own proprietarily dubious definition allowing many to claim that no, they are indeed the owners of *three* tablespoons worth of brains, not two tablespoons as every other indicator in life has spat back at them.”

He paused and flashed me a look of such simpering satisfaction that I can not help but consider the irony of listening to this sort of humility from a man who itched to claim much more than three tablespoons.

“You will note, doubtless, that these figures are purely as a frame of reference for context, rather than a stolid pillar of definition. I digress; my point is that you, like many, think of yourself as possessing a disproportionately improbable mental stature.”

My grin doesn't waver, although I swear one of the goons lean forward and suddenly back, a sudden bout of narcolepsy. Whatever this rodent fucker soliloquied, I'm smart enough to single out the most likely track for eschewing my usefulness. “Mongoose, you know I'm good for it—”

He darted forward with his fist and it takes all my self control to not defend myself as his missile, akin to the rubber end of a pencil in both texture and lethality landed with a thud on my temple. I swing my head with it and mime a breath of shock and pain. He did not seem satisfied.

“Mongoose—”

“One more utterance and I will compel Dameon to place a bullet through your spinal vertebrae...or the approximate anatomical location where one such body part would usually be located.” He breathed out, his lips puckering like a thirsty rose. “You, in your erroneously estimated intelligence, undoubtedly believe that I would not kill you in this park, but we have already clarified that you are quite the imbecile, so where does that leave us?”

The silence grows and stretches out in the chilly air between us, its rhetorical power undulating in front of me, and it finally reaches out and grabs my tonsils and prompts me to query a dry-throated “Where?”

He smiled.

“Fact is I would have been very pleased to glimpse that smirking rictus of yours fixed unto death. I pondered pocketing your meager monetary contributions, placing a bullet through your brain and belatedly informing Frank that you once again disappointed, or that is to say underwhelmed, or maybe perhaps *overwhelmed* in your disappointment; and, in coercion with this sentiment, that I taught you a permanent lesson, starring I as the pedagogue.

“But, but, but...but. You are quite fortunate. I think. I have the perfect errand for a dead man.”

I take a different gander, as it seems my prospects of a desirable outcome are evaporating quicker than drops of dew on a warm morning. “Fuck your mission, Mongoose you fucking *snake*. You can—”

This blow came from my left, a meaty hand wrapping around my neck and slamming my forehead into a zoomed-in knee. There is no reason to pretend this time as my nose crunches audibly and I feel a quick rush gush out over my shirt.

“You are not listening. You are a dead man. If you fail to follow my instructions to the very last detail, you're done. Kapeesh. Dead as *manure*. You understand me? But I am going to throw you one last grasp at life, one last string, and if you manage to catch on and hold on, you will in turn promptly exit from this city, this state, this country. Do you understand?”

Mongoose's eyes swiveled around with a touch too much nervous energy. His abrupt renege on his faux-intellectualism speech does not go unnoticed.

I blurb out a yes, as the blood runs over my mouth. A broken nose. I am already thinking of ways to hide it from Mike.

"Grant me your attention, then. Soon you will be contacted by an agent, of whose scope or purpose or existence would only serve to befuddle your inferior intellect. Do not concern yourself with the logistics as to the when- and whereabouts of this meeting. The only thing you need to concern yourself with, to imprint upon the undefined outline of your mind is the code word that will be used to establish this contact: *'Injer Injeras.'* "

He gasped for breath again, his hand darting to his pocket and emerging with his pathetic little inhaler. A soul-sucking gasp and then he paused, seeming to savor the crypticness of his words and the measure of self-control he sucked back.

"You will have to exterminate this agent. As promptly as possible, and that is but a polite moniker for 'right away'. We will have established eyes observing you at any and every step, and anything you do to cause uncertainty or arouse suspicion will merit a swift end," a pause, "or nay, a decidedly unswift-

He breaks off. "Is that a word?" Sudden frightened eyes.

"What?"

"Was that a word?"

"Was what a word?"

"Unswift. Is that a goddamn English word?"

"I don't think so actu-"

"Shut the fuck up! Your lacking brainpower can not be relied on anyways! Anyways, kill this agent or your regret will be wrought in the form of a drawn-out death. I am done here!"

I blink. The ludicrousness of the situation is such a startling slap that I almost smile. A flicker of joy wafts in my soul for the first time in weeks. My mundane cycle of life and its rote pleasures may, for the first time in a while, be threatened. A dozen questions bubble to my mind, but it is clear from Mongoose's face that they are not worth posing, so I nod my head and Mongoose jerks *his* head confidently, and the glock's weight vanishes from my side and a handkerchief is shoved into my hand that I use to wipe away the blood and wrench my nose into place as a mind-numbing sear of pain crests through my body and I blink and jolt back into the slow-motion of sober consciousness. God, I needed a drink.

As I stand up, Mongoose gestured back towards me.

"Oh and do not concern yourself about the other half." Another vicious grin. "The service you will have performed will be of a much higher value. And, otherwise, your death will be of almost equally

pleasurable magnitude. And, recollect, not a breath of this to anyone in...anyone ever. Ever.” And he was off, sauntering self-consciously away as only a small man could, flanked by his goons, never sparing a glance back at the dead man.

I slouch off to my car, not another soul in sight, for now. I have a death sentence on my head, and a not altogether ponderous path to freedom, and today’s rehearsal is not yet up.

I count to ten in my head, take a right, another right, and then a rolling left at a four-way stop sign.

The familiar siren’s whine prompts a quick response from me. The chrome blue hovers into my rearview and the brisk jiggly walk of Sergeant FatNeck has me rolling down my window. I extend my license and registration.

He took them and wasted no time. “So. What’d he say? Was he mad? Jason said one of his goons kneed you in the face, but he couldn’t see much else from his spot.”

I relish a small victory in watching his fat fucking face crinkled in impatience as I take my time. “Yes, he was fairly angry.”

His shit-brown eyes bulged. “Well? And? What’d he say?”

“Take a breath, lardass-“

He seethed. “Shut the fuck up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut the fuck up! Don’t fucking tell me what to do! This isn’t some kind of alliance, we’re not *partners*, you’re helping us out ‘cause you have to and if you don’t, you’re fucked so don’t give me any goddamn lip.”

I smile with infuriating ease. “Alright Meyers, you tell me what Mongoose said, if you want me to shut up.”

His fists clenched and his arms lashed out and in as if some invisible person was holding him back. Then he smiled himself. “Think you’re sitting high and dry, huh, think you can drop snide remarks and jerk me around, because you’ve got nothing to lose, huh? Think just ‘cause we don’t know your real name *Jag*, you think we can’t touch you?”

I don’t say anything but it looks like Sergeant FatNeck isn’t too familiar with the idea of rhetorical questions. After a long pause, his face was startled into confusion and he relented, “Ok, come on, out with it.”

The growing time gap since my last drink prompts cooperation like nothing else would. “Yes, he was mad. Said he had some mission for me, something about an agent contacting me that I have to kill. I can’t tell anyone about it and I’ve got to leave town right after.”

The vapidness in his eyes remained unperturbed. Did the idiot understand me?

“Ahh. Ok, I see. Well Detective Burns will be very pleased to hear that.”

And, FatNeck left me at a loss for words this time, flicking my papers in the car and striding away without a backwards glance.

Fuck it, time to get hammered before my mind whirs to a solution.