

Chapter 3

Jamie stopped, catching himself. He'd gone too far this time. Close eyes, deep breaths, count to five, and then open eyes to see the damage.

Damn it. He'd really done it. He looked at the grout brush, then the lines between the countertop's tiles, then back at the brush. Yes, he'd gotten the coffee stain out, but he'd also scrubbed too hard, wearing away some of the grout.

Twenty minutes ago, he'd arrived home, throwing his cashfilled backpack on the futon cushion. It landed with a thump, startling Normal out of her cat tuffet next to the window. And though he stopped to give Normal a calming pet, his instincts took over, starting with a meticulous cleaning of the litter box, then a complete vacuum of the small apartment. Then organizing his stack of library books into a preferred reading order, putting away the neatly folded clothes in the laundry basket, cleaning the pour-over coffee carafe and kettle before brewing a fresh cup. As it settled, he noticed some drips of coffee had absorbed into the grout lines adjacent to his row of ceramic mugs, thus kicking off his quest for a completely clean and reset kitchen. All of the fear and concern and guilt from the day funneled into his end-to-end cleaning spree even though it wasn't Sunday, the day he typically reserved for getting his home in order.

But this. Flecks of dried grout stuck to the brush bristles, and Jamie squinted, examining them as if he tried to break into the memory of the synthetic fibers. He blinked when Normal mewed at him, snapping him back into the present. He had to slow down. He had to regroup. He'd gone too far this time, and though the counter looked clean, a closer examination showed a tiny degradation in the grout.

Damn it. Jamie blew out a sigh and surveyed the room.

So neat. So organized. In fact, it was nearly identical to when he'd woken up here, standing in the middle of a barely furnished apartment two years ago. On that morning, he had blinked as he came to, his eyes adjusting from blurry to focused, taking in the sun shining through the cheap tan drapes onto the futon in the middle of the living space. Once he'd realized where he was, it had dawned on him that he didn't know who he was. He'd walked methodically through the semifurnished apartment, looking for triggers. Coffee table, bread, water, sink, bed, toothbrush. He knew what those were, their purpose, but none offered clues about himself. Even the mirror produced zero recognition; he didn't know what history lay behind those eyes, what the story was behind the scar on his palm.

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And now? What he wouldn't give for that blissful ignorance, free from knowing that the injured woman from today was all his fault.

How could he have been so stupid, so reckless?

As with each of his bank robberies, he'd taken his time, planned a strategy, even wrote out his script beforehand and memorized it. He still lacked in execution, but that was why he had checked out some acting books from the library. The whole goal, the entire focus was to get in and out as quickly, as cleanly as possible. That meant brain-stunning the people in the building in a very specific order under a very specific time frame, all while cackling like a cartoon character and reciting over-the-top lines in a not-quite-there American accent.

If he controlled the entire situation, then no one got hurt and he did his job.

Except when one of them had a medical condition.

Jamie cursed at himself, cursed his fake-it-till-you-make-it attitude, cursed the whole damn situation. Not once, not a single time had he ever considered the possibility of a medical issue.

He finally broke, forcing himself to move. A click on the remote control brought his small TV to life, flashing a news report about electrical surges throughout the city before turning to the bank heist. His fingers fumbled to hit the power button again, taking several tries before the screen thankfully went to black, leaving only the sounds of a hungry cat meowing to remind him that he hadn't given her dinner or her nightly treat of coconut water yet. Jamie set the grout brush in the sink, and obliged the demanding cat.

Seconds later, the room filled with a content rumbling of purrs.

But even Normal's happy noises failed to remove the trauma of the day. The sound of the woman's head hitting the tile. The sight of the blood pooling. The desperate cries of her coworker.

Don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it.

Onward. Next task: the money. He grabbed the backpack and headed to the bedroom. The backpack's large top zipper got caught as he tugged on it, and the stress of the day gnawed at his patience, skipping past his normal mode of meticulously fixing it and jumping right to forcing it free. On the underside of the zipper, the corner of a hundred-dollar bill clung in between the metal clasps.

Jamie sighed, a sound soon mimicked by Normal yawning at his feet. "You have no idea," he told the cat before reaching in and starting his post-robbery sorting process for cash.

A buzzing sound rattled the room, causing a handful of loose coins on the end table to dance; it broke his focus, jolting his shoulders and neck in surprise. From the hallway, he heard Normal's claws catch in the thin carpeting before dashing off to find a hiding spot from the abrupt noise.

He picked up the phone, heart pounding that it might be someone on his trail. But a glance at his screen caused a sigh of relief. Reminder: Support Group. San Delgado East Side YMCA. Six o'clock.

Right. The weekly support group—more specifically, San Delgado Memory Loss & Dementia Support Group.

Not that Jamie cared about the giant gap in his personal life, the big cloud of nothing stemming from the moment he awoke in this apartment all the way back to, well, his birth. Something pulled him away from those thoughts whenever he even approached the matter, like staring into a bright beam of

light until the intensity forced his eyes away. Every time. That avoidance happened so frequently it felt instinctive at this point, skirting whatever that was and whoever truly stood behind the impenetrable fog.

It didn't matter. No, the support group was for learning more about memory loss in general, to guard himself from any further memories vanishing.

The irony of the Mind Robber dealing with all that didn't escape him.

He resumed unloading the cash, first putting the stacks by denomination from left to right, then counting and rubber-banding any loose ones complete with a Post-it note with the total on each makeshift bundle. In the closet sat a safe—something that had been absolutely terrible to get into his apartment. He pulled off the blanket hiding it and turned the dial. Left with *click click clicks*. Then right. Then left again.

It opened up, revealing a larger version of the stacks assembled on his bed. Jamie took new bundles, two at a time, and neatly set them in the appropriate spots, making each tower of cash grow until the backpack and the bed were clear of evidence. A notebook leaned on the cash; Jamie pulled it out and opened it to the ledger he'd crafted, filling out the columns with the latest tally of earnings, anticipated expenses, safety-net cash and overall savings.

At the top of that column was a little drawing he'd made of a palm tree and a beach. Based on today's earnings, he was nearly 80 percent to his goal. Depending on the size of each haul, a few more robberies—especially if he remembered to ask for the stacks of hundreds specifically—would provide enough financial comfort to retire on a tropical beach at a much lower cost of living. He'd read that the coffee in the Caribbean was excellent.

A comfortable permanence, as long as the Throwing Star didn't track him down. That further complicated things, and Jamie wondered if he'd jinxed it all by invoking her during his bank performance. He gritted his teeth.

So close to a fresh start. For him and Normal, and he wouldn't let the Throwing Star jeopardize that.

Normal gave an urgent meow, which translated in cat speak to "Where is my bed?" Jamie folded the blanket exactly and draped it over the safe, then put a small cat tuffet back on top of it. A gray-and-orange blur zipped by, and in one leap, landed on the tuffet, turning his trail of crime and/or source of income into the world's most valuable cat bed.

Jamie exhaled, and his mattress bounced as he flopped on his back, eyes glued to the ceiling but brain refusing to shut off. One blink and he saw the woman fall again. Every time he closed his eyes, the image reappeared, except each instance seemed to intensify in its color and sound, the sheer vibrancy of his mind seemingly taunting him.

He could lift the memory out. He'd done it before as an experiment, including writing a note with steps and details as proof that he'd removed his immediate recall of the moment. It left him with what he presumed to be the same nausea that his victims experienced, and other than a few follow-up trials, he hadn't done it for any practical purpose.

A small price to pay to be relieved of the guilt.

Jamie raised his hand, this time pointed at himself, and he closed his eyes, digging deep to flip through his own memories. Bright and fresh, full volume and movement, no haziness or missing pockets of moments. One wipe and it'd be gone.

But what would that make him? A possible murderer without a conscience? He treated his villain persona and robberies as a job, an income. Not to hurt people, not with malevolence or sociopathic apathy.

No.

This memory had to stay.

Jamie lowered his hand.

There was a knock at the door, jolting him to his feet.

He closed his eyes and stretched out with his mind, sensing the ghostly silhouette of a single form at his door.

No one ever came to his door.

“San Delgado police. Is anyone home?”

The very idea of having law enforcement at his door caused Jamie's hands to tremble and a thin layer of sweat to form on his forehead. He could brain-stun the officer and run. He could dive into the officer's memories, see what happened, why he was here—maybe it was just a fundraiser for the Police Athletic League.

Another knock rattled the door.

If he brain-stunned the officer, that wouldn't exactly be inconspicuous. You couldn't just leave gawking, unresponsive police on your doorstep. And the officer's location was probably tracked by SDPD, which meant that lifting memories and sending him on his way would only lead to more trouble.

No, the only way out of this was through it.

Jamie took a deep breath, put on a baseball cap with a logo of the local San Delgado Barons hockey team, then marched to the door. He opened it halfway to find the very serious, very professional face of a plainclothes officer. Despite the fact that he stood shorter than Jamie, his sturdy build made him far more intimidating.

“May I help you?” Jamie held the door ajar. “Sorry,” he said, native English accent in full display, “I have a cat that tries to get out if I open the door all the way.” As if on cue, mews came from behind him and Jamie scooped up the pudgy feline. Mental note: she deserved extra coconut water tonight. “Be nice, Normal.”

The detective tilted his head at the name, then chuckled, sunlight gleaming off the light brown skin of his shaven bald dome. “No problem. Sorry to bother you this evening. Detective Patrick Chesterton. I'm the lead on the Mind Robber case.”

No reaction rippled through Jamie. Which was probably a reaction in itself. He waited, seconds stretching into vast chunks of time, and though he somehow managed to keep a polite expression on his face, the pounding in his chest might have given him away.

“We get anonymous tips all the time about the Mind Robber. Some people even claim to be him. But this one was very specific. And since we know he left on a train heading eastbound about ninety minutes ago, I thought I’d check it out.” He glanced over his shoulder, eyes tracking past the courtyard and toward the parking lot. “Traffic is going to be hell getting back to the station.”

Jamie told himself to laugh, though in a completely different way from the forced maniacal display of the Mind Robber. Calm, quiet, a little nervous—the natural kind of nervous anyone got when questioned by law enforcement. Normal must have agreed, as she continued mewling in his arms.

“Well, aren’t you a nice cat?” the detective said, his voice softening. He reached up to pet Normal’s round head, but the cat replied with a hiss. Before Jamie could stop her, she swatted at Chesterton. The cat kicked out of his arms, and Jamie turned to see a streak of pudgy fur dashing for the bedroom.

“Oh, I’m so—” Jamie stopped himself at the realization that the detective nursed a fresh scratch across the knuckles.

If they weren’t going to get him for being the Mind Robber, what about assault via cat scratch?

“I’m so, so sorry. Normal usually loves strangers.” That was a lie, or it might have been a lie. Normal never met anyone, regular or stranger, so the sample size on that remained small. “But she gets weird occasionally.” That part was true. Jamie held up his hand, palm out. “See this scar across my palm? Normal got me good one time.”

Flat-out lie: Jamie had no idea where that scar came from, though whenever he focused on it for too long, a strange mix of nausea and embarrassment would flood over him.

“It’s okay,” Chesterton said. “I had a cat growing up. They can be temperamental. I should know better than to do that. Anyway, the tip said that someone who fit the build and look of the Mind Robber was in this area. This block, actually.” He looked Jamie up and down. If Jamie decided to risk it, he probably could have poked into the detective’s memories and seen specifically what he was thinking, even the source of the tip. “Have you seen anyone who fits that profile?”

In the courtyard, Jamie caught sight of the old couple across the way trying to get their mini schnauzer puppy to obey commands. They looked over at Chesterton, then Jamie, and Jamie offered a reassuring wave. Despite being a theoretical villain, he still wanted to be a good neighbor. “I, um, actually don’t watch the news much. I find it triggering.”

“Ah, got it. He’s Caucasian. Around six feet tall. Thin build. Strong chin. That’s about it, really, though. His hood and mask obscure everything else.”

“Well,” Jamie said. A response came to mind, and he debated whether or not he was being too clever. His arms extended and a wry smile came over his face a little too easily. Maybe learning to play a villain had turned the gesture into muscle memory. “That sounds like me.” The words came out smooth,

just enough of a joking lilt that they threaded the needle between bullshit and levity. It came naturally, almost uncannily so.

For a moment, nothing happened. Neither man blinked, and even Normal stayed quiet. The only noise came from squeaking brakes as a car pulled into the adjacent parking lot.

Then the detective burst out laughing. “I like you,” he said, before reaching into his back pocket. Jamie’s hand moved into position, a subtle gesture that only he could detect should he need to brain-stun. His fingers raised ever so slightly in preparation when a buzz in his back pocket caused both men to stand at attention.

“Sorry, just my reminder,” Jamie said after pulling out his phone. The device’s blinking screen gave him an idea. “My weekly support group. I, uh, need to get going.”

“Oh, of course. Good for you,” he said. “It takes a strong person to seek out help.” Jamie’s head bobbed at the compliment, and the detective finished reaching in his back pocket. He held up a business card. “Do me a favor and call if you see or hear anything that strikes you as suspicious. About him or the Throwing Star. We’re no fan of vigilantes, extraordinary or not. You can’t just run around in a suit beating up people. I don’t care if they’re good or bad. You know, if either of them just called us first and said, ‘Hey, we’ve got these abilities,’ you can bet we’d have found a job for them.” Chesterton glanced at the cat scratch on his hand before letting out a short laugh. “I heard she tripped in the Metro station and let the Mind Robber get away,” he said with a headshake. “I guess ‘extraordinary’ comes in many forms.”

All forms. That skepticism, if not admirable, at least provided some cover. “Right,” Jamie said, taking the card. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Even if you hear anything about weird crimes in Hartnell City. Their PD asked us about the Mind Robber. Guess they’re seeing some strange activity too.”

“Of course, Detective.”

Jamie’s exhale was nearly as loud as the slamming of the door. He’d never been that close to getting caught before.

Who could have possibly tipped the police? He’d wiped the memories of any OmegaCars driver that took him close by, and even then, he’d always walked the last few blocks, taking different routes each time. Could the Throwing Star have tracked him? Possibly, but she seemed more like the “punch in the teeth” than “call the cops” type.

Questions circled as Jamie heard the roar of the detective’s car coming to life. Through the blinds, Jamie watched a dark blue sedan pull halfway across the parking lot before pausing for a handful of seconds and then finally rolling away. Chesterton was gone for now, but if he suspected anything, the best course of action would be for Jamie to act as any normal civilian would. In this case, it meant going exactly where the detective expected him to be.

Normal meowed a farewell as Jamie grabbed a jacket—not his black hoodie—and locked the door behind him.

It was almost time for the support group. Even if he didn’t want to go.

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