

That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore – Chapter 10

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## CHAPTER 10

Archie heard the boots scraping against the floor. There were two of them. The light seemed to pierce his eyes even through the eyelids.

“What the hell happened here?” One of them said. Archie recognised the voice as the one that had manhandled him earlier.

“How should I know?” The other responded in a low guttural tone. “You’re going to pay for this now, pal.”

Archie guessed that the last bit of speech was directed at him. He knew that one of the captors had a sense of humour. It was the calling him pal that tipped it. If they really were friends, then Archie would be unchained by now. He heard more boots scraping on the floor. Was there someone else in the room besides the three of them?

He opened his eyes and blinked away the tears. At first he just saw blurred shapes but after a second or two, things came into focus. Two figures standing over him. One of them was wearing a black ski mask; the other was wearing a silver version. They were both dressed in black coveralls.

“What’s happening?” Archie asked, as though it weren’t obvious.

“I’m back to start breaking bones.” Black ski mask said. Archie could feel him grinning underneath his disguise. He adjusted the gloves on his hand.

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“Watch the ring.” Archie said. “That could cause some real damage.” Archie made an attempt to stand but he was pushed back down. It didn't take effort to do, either.

The Ski Mask Twins laughed.

“I'll bet you wouldn't be this eager if I wasn't tied up.” Archie said, trying to get to his feet again.

“You're right,” Silver Ski Mask said. “We wouldn't.” He cracked his knuckles, perhaps in preparation for breaking Archie's. Silver Ski Mask pushed the prisoner over again. “Isn't this fun?”

Black Ski Mask nodded.

“Not really,” Archie offered, trying to be part of the conversation. The longer he could keep them talking the longer he evaded serious injury or even death. “So, where are you boys from?”

Silver Ski Mask raised a finger and Archie could sense that this guard was seriously considering answering him. There was still a little concrete dust in the air and the ski mask was obviously not providing enough of a filter for silver as he let out a cough and raised his hand to cover his mouth. It was a pointless move as nothing about his face could be seen.

Archie was a surprised that Silver Ski Mask had manners.

“So,” Archie said trying to get to his feet again. “How long have you been hired goons?” He smiled at his captors.

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“We are not just hired goons.” Silver Ski Mask had anger rising in his voice.

“Sorry, where are my manners.” Archie coughed to see if Silver would pick up on his subtle reference. “What I meant to say was how long have you two gentleman been the best hired goons around?”

Black Ski Mask, who obviously did his shopping at lower end stores didn't get Archie's reference and pushed him over, causing another cloud of dust to rise into the air.

Silver Ski Mask coughed as the particles invaded his throat through what was obviously not the finest ski mask available, but a cheap and very porous substitute.

“Shut up.” Black Ski Mask said.

“Are you talking to me or to him?” Archie nodded in the direction of Silver Ski Mask as he continued with his mini coughing fit.

“I'm talking to both of you. Both of you shut up. Shut up, shut up.” Black Ski Mask stomped his foot on the floor which caused another load of particles to dance in the air and head straight for Silver Ski Mask as though they had a vendetta against him.

It took a minute or so for Silver Ski Mask to stop coughing. He turned to his companion. “You got any water?”

“No.”

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“I could run out and get some.” Archie said trying to lighten the situation. He grinned at them. Maybe the brilliant smile would convince them.

It didn't work. Black Ski Mask backhanded him with the ring again, knocking Archie back to the floor.

“Quiet.” He turned to Silver Ski Mask, “No, I don't have any water.”

Note to self, thought Archie, put less sarcasm in the smile from now on.

“I told you I had severe dust irritation. Allergies even. You and Sid can't expect me to come down here and look after this creep.”

Archie smirked on the ground. Luckily for him, he was face down. They'd slipped up. More specifically, Silver Ski Mask had. He's figure out a way to use this. He had to try and get on Silver's side and then try to drive a wedge between these two reluctant partners. Only then he could make his escape.

There was a glaring silence that filled the room. Archie managed to stifle his grin and rolled to his back.

He stared up at the Ski Twins. He had to do something to take their mind off Silver's faux pas. “Didn't you think to co-ordinate before you left the house this morning?” Silver hauled Archie to his feet. “I mean, the outfits are very fetching but why didn't you go for more fashionable headgear? A beret for instance? That would have offset the blandness of those coveralls.”

Silver Ski Mask's dull eyes stared back at him. Archie locked onto his stare, taking Black Ski Mask out of his line of sight.

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A second later, Archie thought his ribs were on fire and found himself kneeling on the floor gasping for air. Perhaps that was pushing them a bit far. At least he was aware of where the limit was. He pulled air into his burning lungs.

“Get up.” Black Ski Mask said as he grabbed Archie by the collar and hauled him to his feet like a rag doll. “Stay up, this time.”

Archie sucked in more air. “Or what?” He looked from one captor to the other and then back again. “Or you’re going to kill me? Is that it?”

Silver Ski Masked grabbed Archie’s cheek between his thumb and forefinger and hook it vigorously like an over enthusiastic aunt. Archie was expecting him to say “Hasn’t he grown?” but instead it was more like: “This guys funny. Maybe he should be a comedian.”

“I think there’s an open mike night at Caroline’s. I’d give it a go, if you dropped me off. Obviously I’d come back and let you know how it went.”

The answer was more physical than vocal. Another stiff shot to the stomach, but this time, Silver Ski Mask held onto Archie and wouldn’t let him fall.

Archie let out a rattling cough and speckles of blood landed on the coveralls of his captors. “What do you want from me?”

Black Ski Mask gave the signal to Silver, who let Archie stand on his own two feet. “Where is it?” Black Ski Mask said. He adjusted the glove on his left hand as he waited for an answer.

“I told you before.” Archie said. “I mean, I -”

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“You -”

“I mean I said I didn't know what you were talking about.” Archie continued before Black Ski Mask could get more than one word out. “Tell me what you want me to say and I'll say it. Tell me what you want and I'll give it to you.”

“We have what you want.” Silver Ski Mask said with chuckle. “Tell us what we want to know and you'll get it back, good as new.” He paused to look at his accomplice. “Well, almost.”

“You bastard.” Archie spat at the face of his tormentor.

The saliva dripped down off the material.

Silver Ski Mask cracked his knuckles. “I'm going to enjoy this.”

Black Ski Mask laughed.

Archie spat again.

Black Ski Mask laughed again.

“Enough.” There was a deep voice from the doorway.

Silver Ski Mask was blocking Archie's view of the new arrival to the room. It didn't stop him from shouting to the third captor. “What do you want?”

The voice came back even and calm. “I want you to calm down and relax. This will go much smoother if everyone will just chill the fuck down.”

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Archie knew that there was truth to what had been said. He didn't know why he was here or what he was supposed to get but the screaming and the spitting was only going to get him killed and that wouldn't be of use to his daughter. She had to escape and live her life.

An old man with a cane limped into Archie's view. At least, Archie guessed it was an old man. The hunched posture, the use of a cane could be affectations to hide his true identity, just like the ski mask he wore. Could this really be the possessor of the voice he had heard? "Who are you?"

The old man said nothing but shuffled forward. His gnarled hand gripped the cane. The old man surveyed the prisoner and the two guards on duty. "Has he talked?" The old man said in a low whisper.

Black Ski Mask looked at Silver. Silver Ski Mask looked at Archie.

"Who are you?" Archie said with more force in his voice now. His brain buzzed as he said the words. He was obviously dehydrating and it had been a while since Archie had anything to drink and this dust wasn't helping matters. Soon it would be a full blown headache. He was fixating on the pain in his head to try to avoid thinking about the pain in the rest of his body.

Black Ski Mask's posture altered. He visibly grew an inch in height when he straightened his back. He puffed out his chest, like some bird strutting around for the attention of a mate. "We'll get it." There was a tone in his voice that radiated confidence, obviously trying to impress the old man, obviously trying to impress the boss.

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The old man looked over the prisoner. “It appears that you’ve not been successful so far.”

“We’re on the cusp,” Silver Ski Mask said.

The old man shook his head. “Cusp?” His voice hardened. “You’re not reading me a fucking horoscope.” He lifted the cane and jabbed the end into Silver Ski Mask’s chest.

Silver Ski Mask took a step back, not so much as to absorb the force the old man was applying, but to lessen the impact of the sharp end. He’d seen people cut with it before. He didn’t want to suffer the same fate. “Sorry, boss. I meant-”

“I don’t care what you meant.” The old man hissed. “I want my million dollars. And I want it now.” He turned away.

“But boss, I.” Black Ski Mask stopped talking. He knew there was nothing he could say to calm the old man down.

“But boss, nothing.” He turned on his heels. “I want my goddamn money.” The old man picked up his cane and with lightning quickness struck Archie in the chest.

The next thing Archie knew, he was back on the floor. He wasn’t sure what had happened. His chest hurt. The old man could move, when he wanted, when it involved money. “Money.” Archie gasped, sucking air into his lungs. He was sure that there would be a bruise there come morning, if it wasn’t morning already.

The old man moved slowly over to where Archie lay. His determination still visible in his frame, if not his speed. He bent down to one knee, though Archie didn’t

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believe he was about to propose that they run away together and elope. The old man breathed heavily after the exertion. Now, when he spoke there was a rattle emanating from deep within his chest. “Yes. Money.” He tugged at the ski mask, as if he were trying to allow more air to reach his lungs.

“I don’t understand.” Archie looked at the old man’s eyes through his ski mask. They seemed to burn right through him.

“My. Damn. Money.” He continued after the interruption. “Your daughter stole it from me, and I want it back.”

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