Diamond Hands

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About this Piece

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CHAPTER ONE

Diamond Hands

"Hi Corinne. What's the emergency?" I mumbled, somewhere between still-drunk and hungover.

Morticia replied in her familiar, economical tone. "You'd better come down to St. Thomas General. Mike's been in a serious car accident." Then she paused, as if to compose herself, her voice quivering with an uncharacteristic show of emotion toward her younger brother. "They're not sure he'll make it through the night."



The words bounced around my head without really registering. I had no fucking clue how to feel.

"Alex, did you hear me?" Her insistence snapped me out of the fug.

"I'll come straight down. Just need to get dressed." I put the phone on speaker, stumbling comically around my room, trying to pull on track pants, hoodie, and trainers, while mentally struggling to process my emotions and find a more meaningful response.

"Is he conscious¿' Was the best I could muster.

"He's drifting in and out. Seems aware of what's going on." Another pause.

"He's asking for you." Aunt Corinne seemed to struggle to let the words out of her mouth but their impact on me was instant. I felt a wave of emotion and a clearer sense of purpose. I had to see my uncle before it was too late.

"I'll be thirty minutes max. Keep me updated." I hung up, grabbed my car keys, and headed out into a damp, gloomy, and eerily silent early Autumn morning. The light from the LED street lamps reflected in the puddles with a surreal intensity.

As I slipped onto the motorway, I began thinking about how my relationship with Uncle Mike was so much more than an uncle/nephew bromance. He was a stand-in father figure, the only stable strand of a tangled web of family dysfunction spreading outwards from my estranged parents, and rooted in money; what else? My parents had squandered their share of an inheritance on subprime, but Mike had zigged, when they had zagged.

He was a strange mix of free spirit and school librarian, tech-savvy, but far from your classic nerd. My uncle encouraged me to

travel more and find my own path in life, but within a strict online security regime.

I pictured him peering over his reading glasses disapprovingly as I doom-scrolled on my iPhone. "You know the world is much more interesting first-hand, Alex." These exchanges were so familiar they became like a sitcom-style running gag; Mike would doggedly repeat his nuggets of wisdom, and I would roll my eyes.

He had a real thing about password reuse, trying to convince me to use initialisms. "Just take the first letters from favourite song lyrics Alex, and you have a strong but memorable password"

"Really" I would mock in a faux-English gentleman's voice. "How interesting" [canned applause].

I admired his determination, but the same lame-ass password still secured most of my worthless online life.

Just below online security on my to-do list was to read more books, or any books for that matter. The Count of Monte Cristo was Uncle Mike's favourite, but as much as the general blurb sounded interesting, I simply wasn't prepared to commit the time and effort to wade through the flowery language. I liked my gratification short, instant, and delivered via my mobile, but there was more to our relationship than tech-based nags and funky book recommendations.

The guy knew how to have fun. We laughed together and at each other, in equal measure. There were epic BBQs spent talking drunken shit around a fire pit. "Okay, Boomer, I'll up my online security game when you book yourself in for a hair transplant and veneers, then let me loose on your Tinder profile." That tickled him.

Those sessions often bizarrely ended with Mike bellowing some shonky 70s tune into my ear with a strange fervour that seemed to go beyond the effects of way too many brewskis and a long lost romance; but whatever that hidden message was, it was lost on me.

Now, speeding to the hospital, there was a sick feeling growing in my stomach that fate was about to break up this odd couple and those life hacks my uncle was desperate to share would remain on his bucket list, forever unchecked.

* * *

The nurse had tried to prepare me for the shock of how he looked. While his torso had taken the brunt of the impact and was hidden from view, his face still communicated the urgency of Morticia's phone call: his forehead and cheeks were badly bruised, his left eye swollen and closed, his right eye bloodshot, open and closing sporadically and lacking its familiar intensity.

I stood over him, trying to process what I saw, gently squeezing his hand.

"Mike… Mike, it's Alex." His right eye flashed with recognition, and his heart monitor spiked, catching the attention of the nurse sitting quietly but attentively in the corner. She motioned that I was okay to continue.

He tried to respond, but his mouth was so dry that no words came out, just a strange rasp. I saw a cup of water on the bedside cabinet and gently guided the straw into his mouth. It took a huge effort for him to draw a small slug, which lubricated his

throat enough to speak. What came out made no sense and convinced me that the Uncle Mike I knew was already gone. It sounded something like, "Diamond hands, Alex."

He coughed and choked as he tried to repeat it, but this time the nurse intervened, and I let go of his hand.

* * *

Those three words would be the last I would ever hear from my Uncle Mike. He died soon after. He was 63.

His funeral was a simple humanist ceremony tarnished by the presence of Morticia and the rest of the Addams family feigning emotion. They were also in attendance when, several months after his death, the reading of his will took place at the offices of his lawyers. As much as I had seen this scene play out in countless movies, I had no idea what to expect in real life.

My Uncle had a quirky sense of humour, so part of me was expecting a beyond-the-grave video or *Brewster's Millions* type challenge, but the setting was drab and humourless, lightened only by the lawyer's likeness to Lionel Hutz in *The Simpson's* attorney-at-law. Hutz kicked things off, opening a blue leather folio and reading aloud, with the familiar "sound body and mind" preamble, then getting to the nitty gritty.

"In the amount of $5 million in cash, the proceeds of my stock portfolio and sale of my condominium, I leave to the Electronic Freedom Foundation."

Morticia had been sitting nervously nursing her coffee and giving me the stink-eye as we built up to the main event, but now blurted out her frustration. "The Electronic what?"

"Mrs. Addams, you'll receive a full copy of the beneficiaries. Please allow me to continue without interruption."

I guessed there was no real need for this pantomime; from what I'd googled, this could have been executed by post, but I sensed that Mike saw symbolic importance in doing things this way, a kind of ritual public humiliation of his siblings.

"To Mr. Alex Miller, I leave the following package."

At this point, Lionel Hutz handed me an A4-sized padded envelope that sat on the right side of his desk.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Morticia's abrasive tone barely concealed her resentment.

"I guess so," I stuttered with a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

I slowly opened one end of the envelope, peeling back the seal, painfully aware of the eyes of Morticia, her husband (Fester), and several assorted cronies. I reached inside and pulled out a hardback book.

It was Mike's personal copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas. I opened the cover, and inside was a handwritten note, "Diamond Hands, Alex. Love, Uncle Mike."

As I grappled with the sudden realisation that my uncle hadn't been talking gibberish on his deathbed, I became aware that the eyes of the room were still on me, expecting some kind of comment.

"It's a book. Mike's favourite," I announced, waiving it above my head sheepishly for acknowledgement and doing my best impression of someone grateful for such a wonderful yet worthless memento.

"What's so special about *that* book?" Uncle Fester chimed in, with an approving nod from Morticia. "You're not one for reading, are you, Alex?" he added.

I began to feel a little awkward. Sure, it may have looked a little odd to an outsider but I didn't have to justify our relationship to these parasites. "Guess I'll find out," I responded, snapping the book shut.

I looked pointedly back at Hutz, putting the spotlight back on him. He took the nudge and returned to his script.

"Thank you all. That concludes the execution of Mike Miller's will." He then directed his gaze at me. "Mr. Miller. If you could please remain behind, I just need you to sign a few documents."

He began to push back on his chair, ready to stand and usher the others out.

"So that's it?" Morticia was visibly angry, her usually sallow face blushing red at being left empty-handed.

"Yes, Mrs. Addams. That's it." Hutz replied with a confidence and disinterest that told me he'd met Morticia's type many times before.

Morticia rose abruptly, with Fester following in her wake. In my head, the Addams Family theme tune played, and I had to restrain myself from clicking my thumbs and fingers as they traipsed out of the office.

Once the family freaks had left the building, I was left facing Lionel at the end of the long glass-topped meeting table. He opened his binder at some coloured tabs and explained that various signatures were required, despite my inheritance amounting to a Penguin Classic.

I signed without question, my mind more focused on figuring out what "Diamond Hands" meant, when Hutz broke my train of thought.

"There's one more thing Mr. Mill—"

"Please, just Alex, is fine," I interrupted, feeling far too much like an adult with all this "Mr." bullshit, anxiety rising up inside, sensing this wouldn't be about another book or request for a plaque on a park bench.

"Okay, Alex." He smiled. "The will requested that we notarise your uncle"s death and send the proof to a specific service provider. I cannot tell you why, Alex. That kind of arrangement is relatively new and is normally to ensure privacy. The notification will trigger a smart contract to perform some specific action."

"A smart *what*?" This was completely baffling. Somehow, I felt that Mike was punishing my Luddite ways from beyond the grave.

"Think of it like a robot butler, waiting for instruction, like our notification of your uncle's death. That will trigger some other action, but it's designed specifically, so we don't know what that might be."

"And that butler robot thing has already received its instruction?" Fuck, I sounded *stoopid*.

"Yes, Alex. We fulfilled the instruction."

"So what do I do?" I looked pleadingly at him, like a child waiting for an adult to take control of a complex conversation.

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Alex, but your uncle was very particular with his instructions, so I can only assume you'll find out." He smiled, closed his binder, then glanced at his watch, the international sign for "off you fuck".

I took the cue, stuffing the package into my shoulder bag, thanking Hutz with a limp handshake, then gingerly left, feeling like I was on a hidden camera show.

* * *

That afternoon, sitting in my kitchen, I took another look at the contents of the package. A key fell with a clank onto the table. Was this connected to the robot butler conversation? Its bright rubber cap had a name and number, 021 - SafeStore, a locker service I vaguely recognised.

A quick Google told me the storage facility was nearby, but to add to the growing sense that I was in a Dan Brown novel…it was about to close. If I was going to maintain the treasure hunt, I'd have to hurry. I smiled for the first time that day, imagining Mike nodding with approval as I followed his breadcrumb trail.

I parked my car haphazardly across numerous spaces in front of the non-descript SafeStore building, bolted to the door, pulled at a glass door that needed pushing, then finally burst into the reception.

"Hello Sir, how may I help you?" The desk assistant could easily have qualified as the robot butler that Lionel Hutz had described,

the greeting delivered with a combination of machine-like insincerity and condescension.

I hesitated. "I'm not entirely sure. I have this key." Waiving it hopefully at her eye level, then I stopped, not knowing how to explain how I'd come into its possession.

"Did you find it? I can check if any have been reported missing" Her tone betrayed the frustration of ending her day with a crank customer.

"Sorry, no. It was the proceeds of a will." I replied with an unnecessarily apologetic tone.

"Ah. Okay." The desk assistant's demeanour changed. "How do you like them apples?" I thought to myself.

"Let me see the locker number, please."

I handed her the key, and she punched the ID from the rubber key cap into her computer, her glance back up at me making it clear that she still thought I was a grifter.

"Do you have any ID, sir?" Her tone remained in the suspicious zone.

I handed over my driving license, sensing that she might be reaching for a button under her desk marked "release the hounds," but instead, her face broke into a more accommodating smile.

"Thank you, Alex. I can see you've been granted access." She printed something off her screen, which turned out to be a QR code that she folded into a plastic envelope attached to a lanyard and handed to me over the desk.

"The locker location is 021 D - which is on the fourth floor." The assistant pointed at the lift. "Use the QR for the security door. I'll

be here for another fifteen minutes. Just use the floor-level intercom if you need assistance."

Mike's little game, whatever it was, now had my full attention, and I struggled to keep to a regular walking pace toward the lift.

Locker 021 D was easy to find. I slipped the key into the lock, and the door sprung open to reveal a small package the size of a cigar box. I grabbed it and stuffed it into my rucksack, for the first time feeling that the length Mike had gone to with this mission suggested the contents shouldn't be exposed to the watchful eye of the security camera peering from above the door.

* * *

In the privacy and clutter of my kitchen, I opened the second surprise package of the day to find a cellophane-wrapped box with a picture of some kind of USB stick and a description, "hardware wallet."

It may as well have been a flux capacitor for all that meant to me, but Alexa explained that it was a device for storing bitcoin, which set my heart racing.

Despite being clueless about new technology, I'd seen some Insta posts from teenage bitcoin traders flexing lambos, and there'd been a brief conversation at work after a request to list a property for sale in bitcoin. I'd ignored it, as it seemed like way too much effort.

In my ignorance, I assumed I would simply have to turn this USB thing on, and somehow extract this magical internet money

to my Paypal or Venmo account, where I could convert it to USD and start planning a life of laziness — all thanks to my Uncle Mike.

But the USB stick had nothing stored on it. Reading the online instructions multiple times, slowly, and referencing multiple ELI5 forum posts, I realised the hardware wallet was just a gateway to a digital vault, protected by something called a Seed phrase. A unique collection of 12-24 words.

So the plan changed. I needed the Seed to unlock the bitcoin, convert to USD, then I could start planning a life of laziness. But what the hell were those 24 words?

It was after midnight, and my head was hurting from the charade at the lawyer's, the strange treasure hunt, and the crash course in blockchain. But the bottom line was this: no Seed, no Bitcoin.

I'd checked all the emails Mike had sent, WhatsApp messages, and postcards (that's how old-school he was), but nothing seemed to fit the Seed. My excitement had been short-lived, replaced by frustration and a sinking feeling that I was out of my depth, still captive to the world of real estate that would expect me to arrive bright and early the following morning.

Accepting defeat, I drained the dregs of my nth beer and, as I was going to switch off the kitchen light, glanced back at the table where *the Count of Monte Cristo* still sat ignored. At least I could belatedly fullfil one of my Uncle's wishes and send myself to sleep.

Snuggled in bed, I started reading. My eyes were already drooping just a couple of pages in; who knew that 19th-century literature and beer didn't mix? But I stuck to a mental target of finishing the first chapter, a nod to more of Mike's fortune-cookie wisdom — always finish what you start. Reaching page 21, I noticed a word underlined in pencil. "Cupboard."

Half-asleep, it took a few seconds to realise its significance. Frantically flicking back and forth through the remaining 1,300 pages, I discovered another 23 unique words underlined in pencil. Mike's bucket list was now starting to make sense.

Suddenly alert, I jumped back out of bed and rushed down to the kitchen, reconnecting the hardware wallet to my laptop and walked slowly through the steps to unlock the vault with the Seed, entering the 24 words in the order they appeared in the book, hoping and expecting to find the cheese at the end of this maze.

But though the Seed was accepted, there was no gorgonzola; my security-conscious Uncle had added an additional level of security, a final password. The boss man at the end of the video game was still wagging his finger.

I returned to the book, searching for more pencilled clues I'd somehow missed, but there was nothing. "You and your fucking passwords!" I cursed my uncle and dumped Dumas in the kitchen pedal bin in frustration, then trudged off to bed. Defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

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I remained defeated by that final password, trying combinations of names, dates, and places that meant something to my uncle, recording them systematically in a Google sheet. But as the days and weeks passed, my resolve to crack that final obstacle waned. I realised I was looking for a specific grain of sand on a beach, bitcoin's security was designed to be impossible to crack and my uncle wasn't keen on shortcuts. But my journey down the bitcoin rabbit hole hadn't been wasted. Having started my research wanting instant gratification, over time, my mindset changed. I started to understand and respect the technology and the idea behind bitcoin.

In the days after the bitcoin treasure hunt, I'd been mad at him for not filling me in while he was alive but came to appreciate his reasons for keeping a code of silence. Money had split our family apart once before. Nothing good could have come from it. Despite starting as a wild goose chase, the challenge he'd left had inspired the changes he'd tried, in his own way, to achieve when living.

With the emotional crutch my uncle had provided kicked away, I was forced to stand on my own feet. I began stacking sats (the equivalent of saving pennies), learned more about what diamond hands really meant — though not why it was my uncle's dying words — and through my own experience, was even able to help others grapple with Seeds and hard wallets.

I began to think that maybe my uncle had never even intended for me to access his wallet. The journey itself was the reward.

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Months later, I found myself in Guatemala, following another piece of my uncle's advice and expanding my horizons by travelling abroad. I'd sold my car and jacked in my job. Neither gave me any joy.

I was sitting in a quirky little bar on the shores of Lake Atitlán, drinking a beer, enjoying the view across one of the most beautiful lakes in the world and savouring the final chapters of the Count of Monte Cristo, when the song playing in the bar caught my attention. This was the tune my uncle used to screech into my ear when he'd had a few too many beers.

"Hey," I beckoned to the waiter. "This song?"

"You want me to turn it down, *Señor*?"

"No, no *amigo*." I laughed. "Who's singing it?"

"Neil Diamond. *Muy buena canción*."

Suddenly, a light bulb went off in my head, and as the chorus came around again, I wrote out on a napkin the verse my uncle loved to boom in my ear, emphasising the first letters, just as he"d tried to teach me.

"Money talks, but it can't sing and dance and it can't walk."

The final piece of the puzzle had been hiding in plain sight all along, I just couldn't see it. Maybe I was just too used to looking down and not up.

I glanced back to find the waiter laughing. He gave me the okay sign, then turned away to serve another table, and I laughed too."Diamond fucking hands, Alex."

Source

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