

Friday, January 18, 1:35AM

“FUCKING BROTHER OF YOURS,” Ronnie Saxon said, the coke revving her up, making her aggressive. “Treats you like his errand boy.”

Dale Knight drove the big Dodge Ram without looking at her, knowing the eye contact would only make her worse. He flicked the wipers on, fat snowflakes melting as they struck the windshield. Outside, Asian district neon reflected off the accumulated snow, drifts of it smothering the city.

Ronnie said, “You should be partners by now. Look at him, king shit in that big house in Rosedale. Where are we? Cabbagetown. Half a duplex with a plugged toilet, those fucking rappers upstairs playing that street shit half the night.”

She paused to do another hit off her coke mirror and Dale said, “It’ll come, Ronnie. Ed’s just showing me the ropes. He came up this way himself, doing runs for Copeland. It’s how it works.”

“The ropes,” Ronnie said. “Listen to yourself.” She hefted the gym bag out of the footwell in front of her, 250K worth of Randall Copeland’s heroin. She said, “I was you? I’d take this shit and start up on my own. Someplace fresh. Miami, maybe.”

Dale took the bag from her and tossed it on the back seat. “You’re talking shit now, Ronnie. This is Copeland’s dope. Randall Copeland? Remember him?”

A long-established independent in the Toronto Area drug trade, Randall ‘Randy’ Copeland had managed through sheer force of will to maintain a healthy percentage from almost all of the rival factions that had sprung up over the past few decades—the Jamaican posses, the Eastern European *bratvas*, the Asian triads, even the American biker and youth gangs—mostly by providing safe and reliable distribution, his vast clientele far more terrified of Copeland than they were of his competitors.

Dale said, “My brother told me he watched the man split a guy’s tongue with a pair of tin shears for putting a ding in his Beemer. He’s the last son of a bitch we want to fuck with. Why don’t you just mellow out.”

Ronnie only stared at him, that hard shine in her eyes that made Dale nervous, giving him no idea what was going on inside her head. It made him realize how little he knew about the girl. He’d met her through his brother—one of Ed’s discards, a hand-me-down, like a sweater—and six months later they’re engaged. True, she was fine: that black leather coat flared open to show a little cleavage above a tight red tank top; legs that went all the way up; all that thick dark hair. But she never talked about her past, only hinted at its flavor, almost like a threat when she got pissed at him and wanted him to know it:

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Dale, so I suggest you just back off.”

“Listen,” he said, “we’re almost there. I’m gonna go inside and do the deal, you’re gonna wait in the truck. Ten minutes tops. We’re late, so I’ll probably have to put up with some shit about that.” Late because Ronnie’s ‘quick’ stop for blow wound up costing them an hour.

“You saying that’s my fault?”

“We could have picked up your blow *after* the drop, like I suggested.”

“The day I had, you expect me to wait?”

Letting it go, Dale said, “When I come out we’re gonna take the money to Ed, collect our two grand and that’s the end of it. Fucking coke, makes you hyper.”

Ronnie said, “At least I’m awake,” but the edge was gone from her tone, something else on her mind now. She slipped the smeared coke mirror into her bag, her trim body moving to the *Santana* tune on the radio.

Dale slowed the Ram and turned left, then left again into an alley behind a closed Korean take-out joint. He parked beside a black BMW and killed the engine, pocketing the keys. He reached over the seatback for the gym bag and Ronnie leaned into him, her manicured fingers squeezing his thigh.

“I’m sorry I bitched you out,” she said, close, minty breath warm in his ear. “I just wanna see us get ahead. We deserve more.”

“It’ll come,” Dale said, suspicious as he always was when she turned on that lovey-dovey shit. But man, she knew how to play him. “Couple more years, maybe we’ll move into the top half of the duplex.”

“Don’t push it, Dale.”

Grinning, he got the gym bag and opened the door. “Ten minutes, okay?”

“Let me come in with you, baby.”

“The mood you’re in? I don’t think so.”

“I’m fine now, honest. Come on, they won’t mind.”

Dale got out of the truck, sinking to his ankles in wet snow. “Forget it, Ronnie. These guys are wrapped way too tight. I go in alone.”

“But—”

“Lock the doors. It’s a bad neighborhood.”

He closed the door on her protest, thinking, *Stick with the plan*. He’d fucked up more than once already, Ed bringing him into his office to ream him out, like Ed was his father instead of his brother. But Dale never took it personally. He *was* a fuck-up a lot of the time, the dope getting him into shit he sometimes couldn’t even remember. He’d been clean a few months now, though, even caught a few twelve-step meetings when the itch got bad enough. Truth was, Ed’s last talk had shaken him. “*Keep it up, Dale, you’re going to find yourself in a bind I can’t pry you out of. In this world, blood only runs so thick.*” Jesus, Ed could be spooky sometimes.

But he was right. Brothers or not, Ed had put his own ass on the line to get him this job, and if he screwed it up, it was Ed who’d have to answer for it. The job itself was

easy—drop off the shit, pick up the cash, bring it to Ed and get paid on the spot. Two weeks' pay at minimum wage in a couple hours. All he had to do was follow the rules.

He banged on the restaurant's service door, then glanced back at the Ram—shit, Ronnie smoking in Ed's, like he needed more trouble with his brother. He turned to say something to her about it and the service door opened on its chain. An Asian guy the size of an outhouse stuck his face in the gap, shark eyes sizing Dale up, then got the chain off and let him inside.

Dale followed him into a storage area where the boss, Trang, and another guy—all three of these dudes in the same sky blue leisure suits—were shooting darts and drinking beers.

Dale stumbled over something on his way in, making a racket, and Trang missed his shot, looking none-too-pleased about it as he turned to face Dale. "You're late," he said and let his jacket fall open, giving Dale a clear view of the big semi-auto tucked into the front of his trousers.

"Yeah, Mister Trang," Dale said, "I'm sorry. I was...unavoidably detained. But I got your product right here."

"It makes your brother look bad," Trang said, not letting it go, "showing up late for a quarter million deal." He touched the black leather briefcase that sat on the service trolley next to him. A caress. "I should tell him."

"Sorry, Mister Trang. It won't happen again."

Trang's gaze ticked over Dale's shoulder now, registering mild surprise. He turned to look at his pals and when he faced Dale again he was smiling, showing small yellow teeth. "But I see you brought a peace offering," he said, the smile widening. "Blowjobs all around, eh boys?"

The other two joined Trang in a good laugh and Dale turned to see Ronnie right behind him, strolling past him now, cool as ice, going straight to Trang as the other two flanked him to wait their turn.

Dale said, "Ronnie?" but the girl wasn't listening.

She sidled up to Trang with lidded eyes, giving him her smokiest smile, one hand going to his thin chest, the fingers of the other loosening his belt.

Ronnie said, "I'll blow you..."

And Dale saw her hand close around the pistol grip, saw her shoot Trang in the balls and draw the gun from his pants as he fell, tugging once as it snagged, then watched her drop to one knee to gut-shoot the big one, capping the third in the throat as he reached for his piece. The reports slammed Dale's ears, flat claps of thunder in the cement-walled room. For a moment from the look on her face Dale thought she might turn the gun on him, too.

Then she was moving, sweeping the briefcase off the table, turning to hand it to Dale. He took it and watched her collect the men's wallets and guns, calling Trang an asshole when his bloodied hand came up to clutch her calf, cursing him again for staining her

jeans. She stuffed the swag into a plastic bag she found somewhere and it was all Dale could do not to faint dead away.

Then, with the cool detachment of a farm woman snapping the neck of a hen, Ronnie put a single round into the top of Trang's head, stifling his frantic screams. She stood over each of the others in turn, but both were already dead.

"See?" she said, looking at Dale now. "That's how easy it is. Now come on."

She started for the exit but Dale stood frozen, gaping at the scene, gun smoke smarting his eyes.

Ronnie's voice: "Dale."

"Jesus, Ron..."

"Look at me, Dale."

He did.

"It's like I've told you before," she said, green eyes wildly alive, "there's a lot you don't know about me. Now *come on*."

Head spinning, Dale broke for the exit, running full out now, briefcase in one hand, gym bag in other.

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Ronnie got right back into the coke, turning the radio up loud, laughing when Dale came out of the alley too hard, fishtailed in the wet snow and sideswiped a parked van.

"*Fuck*," Dale said and Ronnie whooped. He couldn't look at her, not now, afraid that if he did he'd grab Trang's gun off the console and shoot her with it.

Now she was stuffing the other two guns under her seat, going through the wallets, griping about cheap chinks who didn't carry cash, tossing things out the window as she got through with them.

Slowing as he turned north onto Yonge Street, Dale said, "You know what you just did?"

"Made us five hundred K in under a minute? Twice that if we cut the shit and deal it ourselves."

"You *killed* us, that's what you did." Picturing Ed when he found out about this, Dale wanted to scream. "Copeland's gonna waste us for this and there's not a thing Ed's gonna be able to do about it."

"Like we're going to sit around and let that happen. The airport's a thirty minute drive from here. If you can't handle it, pull over and I'll take the wheel."

"The airport. In this weather."

Ronnie considered this a moment, staring out at the worsening storm. Then she dialed 411 on Ed's satellite phone, asked for the number for flight information and waited while it connected, shushing Dale when a recorded voice came on and told her all flights had either been canceled or delayed until further notice.

She hung up and said, "Fuck it then, we'll wait it out. How's the Harbor Hilton sound? Room service. Jacuzzi. It's not like we can't afford it."

“Copeland knows everybody in this town, Ronnie. There’s no place we can hide. Fucking shitstorm. Look, maybe we should call Ed, tell him Trang went crazy or something, tried to rip us off. Gave us no choice.”

“Forget it, Dale. You lie about as well as you fuck.”

“Nice.”

“You know what I mean. He’d see right through you.”

“Look,” Dale said, struggling to catch his breath. His heart was triphammering, the image of Trang clutching his bloody crotch making his stomach sick. “I know a place. It’s about five hours north of here. My uncle’s cottage on Kukagami Lake. It’s the last place Ed’d think to look.”

Ronnie said, “A cottage,” like it was a toilet. “If we’re gonna drive, drive *south*, fuck sake. We take turns at the wheel, we’re in Miami in two days.”

Dale sped the wipers up a notch, the wet flakes heavier now, angling straight in at the windshield. He said, “They got dogs at Customs, Ronnie, can smell dope on your breath. Forget about it. There’s no way we’re gonna try that. No, if we’re gonna run—and I don’t see as we got any other choice now—we’re gonna have to ditch the dope or sell the fucker before we leave the country. We lay low at the cottage—it’s a real nice place on the lake, Ronnie. Heat, electricity, everything. We stay there a day, maybe two, then drive to Montreal. I know a guy there’ll take the shit off our hands. Then we head for Europe or maybe New Zealand. Someplace Ed never heard of.”

“What if your Uncle’s at this cottage?”

“He’s in Daytona till the end of March, same drill every year. Trust me, the place is empty.”

Ronnie was quiet after that, the fading adrenaline rush making her sullen. Dale had seen her like this before, brooding silences that went on sometimes for hours and made him nervous, afraid he’d done something to piss her off and he’d wake up in the morning to find her gone.

But right now he liked her this way just fine. He needed time to think.

He got on the 401 and followed it west to the 400, pointing them north now, into the throat of the storm.

At 6:00 o'clock on the morning of his thirty-first birthday, Tom Stokes dressed quietly in his winter work clothes then leaned over the bed to kiss his wife Mandy on the forehead.

Mandy opened her eyes to squint at him in the thin dawn light. She looked annoyed.

Tom said, "Did I wake you? I was trying to keep it down."

"You're a bull," Mandy said and flipped back the covers, showing a very pregnant abdomen. "Come back to bed."

"I'd love to, but I gotta get airborne. Billy Trudeau said he saw a busted window in Outpost Cabin Three." Billy was an Ojibway trapper and guide Tom sometimes hired to look after the hunters and fishermen he rented his outpost cabins to in season. "That means either looters, animals or both. Either way, I want to get it secured so I can be back in time for Steve's party."

Mandy smiled. "My birthday boys. Okay, I'm up."

As she grunted her way into a sitting position, shivering in the morning chill, Tom crept along the hallway to his son's room.

Steve, five years old today, was still sound asleep, tangled in his blankets as he always was, a restless sleeper since birth. Seeing him there, winter pale and so utterly still, Tom felt the same unnerving mix of love and dread he'd felt every morning since they brought the little guy home from the maternity ward: love of a depth he'd never imagined possible...and dread that his son's stillness meant death had crept in to claim him in the night. An irrational fear, maybe—Steve was a healthy, active kid who, apart from those few routine illnesses of early childhood, rarely even caught a cold—but it was a dread that abated only when Tom rested his hand on that tiny chest, as he did now, feeling the rhythmic passage of air that signaled precious life.

He kissed his son on the cheek, then did his best to disentangle him from his blankets without waking him. By the time he got downstairs, Mandy had a pot of coffee brewing and two slices of rye bread in the toaster for him.

As he always did, Tom took his breakfast into the business office on the main floor. He set his toast on the desk but held onto the coffee, sipping it as he checked the weather forecast on the computer, then visually through the big picture window that gave onto the lake where his two planes—a blue and white Cessna 180 and a bright red DHC-2 de Havilland Beaver—stood waiting on their skis, looking frosty and stiff in the gathering light.

The morning was cold but clear, the windsock hanging limp on its pole, no sign of the storm the computer said was raging a few hours south of them now, plowing its way

north. He should be able to get his repairs done and be back in plenty of time to see Steve getting off the school bus.

The family trophy case caught Tom's eye and he idly surveyed its many awards with pride, even though most of them belonged to his wife. Mandy was a crack shot with any kind of firearm. She'd been competing at some of the highest levels since high school, and for a while, before deciding to become a pilot, had been grooming herself for the Olympics. The most exciting events she competed in were the IPSC matches, wicked, action-movie scenarios with gangster popup targets and cardboard mothers clutching babies. It was wild watching her do her thing at these events—and because of them Steve thought he had the coolest mom on the planet. Some of the trophies were pretty impressive, too: poised, gold and silver figures aiming handguns and rifles, the plaques beautifully engraved. He had a couple of things in here somewhere himself...ah, there they were: a three-inch tall gold cup with *World's Best Dad* inscribed on its base, and a grinning porcelain skull he won at a coin toss at the Azilda Fair. There was a vacant shelf at the top of the unit, reserved for Steve's future accomplishments; and soon enough, those of his still gestating baby brother as well.

Completing his morning ritual, Tom sat on the love seat in front of the window and finished his breakfast, gazing with pride at the logo on the Cessna 180, the plane he'd be flying this morning: Stokes Aviation.

He wondered what Mandy got him for his birthday.

THE WEATHER BROKE ALL of a sudden, six in the morning, just south of Parry Sound. An hour earlier they'd been sitting at a dead stop behind a tractor-trailer jackknifed across the highway, flares everywhere, an O.P.P. officer coming right up to Dale's window and asking him where they were headed. Dale only stared at the man and Ronnie said, "Kukagami eventually, but we'd be happy to make Parry Sound tonight, find a hotel and get out of this weather." The cop said that was a good idea, flashed Ronnie a smile and went on to the next vehicle. Dale saw Ronnie tuck her handgun—a nickel-plated Colt .380 she carried with her everywhere—back into her bag and thought, *This is a nightmare, somebody wake me up.*

The drive in the snow, slow and hypnotic, had settled Dale's nerves a little; but seeing that cop stroll up to the window like that, and then Ronnie, ready to shoot the man in the face, brought it all back hard. He was a fugitive now, running not only from the most ruthless crime boss in the country but from his own brother. The law, too, if the cops got involved. Christ, three dead Asians.

He kept thinking maybe it wasn't too late. He could call Ed, tell him the truth. This wasn't his mess, it was Ronnie's. Maybe—

Ronnie said, "I know what you're thinking."

Trying to get some edge in his tone, Dale said, "You're a mind reader now?"

"You're thinking of calling your brother, am I right? Telling him it was me? You had nothing to do with it?"

"Would I be lying?"

Ronnie said, "*Fuck* those guys, man. This is petty cash to them. Your brother'll get his wrist slapped and life'll go on. Meanwhile we're sipping gin fizzes in Florida sunshine."

Dale glanced at the phone and Ronnie said, "Okay, you want to call him?" She picked up the receiver and held it out to him. "Be my guest. See what he has to say. Better yet, call Copeland. It's his dope, anyway. And you know how forgiving *he* can be." When Dale didn't move, Ronnie set the phone back in its cradle. "You're in this, Dale. Don't kid yourself. You *are* it. Fucking slant, thinks I'm gonna suck his yellow dick. *What* dick? I hate those slippery creeps, think they can have whatever they want." She said, "Did you see the look on his face?" and brayed laughter.

Dale tuned her out. Let her rant.

Traffic got moving again after that, the drive to Parry Sound slow but smooth.

Then, almost without noticing, Dale was driving on center-bare blacktop under a white sky, the moon burning through like a dull beacon, guiding them north.

They stopped for breakfast at an all-night joint along the highway, Ronnie bringing the cash and the drugs inside, bitching about the country music on the radio as she led Dale to a booth by the window. She ordered black coffee, bacon and eggs over hard with white toast and Parisienne home fries and dug in without saying a word.

All Dale could stomach was dry toast and a few sips of apple juice. He'd lost his appetite for food. What he needed now was inside that gym bag. He kept thinking about that first sweet rush when the tourniquet comes off, the warm calm that washes over you like tropical surf, the only true antidote to fear he'd ever found. And he was shit-scared now, more afraid than he'd ever been. Every minute that passed without dealing with this thing was a minute closer to the grave. Until now he'd always been able to turn to his brother when he got in a jam, Ed always coming through for him. But this...this fucking mess didn't *have* a solution. At least not one Dale believed he could survive.

He looked at Ronnie looking at him, then down at her plate as she pushed her fork into a small round potato, spun it in a glob of ketchup then tugged it off with her perfect white teeth, eyes full of dark humor.

Dale thought of Trang screaming and felt his stomach clench, the dry toast congealing into a missile shape inside him, and he stood up fast saying, "Goin' out for a smoke," making it through the door just in time to gulp the cold morning air and keep his meager breakfast where it belonged.

He lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall under the overhang, smoking and watching the dark clouds in the south race to catch up with them.

Ronnie came out a few minutes later with her cargo.

"Pay the bitch," she said, "and let's go."