

SNOW by Mike Bond – Excerpts

“*THIRTY GRAND* a kilo!” Steve tugged a plastic bag of powder from the broken coffin and jumped down from the plane. “What *this*,” he held it up. “is *worth* on the street! And there’s a ton of kilos in these coffins!”

“So *what*?”

“It’s a *fortune*!” Steve stared out at the fading landscape, the white snow almost dark now, the black trees and dark night. “Imagine, if *we* could sell this...”

Zack laughed. “You *nuts*? It’s not even ours.”

“So do we *care*?” Steve nodded at the plane. “These guys are drug dealers. Crooks.”

“What would *we* be, if we took it?”

Steve grinned. “Could make us rich.”

“We’re already rich.” A black scorpion logo, Zack saw, was printed on the bag: A *warning*. The bag was torn on one end and the powder trickling out made him want to cup it in his hands. He glanced up at the glacial peaks, the lofty darkening trees, the hills of deep silent snow, the horizon empty of humans. “What would *we* do with it?”

“*Sell* it!” Steve tipped powder onto the blade of his Buck knife. “Oh *Jesus* this is good.” He sniffed again, head back, inhaled. “Absolutely *pure*.”

“If we take it, then *these* guys,” Zack nodded at the plane, “they come after us.”

“You’re telling me *you* are afraid of some scumbag coke dealers?”

“It’s an added hassle, that’s all.”

Steve smiled at him with affection. “You know, in all my life, all the shit I’ve done, all

that's happened, Lady Coke's done me more good than bad."

"I don't care. Let's get back to camp."

Steve tipped more powder on his knife and held it blade-first to Zack. "Try it."

"Giving it a break for a while. You know that."

"Because Monica told you to?"

"You know she wouldn't."

Steve withdrew the blade. "Never have you had coke like *this*. We're on vacation... don't tell me you don't do it when you're going live."

"Not anymore."

"You, the great white linebacker, and now the handsome TV guy with all the answers – and you're *afraid* of a little snow?" Steve took another hit. "Is *that* why you're losing your edge? Why they're not offering you another season?"

"I didn't say they weren't. I said it was possible. I've got a meeting next week, after we get back..."

"Are you're losing your edge? You're in a wicked business, every instant have to have the right words, the fast talk... Be looking *good*..."

Zack laughed. "I can retire now. I told you."

"You don't want to. Not when the market's this hot." Steve snorted some coke, tipped more on the blade. "Just *try* it. We do this right, we can make so much money you won't need to sell our portfolio."

"It's not *our* portfolio. It's *mine*. Money *I* made breaking bones and pissing blood."

Steve gave him a curious look. "So what's the difference between doing that and selling coke?"

“Maybe nothing.” Zack unsheathed his own knife, with a fingernail scraped dried elk blood from the blade, shook on some powder. “This ain’t so unusual.”

Then it seared into his bones, electrified his muscles, drove pure oxygen deep into his lungs, exploded his vision to infinity. Everything grew clear. He sat on the snow. It felt warm and cradling, fit his body like a glove. He looked out over the vast horizon, the great sweeping white plateaus, the raw black peaks and tree-thick ridges under the near-black sky, and sensed the magnificence of it all.

Jesus life is magical. What a great gift. He smiled at the white plateaus, sharp cliffs and endless forests. *Thank God for this.*

With this God inside him, he could do anything. So what was he afraid for? “Holy shit!”

“Yeah,” Steve chuckled. “*Holy* shit.”

“How much you say?”

“Thirty grand a kilo, Wall Street or Vegas.”

It always amazed Zack how coke instantly hones your judgment and will power. You can do whatever you decide to.

But does it hurt you? He couldn’t tell. *Is it evil, to steal what’s evil? Or is coke even evil? It’s always been good to me.* Or maybe coke hurt one person inside him but helped another. Helped the athlete facing endless pain from so many battered places in his body, helped the TV anchor deal with the endless fraud and hustle. But hurt the other side, the one Monica loved, the one she called *the real you*.

What seemed impossible an hour ago now looked easy. As if you can move the earth with one hand.

True, a century ago lots of folks did coke. It was in every bottle of Coca Cola – how

Coke got its name. It's been the basis of so many medicines that have done so much good – why forbid it?

Funny how so many government prohibitions were not to protect the citizen but rather the powerful interests that could be financially harmed by the item proscribed. Like it's okay to smoke cigarettes that kill half a million Americans a year – the industry even gets government subsidies. But smoking marijuana, which kills no one, is against federal law. How funny. How tragic.

“Is it better to be poor and honest?” Steve grinned, “or rich and crooked?” He hunched into his black parka against the thickening snowfall. “Is coke even crooked? Anyway,” he chuckled, “if it comes down to a choice, I'll take rich and crooked any time.”

Zack laughed. And felt a blade drop between his past and now.

“All I'm saying,” Steve added, “is what if there's a way to do this? Think what we're doing with our lives. You want to spend thirty more years like this? Or do you want to *live*?”

“It's insane. How would we get it out of here?”

Snow began to fall harder, twirling down through the green-black treetops and blotting out the early stars.

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ZACK AND STEVE GOT TO DENVER at 2:12 a.m. and paid cash for a room at the Rawhide Arms Motel on South Santa Fe. In the morning they hid the coke in a storage unit at Maxi Self-Rent on Wadsworth, \$79 a month, first month free.

“We should keep some kilos out,” Steve said.

“What for? So we can get arrested?”

“Maybe we can unload some – I know a guy in New York who has contacts here in Denver. And we need to take some with us when we head to Vegas. Or New York.”

In the shadowy back of the storage unit the pile of scorpion-topped kilos looked insignificant. “Most people put their old clothes and sofas in this place,” Steve said. “And we’re putting in ten million.”

“Like I said, we should split it in half, I take half to Vegas, you take half to New York. We each keep what we get for our half. And then,” Zack smiled, “you pay me back my portfolio you lost.”

BEFORE THEY TURNED in the U-Haul they rented Steve a blue Denali with tinted windows from Nationwide, and Zack a white Pathfinder from Avis, using Zack’s credit card billed to Pigskin Events, a company you could hire to bring football players to your marriage reception, divorce party, birthday, Bar Mitzvah, or anniversary. For tax reasons he’d put the company in an LLC, and, he told Steve, there was no way to trace it to them.

A block after they left Avis Steve pulled into a Burger King lot and came back to Zack’s Pathfinder. “Get out a minute.”

“What for?”

“Just do it.”

Zack got out of the Pathfinder and Steve leaned into the driver seat and tugged a small gray plastic box from under the steering wheel and handed it to him.

“What the hell is this?”

“GPS tracking device. Most rental cars and fleet vehicles have them. They plug into the car’s onboard diagnostic port – the one the dealer uses when you bring the car in for

maintenance. With it the company can track the car in real time, even get a street or satellite view.”

Zack stared at it. “I never knew.”

Steve shrugged. “Now you do.” He went to a trash can and tossed them in. “I don’t think they work when they’re not plugged in, but no need to take chances.”

Zack felt a strange surge of optimism. No reason they couldn’t pull off this deal. Sure, ten million bucks wasn’t a lot, but it was a starting point.

Though you had to split it two ways.

From the lone pay phone outside the motel lobby Steve called Princeton Securities at 33 Liberty Street, three blocks from Wall Street. “Roger,” he said. “I’m in Colorado, and may have a market story for you. Is there anyone here you’d like me to call?”

Roger thought about it. “Is it Colorado-based, or nationwide?”

“Could be nationwide.”

“A big story or a little story?”

“It could go 250 words. You got anybody here might like to see it?”

Roger thought a bit more. “If they are they’ll call you. What’s this number?”

“Hotel pay phone.”

“Go buy a throwaway. Then call me back.”

Steve bought two phones at a Broadway electronics shop and tossed one on the bed beside Zack. “Go call your people.”

Numb with morphine and oxycodone, Zack couldn’t figure what Steve meant, or really who he was, and couldn’t figure why he disliked him.

“DO I HAVE A STORY for you!” Kenny said over his cell phone to Duane McCord, the DEA Field Division Office director in Denver.

“You Montana rednecks’re always full of stories,” Duane said. “What is it now?”

“I may have a couple of amateur coke hustlers coming your way.” Kenny smiled, thinking of the two dudes and what would happen to them when Duane got them. “They took maybe two hundred kilos from a crashed plane and stole my cousin’s husband’s red Ford 250, plate 6Z9851F –”

“Damn!”

“– and wrecked a packhorse and caused all kinds of other commotion. So we want them.”

“How they get your cousin’s truck?”

“My *cousin’s* husband. He was guiding them up in the Buffalo Horns north of Yellowstone.”

“I know where the Buffalo Horns is.” Duane swung his cowboy boots off his desk and started taking notes. “You’re not making this up?”

“Hell no I’m not making this up.”

“If it didn’t sound so unreal I wouldn’t believe it.”

“Our forensics guy’s found cocaine traces in what’s left of the plane. Kilos in what seemed to be two coffins, best we can tell –”

“A metaphor,” Duane chuckled, “to remind us that coke kills.”

“And a couple of plastic kilo wrappers that blew out of the plane when it burned. They’ve got a black scorpion logo on the top. Anyway, we think the whole damn plane was full of cocaine.”

“So maybe it all burned.”

“No, these guys seem to have moved it down to Highway 191, the road from Bozeman to West Yellowstone –”

“I do know about 191, Kenny. Have you traced the plane?”

“Bonanza G36, no markings, no numbers. A coke truck.”

“Who are these guys?”

“One’s from New York, some kind of Wall Street investor, the other’s from LA, used to play linebacker for the Broncos, now a TV guy.”

“Zack Wilson?”

“You said it.”

“And he’s shipping *cocaine*?”

“Seems like it.”

“Well I’ll be...” Duane chuckled. “We got a special place for guys like that.”

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IT TOOK STEVE twenty minutes to get from Wagner’s Warfare Heaven to the Fountain exit, where he called the number Radar had given him. A woman answered. “You have GPS on your car?”

“I have a map.”

“Go to 6995 Hermito.”

“Okay, but what’s there?” he asked but she was gone.

He followed the main street east across a dark river through the town which looked like an old movie set, past new subdivisions, more roads, then rolling snow-dusted prairies.

Hermito was easy to find, an old road wandering east between rusty barbed wire and

lichen-gray fence posts, here and there a ranch house, big barns and huge round white-wrapped hay bales stacked in muddy piles.

6995 Hermito sat close to the road, a pale green aluminum-sided shop building with four vehicle bays and a steel-barred office door and picture window. The lights were on and a black Mercedes and a blue Toyota TRD pickup sat out front, new snow atop them. Steve wished Zack were here, wished *he* weren't here, and pulled into the parking lot.

But Roger in New York had said it was okay. So it couldn't be bad. Couldn't be dangerous. How many years had he known him?

He realized he didn't really know Roger at all but let that pass, wondered should he pocket the Beretta and decided no, got out of the Denali and flicked the lock, shuffled his shoulders into his black North Face jacket and reached between the steel bars to knock on the office's icy glass door.

He waited, knocked again. A face at the door, a tall skinny blonde with a sharp mouth, very pretty in a cold way, dressed in a thin pink silk blouse and short black skirt. "Come on in," she smiled, holding the door wide in false welcome, as if she were a high-priced hooker and he her new john. "Tony wants to see you."

"Tony?"

She smiled sweetly. "The man you talked to."

"His name was Radar."

"Hey, get over it." She danced down the hallway ahead of him, skirt swirling, opened the double doors and called, "He's here."

A swarthy man, a little hunched as if from an old wound, in his fifties maybe, gray-haired but ominous, a cold black light in his eyes. "Come, sit down," he waved at a low table of dark

wood and leather. “So, you have something to show me.”

“I spoke with my friend in New York –”

“No, no, no,” the man waved an admonitory finger. “No such talk.”

“Right.” Steve sat back. “So?”

Tony chuckled, sat back. “Please, show us your stuff.”

Steve tugged a vial from his North Face jacket. “Check it out.”

Tony laid a line on the polished mahogany table and sucked it up with a silver tube from his pocket. He sniffed, looked out the window, faraway. He tucked the silver tube back in his pocket. “Okay. You have how much of this?”

“How much can you take?”

“We can go ten keys, maybe fifteen.”

“They’re not cheap.”

“They never are. We can do twenty-five.”

“Twenty-five grand a kilo? Are you nuts?”

Tony tut-tutted. “That’s very rude, you know, Mr....?” He cocked an ear. “What was the name again?”

“How many you want, now?” This was brazen and stupid but Steve did it anyway. Had to get out of here. *Do the deal and run*. Roger’d said this guy was safe.

“You are deaf? You did not hear? I said maybe fifteen keys, at twenty-five thousand dollars each. That is three hundred seventy-five thousand dollars, no? Not bad for an evening’s work.”

Steve tucked the vial back in his pocket. “I’m sorry, I was told to get thirty a kilo... It’s not up to me to decide...”

Tony glanced at Emerald. “You like her, this girl? We make a deal, you can have her tonight. Extra bonus.”

Steve imagined this, thought of Marcie. “I’m not here to get laid. I’m here to make a deal.”

“You will never get laid better than Emerald. Not in your whole life.”

The girl was there, at his elbow. Tall and statuesque and totally without kindness. It would be like screwing the cold depths of Hell – how could you not want to?

She handed him a brandy glass and gave Tony another. “Azteca de Oro, 1999. Back when everything was always going to get better.”

He could see her breast through the cleavage of her pink silk blouse. Small and perfectly curved, soft-nippled. How lovely to feel that against his chest.

He waited till Tony drank his glass then drank his down, the ceiling bulb a rainbowed aura in the upturned bottom of the glass, imagined the silky place between her thighs and everything went dark. He couldn’t breathe, knew he should care but couldn’t.

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DIEGO GOT THE NEWS from María Christina that “our Harvard Stevie”, as she called him, had been arrested at Newark.

Diego had never gone to Harvard. And was happy for it. Grew up till he was seven in the Basurero, the City of the Dump – Mexico City’s vast ordure mountains where two million people live in tunnels burrowed into the festering trash. And survive on what they can dig out of it to eat or sell.

He was sometimes successful in not thinking about it.

“Where they going to put him?” he said, calculating how to make the hit if Harvard Stevie was in jail. How to get their stuff back.

“By the time we found out he’d posted bail.”

“So he’ll go home, no?”

“Seems he did.”

“We should cover his place.”

“We have.”

Of course. María Christina never let anything slip through her hands. Tall, big-footed and stunning in an angular way, with slender breasts Diego longed to kiss, she was a tangled tawny blonde capable of great kindness and fiery wrath, and he loved and feared her with the same deep emotion.

As Diego saw it, María Christina might only be the daughter of El Trapero, the Ragman, but El Trapero was rich and dangerous, and she even richer and more dangerous than he. And it was El Trapero who had saved Diego from the Mexico City dump.

So there was nothing he would not do for her. Yet in his heart he feared he might somehow displease her without knowing. To him she was often kind, almost affectionate. Which made him love her even more. And determined to care for and protect her.

He had learned all he could about her. That she, like this guy Steve, had gone to Harvard. But whereas Steve had simply blundered through, all C’s and D’s, a rich man’s son, María Christina had been Phi Beta Kappa, had gone on to a Yale MBA and returned to Miami to convert her father’s cocaine wealth into an all-American empire of strip malls, housing developments, race tracks, chain restaurants and casinos.

Though the Ragman had grown up in the Mexico City dump, his family compound was

now on the richest street in America, Indian Creek Island Road, on an island off Miami. Diego had been there once, waited his turn through the mob of security guards till María Christina herself came to fetch him in a green Maserati. The house big as the government palace in Mexico City, right on the gleaming blue-green water, her white yacht anchored offshore. A 250-acre island with an 18-hole golf club and only 30 homes, where eighty of America's richest people lived.

She was thirty-one, four years older than he. Still not married. Sometimes in black nights he imagined doing some impossibly heroic deed to save her, and she would fall in love with him. When a squad of killers surrounds the mansion he takes them down, one by one. He is wounded and she cares for him, heals him, learns who he really is.

But who am I, really? he wondered.

Although she was worth hundreds of millions of dollars, nothing enraged María Christina more than losing money. Even a tiny ten million in cocaine. She'd be like a hand grenade, ready to take everyone down unless the thieves were killed. And her property returned to her.

Whatever it took, Diego would make it happen.

Maybe someday she *could* love him.

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THE WALDORF ASTORIA had always been for Steve a personal place, one everyone knows about but few know, where every US President since Hoover has stayed, where many other politicians have lived or visited, sometimes for an hour or so with a young lady, sometimes for a campaign tour, sometimes just to stay in the city for a few days, see some shows and do a deal or two. A grand old tower reeking of judicious wealth and conservative ostentation, 1930s

art deco design, and unpublicized meetings where railroad barons, bankers, politicians and others of that ilk bought and sold the future of the nation.

Steve felt at home here. When he was little his Dad brought him here for a root beer after a trip to the top of Rockefeller Center or the Empire State Building or a wander in Central Park, and Steve, already a young gentleman, reveled in it in his own understated way.

Now here he was again. With a teaspoon of cocaine in a yellow plastic vial in his pocket. Checking emails on his phone in a quiet booth at the back of the bar, all gloss and dark leather, where prosperous young men took their dates to impress them, and tired older gentlemen kept in touch with each other and arranged things how they wanted.

Ibrahim Al Kahtani slipped into the seat across from him, just another investment banker in an expensive suit, a fund manager maybe, call it what you want. In Manhattan you could never have enough money, and you got it however you could.

Ibrahim ordered a Lagavulin and stared out the window where fat flakes of dirty snow tumbled out of the gray sky, glanced at a girl walking by, wiped a napkin at the damp spot on the table where his glass had sat. Steve took the orange pharmacy vial from his suit pocket and handed it to him. With a smile Ibrahim took it in his lap, popped the cover, licked his finger and dipped it in the vial, ran it under his nose, rubbed it on his gums.

“Holy shit.” he leaned back, eyes on the ceiling.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

Ibrahim sipped his Lagavulin reflectively. “So you really *have* this stuff?”

Steve chuckled, a little forced. “Have I ever lied to you?”

Ibrahim shrugged. “Probably many times. I don’t remember.”

“I haven’t. And I’m not lying now. Question is, how much you want?”

For a while Ibrahim didn't speak. "If it's all like this —"

"Never will you find shit like this. Not ever again..."

"Okay okay." Ibrahim waved a hand. "As you know, there's an endless market downtown. Endless." He sipped more Lagavulin, inhaling its ether up his nose, across his sinuses, into his brain. "We both know this."

"I've got other options. Came to you first."

Ibrahim grinned. "So you *do* lie to me."

"Who was it said, *Everything I say is a lie?*"

"The liar's paradox. Some Greek, long ago." Ibrahim turned up his nose, the ancient Arab disdain for Greeks. "We work on the basis of a purchase option. You bring it to me, I check it out. If it's what you say it is, I'll take three."

"Three kilos?" Steve sat back, trying to keep the hardness out of his voice. "For all this hassle and all you want is *three* kilos?"

"No no, you silly infidel," Ibrahim smiled. "Three million *dollars*. 120 kilos."

"I'll sell it in DC before that."

"Look, look, you know what it's worth on the street. You want to stand on a corner on Wall Street, little sign around your neck, *Buy your coke here?*"

Steve snickered, wanting some now.

"Look," Ibrahim said again. "If it's this good, I'll give you top dollar, which as you know is twenty-five grand a key... because if it's all this good I can share it out for top dollar." He shrugged his shoulders, tugged his collar up around his neck. "We got a purchase option going. We know each other. We don't back out."

"I'll want the funds wired simultaneously..."

“Okay okay no problem. You bring me the stuff, I do the wire.” He tossed off his Lagavulin, stood. “I’ll have bulletproof backup. You should too.”

Steve looked up at him, refusing to rise and shake hands. “Three days.”

“Three days.” Ibrahim went out the door into the falling snow.

Steve stood, feeling tired and old, fear like acid reflux in his gut. Bulletproof backup – where was he going to find that?