

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27, 1989

Stepping off the Number 66 bus in the Allston neighborhood of Boston, Kenneth felt a prickling on the back of his neck, a feeling of being watched. It wasn't, like, threatening, though, more like, *interesting*, he thought as his grin spread into the wide, cheek-burning smile that first hit of cocaine always delivered.

The spitting rain started to turn to sleet, and Kenneth broke into the loping jog he'd learned in his time in the Army Signal Corps. Only now, years later, he was woefully out of shape, knees twinging and breath short, the result of piles of coke, countless joints, and a lot of shitty luck.

He opened his apartment door, wheezing and buzzing, still smiling, thinking about a cigarette. Then he felt a strong hand on his back, pushing him inside.

He wheeled to face a hulking man who filled out a Bruins jersey without hockey pads. "Hey man, be cool," Kenneth said, slightly disoriented but working to settle into his professional pose.

He fished a creased packet of Newports from the pocket of his damp field jacket and shook one out, his long fingers straightening the slight kink in the cigarette, stroking it until it was just right. He lit it and drew in the smoke, the nicotine and menthol on top of the coke brightening the room and focusing his attention back to the guy standing in front of him, arms crossed.

Kenneth exhaled the smoke. "You looking to score, man? I mean, it's cool if you are. Like, that's my thing. I've got some good stuff on me, and I can say with tremendous certainty . . ." He really liked the word "tremendous." "*Tremendous* certainty that it will wind you up tight!" he said, punctuating his words with his arm raised, the cigarette pointed at the ceiling.

Clients adored Kenneth. Thought he was fun, often sharing coke they'd just bought from him while they got high together. That wasn't this guy's vibe, but it was all good. Kenneth always delivered outstanding customer service.

"You into something else? I can get other stuff. A few calls, that's all. I am connected as hell. What you need?"

"For you to do the job you're gettin' paid for," the man said. Kenneth's wide smile dimmed. Was the dude about to jack him? The uncertain feeling he had as he got off the bus might have been right after all. This wasn't a customer. This was something else.

Actually, *fuck*, this was that other thing.

He lit another cigarette from the first one. The room brightened again, though not quite as much as before. Still, the action of lighting and inhaling gave him a moment to try to focus.

The man was pacing the apartment in silence, picking up the rotary desk phone on the milk crate next to Kenneth's futon, hefting it, evaluating it, before putting it down. Stopping in front of Kenneth's computer, the man stabbed two blunt fingers down on random keys, the loud keyclicks the only sound other than Kenneth's blood rushing in his ears.

He'd run into tricky situations before, and he'd always come to an understanding, everybody cool. Sometimes you just had to smooth the waters, that was all.

"Look man, like I told the professor dude, I'm a pro here. This is serious business. And the money he's paying ain't cutting it. Cops are going after people for this stuff now. Feds too. It's, like, all over the news. Plus," Kenneth leaned back against the kitchen counter, took another long drag on his cigarette, spread his hands, and summoned his most winning smile. "I've got a lifestyle to maintain here."

Kenneth paused, preparing to tell it like it was. The truth of the matter was that the professor was too anxious, too needy, which told Kenneth that he wasn't charging enough. After all, he was a business- man, right?

"It's the principle of the thing, you know?" Kenneth said. "You want people to respect your work. You understand respect, am I right? Yeah, of course you do. People look at you and see you're a serious dude. Same here. I mean I'm really good at what I do. I just need a little more respect, a little more cash, and it will all be cool."

The guy stood still, as if waiting for something, while Kenneth was thinking of another cigarette, and another bump once he got this guy out of here. He'd burned too much of his high already on adrenaline. This dude was cramping his style and his space.

"So, we're good right?" Kenneth said as he put his hand on the man's upper arm to gently nudge him toward the door.

Instead, the man grabbed Kenneth by his shirt, lifted him completely off the floor and hurled him backward. Taken off guard, Kenneth flew into the cheap kitchen cabinets, then dropped, cracking his head on the sharp corner of the Formica counter, breaking his fall and apparently his skull as he slid down the cabinet wall, eyes glazed, unmoving.

The other man checked Kenneth's pulse. Nothing. He rifled through Kenneth's pockets and found the large bag of cocaine. He scanned the apartment, identifying the only other thing of obvious value: the Compaq computer tower. He unhooked the cables and phone line from the back and hefted it under his arm. He closed the apartment door behind him, then planted a booted kick next to the lockset. The door splintered and swung open, making it look like a break-in.

That would have to do.