



Mark Dalton — SmartDriver 3

On Ice

A FleetSmart Novel by Edo van Belkom

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PROLOGUE

The black Freightliner rumbled down the Trans Canada as the first staccato notes of a Tom Jones song cut through the cab like stabs of a knife. A moment later a hand reached for the volume knob and turned the music up — way up — until the velvet voice of Tom Jones blared from the speakers. He was singing about a woman named Delilah and how she'd betrayed him with another man. It was one of the driver's favourite songs for all kinds of reasons, but mainly because of the part where she stood there laughing, but only til he felt the knife in his hand . . . then she laughed no more.

He'd been in that situation plenty of times before, just not with a woman. He'd never gotten involved with a woman long enough to let her do something like that to him — 'cause he knew they eventually would — no matter how many times they told you they loved you. No, he'd been in situations like that with other people, most of them men who didn't pay their bills or who got greedy with other people's money or who roughed up the wrong person. A lot of those people thought it was funny when he showed up at their door or where they worked or suddenly appeared in the back of their car. But then he'd break their leg, knock loose a couple of teeth, choke them to within an inch of their life, or just show them the butt of a gun . . . and then they got serious pretty quick.

Ole Tom was just about to sing another verse when the driver's cell phone rang. He turned down the volume on the truck's stereo, then pressed the "talk" button on his phone.

"You there?" said the voice on the phone.

"Yeah."

"This a friend of Mr. Bruno Scorcese . . ."

The driver sat upright in his seat and tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"Mr. Scorcese has a problem with someone named Mark Dalton. He's a truck driver, like you."

The driver nodded, listening intently.

“He drives a green Peterbilt 379 named *Mother Load*. Right now he’s in Alberta, heading east on the Trans Canada. This man Dalton has already caused Mr. Scorsese and his friends a lot of trouble, and now there’s a court thing to worry about.”

“Court doesn’t sound good.”

“Exactly. That’s why we all feel it would be better if we didn’t have to worry about this guy no more, or the kid he’s riding with . . . name of Jimmy or Joey or something like that.”

“Mark and Jimmy. Got it.”

“We think that since he’s driving a truck, there are a lot of bad things that could happen to him, you know . . . like on the highway or on the side of the road – maybe even inside his truck. But I don’t have to tell you, of all people, how dangerous your job can be. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“Good.” A pause. “Now, although this would be a favour to Mr. Scorsese, I’ll remind you that he’s very generous when it comes to repaying favours.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Does this sound like something you might want to do . . . for a friend?”

“Of course it is,” he said quickly, having known from the moment he got the call that he would do whatever was asked of him. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for a friend like Mr. Scorsese.”

“Excellent! I’ll let Mr. Scorsese know,” said the voice, then the phone disconnected.

The driver pressed the off button of his phone, then reached for the volume knob again. He turned it up, but his MP3 player had already cycled onto the next song. A couple of taps on the back arrows and the familiar notes of the Tom Jones song were slashing through the cab once more.

The driver began to sing along as he looked for an exit that could get him turned around and headed east . . .

On the hunt for a green Peterbilt and its driver, Mark Dalton.

CHAPTER 1



The Trans Canada through Alberta was a slow, boring drive, but Mark wasn't complaining. He'd had a bellyful of adventure these past few days, so a few thousand kilometres of quiet and uneventful driving across the country was just what the doctor ordered.

They had already been this way once before, but a breakdown on *Mother Load* and an offer of top money for an easy trip south into the United States quickly turned into a hellish ordeal that kept going from bad to worse, eventually involving smuggling drugs and guns over the United States/Canada border, going undercover and wearing a wire for both the RCMP and the Canadian Border Services Agency, and nearly getting killed by a crime lord who had since vowed to make Mark and Jimmy pay for putting him behind bars.

It was enough excitement to last a lifetime, but for some reason Mark had a feeling it wasn't over yet. They'd gotten out of British Columbia too easily, and there hadn't been a single problem all the way through Alberta. It was as if things were going too well for them to last.

"You trying to save fuel," Jimmy asked, leaning over to see the speedometer in front of Mark.

"No, why?" Mark said, wondering if Jimmy noticed something wrong with the truck.

"You're driving so slow . . . or at least slower than usual."

Mark smiled. "I'm driving slower because there's always something waiting for me down the road. If I drive faster, it'll just find me sooner rather than later, and I just want to take it easy for a while, you know."

Jimmy nodded. "I'm with you on that," he said. "If nothing happens between here and New Brunswick, I'll be happy."

Just then Mark noticed a flashing light atop some sort of enforcement vehicle flickering in his side mirror. "I knew it couldn't last."

"What's wrong?"

"Take a look!"

Jimmy looked in the mirror and shook his head. "It can't be for us," he said. "It's gotta be for someone else, someone up ahead. I bet if you slow down, he'll go right by you."

Mark eased up on the pedal and *Mother Load* slowed slightly. The flashing lights grew larger in their mirrors . . . but did not pass them by.

"He's still back there," Mark said.

"Maybe it is for us." There was a defeated tone in Jimmy's voice. "But why? What did we do to get pulled over?"

What indeed, thought Mark. They'd passed through a couple of weigh scales since Vancouver, and each time they'd been well within the limits. They hadn't been speeding, or going slow enough to warrant being pulled over.

The flashing lights were directly behind them now and the patrol car looked as if it had no intention of passing them. Then the car's headlights flickered, leaving no doubt that the driver wanted them to pull over onto the side of the road.

"It's for us, isn't it?" Jimmy said, his voice somehow even more dejected than before.

"Yup," Mark said, gearing down slowly so the stop would be easier on his engine.

"What do you think they want?" Jimmy asked.

Mark shook his head. He was on the shoulder now and gliding to a stop. "I haven't got a clue."

He left the truck in neutral and set the parking brake, letting the truck continue to idle to ensure a proper cool down.

Both Mark and Jimmy stared into Mark's side mirror, waiting for someone to emerge from the car. It took more than a minute, but eventually an officer got out.

"That's not RCMP," Jimmy said.

"No, it's Alberta Department of Transport, probably commercial vehicle enforcement."

"Then it's got to do with the truck, right?"

"Most likely, yeah."

The officer appeared by Mark's window. He rolled it down and the man stepped up onto the side of the rig. "You Mark Dalton?" he asked.

"Yes, I am, officer. Is something wrong?"

The officer shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know. We were just asked to keep an eye out for you by the RCMP."

"The RCMP? What do they want with me?"

"Like I said, I don't know." The officer smiled. "But I would appreciate it if you get off at the next exit and follow me back to the last weigh scales."

"You're asking me?"

"That's right."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, then I'd have to go over this truck with a toothbrush and a pair of tweezers until the RCMP gets here . . . bad mood and everything."

"Right, then. We'll be doubling back."

"Appreciate it," the officer said, then was gone.

"What does the RCMP want with us?"

"I don't know," Mark said. "But it can't be good."

He'd been driving recklessly fast, swerving left and right in his lane while he desperately searched the roadway ahead for a green Peterbilt . . . or any green truck for that matter.

But what first grabbed his attention were the flashing lights of a Department of Transportation car ahead in the distance. It was pulled over behind a rig, obviously conducting some sort of traffic stop on the side of the highway.

He slowed and steadied his hands on the wheel as he approached the emergency vehicle. The last thing he wanted was to attract attention by driving too quickly or swerving across the lanes. As he neared, he noticed the colour of the rig was green, the very colour he'd been searching for all morning. What's more, the outline of the tractor was unmistakably that of a Peterbilt 379.

And then as he passed the scene, he read the name painted on the back of the Peterbilt between a set of quotation marks — "*Mother Load*."

"Mother . . ." he said, not believing his luck.

He slowed further. Then, realizing he was down to less than 50 kilometres per hour, downshifted two gears and pressed hard on the accelerator.

He couldn't stop now. That would be a little too obvious.

Instead he would pull off up ahead and wait for the Peterbilt to catch up. Then he would follow it for a day, a week, as long as it took for him to get his chance.

CHAPTER 2



“You didn’t steal anything back in British Columbia, did you?” Mark asked.

“What?” Jimmy said. “No, of course not. Why would you even ask that?”

“I’m just trying to figure out why the RCMP would want us to turn around and come back.”

“Maybe you hit something while you were driving and didn’t even know it . . . and now they want to charge you with a hit and run.”

Mark didn’t respond to that. It was possible, especially if he was unaware of the accident, but unlikely for a driver of his age and experience. “Whatever it is, it has to do with *us*, not our load.”

“But we’ve been good these past few days. We even helped the police.”

Mark continued his train of thought. “And it’s something important, something that they couldn’t just talk to us on the phone about.”

Jimmy sighed. “You’ve got me worried now.”

“Good!” Mark said. “Why should I have all the grief?”

They drove three more kilometres before coming upon an exit that had a bridge they could use to double back west. There was a full-service truck stop at the crossroad but even though Mark was pretty hungry, he couldn’t stop if he wanted to. Even if he could stop, he was too curious about what the police wanted to waste time eating. He looked over at Jimmy. “You want something to eat?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Find something in back,” Mark said. “We can’t stop.”

“Then why’d you ask me?”

“Just trying to be nice. I didn’t think you’d say yes.”

Jimmy was silent, obviously thinking. “Now that you mention it, I’m really not all that hungry.”

Mark drove over the bridge and turned *Mother Load* onto the on-ramp heading west.

Back on the highway, he checked his speed and made sure he was doing 90 kilometres per hour.

Jimmy must have noticed the reduction in speed because he leaned over, looked at the speedometer and said, “I thought you were in a hurry to get there.”

“No, I want to know what the RCMP wants with us, but I’m not going to waste fuel just to find out five minutes sooner.”

Jimmy chuckled, knowing like Mark did that going just 10 kilometres under the speed limit translated into a fuel reduction of 10 percent. A small amount in the short term, but adding up to thousands of dollars in fuel savings over the course of a year.

“It’s bad enough we’re doubling back and putting extra kilometres onto this load. The least I can do is slow down and save fuel while I’m wasting it.”

Jimmy just looked at Mark.

“Am I confusing you?”

“No, that makes sense. I’m just amazed at how fuel-conscious you’ve become since I started riding with you.”

Mark set the cruise control at 90 and took his foot off the accelerator. “I’m an old dog,” he said. “But I’m not so old that I can’t learn a few new tricks.”

Mark pulled into the weigh station 20 minutes later and parked his rig well away from the rest of the trucks in the lot in case someone wanted to do a full inspection of his tractor and trailer.

After setting the brake, Mark let the truck idle for a minute while he checked his engine temperature. The truck had been driven long enough at slower speeds as he got off the highway to cool the engine down sufficiently to allow the engine to be turned off.

He turned the key and let the Cummins die.

“Now,” Mark said after the engine had rattled to a halt, and the cab was eerily quiet. “Let’s see what this is all about.”

Mark and Jimmy got out of the truck and headed across the parking lot toward the coop that was situated at one end. In addition to several rigs and a couple of department of transportation vehicles, there were two RCMP cruisers in the lot, their officers no doubt here to see Mark and Jimmy. Before they were even halfway there, the entrance door opened to reveal a Department of Transportation officer standing in the doorway. He waited until Mark and Jimmy were in earshot, then said. “Follow me. They’re waiting for you.”

Mark and Jimmy entered the building, then followed the officer down a short hallway into a meeting room. There was a table in the centre of it and enough chairs for ten. Two of the chairs were taken up by uniformed RCMP officers, another was filled by an RCMP officer in a suit and tie. There was a Department of Transportation supervisor in the room, but as soon as Mark and Jimmy stepped inside the room, the officer in plain clothes got up and said to the DOT guys, “Thanks for your help and that of your department. I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but we need to speak to them . . . in private.”

The supervisor got up from his chair with a relieved look on his face. “No worries,” he said. “Not offended at all. This sounds like nothing I need to be involved with anyway.”

“Thanks again,” the RCMP suit said, closing the door as the DOT officers left the room. Then he turned his attention to Mark and Jimmy. “Mr. Dalton,” he said, shaking hands. “Jimmy.”

“What are we doing here?” Mark asked.

The man smiled. “I don’t blame you for being upset, Mr. Dalton, but I ask that you hear me out first. If you have any

questions when I'm done, we'll be more than happy to answer them."

Mark sighed, took a seat. "Call me Mark."

"All right, Mark. I'm Sergeant Griffiths, and these two are officers Wright and Duchene."

Mark nodded at each of them in turn.

"We got you off the road and brought you here for your own safety."

"What?"

"A little patience, Mark, and I'll explain everything."

Mark got comfortable in his chair. Jimmy followed suit.

"Before I say anything else, I just want to confirm that you are willing and fully intending to testify at the trial of Mr. Bruno Scorsese."

"Is that what this is about?" Mark could feel a hard uncomfortable lump of nervous tension drop into the pit of his stomach. "I already told your guys in B.C. that I'd testify at the trial. Don't you talk to each other, or at least text—"

"I'm just confirming," Sergeant Griffiths said. "From what I'm told, it should be an easy case to win. But even though we caught Scorsese red-handed, your testimony would turn a very solid case into a slam dunk. In fact, just your testimony at the preliminary hearing might be enough to get Scorsese to plead guilty beforehand, preventing the case from even going to trial."

"Okay," Mark said, drawing out the word, unsure where this was going.

"If you don't testify, Scorsese could have an outside chance of being acquitted."

"But I am going to testify."

"Right, but if you couldn't because you were, say . . . dead, then Scorsese could possibly get off."

The lump in Mark's stomach suddenly felt like a boulder.

Jimmy was probably going through the same thing because he leaned forward and slapped a hand over his mouth. “I think I’m going to be sick!” he said.

“You’re telling me Scorsese wants me dead?”

“He’s already put the hit out on you.” The sergeant looked at Jimmy. “Both of you.”

“Where’s the bathroom?”

The sergeant nodded to one of the officers, who grabbed Jimmy by the arm and led him out of the room.

“How do you know that?” Mark asked.

“I can’t tell you how. All I will say is the RCMP is the largest police force in the country. As well as having the most officers, we also have the largest number of confidential informants.”

Mark nodded. A hot tip, he thought, just like in the movies.

“We don’t know who’s going to make the hit, when it will happen or how, but we do know for a fact that a contract has been placed on your and Jimmy’s heads.”

Jimmy came back into the room then, his face the color of fireplace ashes.

“We also know that if you continue heading east on the Trans Canada, it would only be a matter of time before you were found and killed.”

“That’s a harsh word, *killed*,” said Jimmy.

“Would you have preferred *murdered*?”

Jimmy said nothing.

Mark had taken the moment to think. “It’s a big country, a long highway. I can probably blend in and get lost on it.”

“Maybe in the heart of Toronto or Montréal, but not in this part of the country. All it would take is a couple of men stationed in Manitoba or northern Ontario. They’d pick you up as you entered the province, and then it would just be a question of where the best place to kill you would be.”

Mark wanted to protest, but he knew that the man was right. Sure, there were plenty of secondary and back roads, but with one major highway spanning the country, it was only a matter of time before he had to take it to get where he wanted to go. Besides, taking back roads would be like hiding from trouble — not to mention wasting fuel — and Mark wasn't about to do either of those things.

“Just to give you an idea how easy it would be to find you on the Trans Canada . . . we just put out the word that we were looking for you this morning.”

“All right, I'm convinced,” Mark said. “Scorcese wants me dead. What am I supposed to do now?”

“We do have a plan.”

“Oh yeah, what is it?”

“We think you'll be safest heading north.”

The room was quiet as Mark considered it. “How far north?”

“The Northwest Territories. North of Yellowknife.”

Mark's eyes narrowed. “I didn't even know there were roads up there.”

“There aren't really, not in the summer months, the warmer months. But there are roads there now . . . on the ice.”

“Like on television?”

The sergeant leaned over the table closer to Mark. “There's nobody on those roads except for truckers and the odd tourist, but everyone has to pass through a security checkpoint, so it's probably one of the safest roads to drive on in the country.”

“Over water?” Mark scoffed. “The safest?”

“There's six weeks left to the ice road season. You go up there and disappear for a while. You make a bunch of money driving the ice roads, and when the season's over you appear out of nowhere . . . just in time for Scorcese's preliminary hearing.”

“Just like that,” Mark said, already accepting the fact that driving on frozen lakes was better than being dead.

“Just like that.”

Mark said nothing for several moments before letting out a long, long sigh.

The colour, not to mention an ear-to-ear grin, was back on Jimmy’s face. “Woo-hoo!” he shouted, pumping a fist in the air. “We’re gonna be ice road warriors!”

Outside, on the Trans Canada heading west, a black Freightliner glided through the scales, its driver’s eyes fixed on the green Peterbilt parked in the lot.

“Where the hell is this guy going?” he said under his breath.

CHAPTER 3



Mark and Jimmy spent another half-hour with the RCMP, making sure they had all the contact information he'd need for the trip north, including the name and number of Constable Graham, the RCMP officer who would be handling his case out of Yellowknife.

"So what am I supposed to do, just drive up there and ask for a job?"

"Basically, yes," Sergeant Griffiths said. "We put in some calls yesterday and since the weather's been so good, there are several companies looking for experienced drivers."

"The weather's been good," Mark echoed. "Just how cold is it up there this time of year?"

"I checked this morning," said the sergeant. "It was somewhere around -30."

"Celsius?"

"Yeah, it's really good weather for the roads."

"That's comforting."

"The trucks have been running full loads for a couple of weeks now, and they need as many trucks as they can get while the weather holds."

"That's good to know."

"Minus 30's nothing," Jimmy said. "It can go down to -40 easy. And it's gone to, like -70 . . . but if it gets that cold they stop working because everything freezes. At that temperature, even steel gets too cold and cracks."

Mark glared at Jimmy. "You're not helping."

"Sorry."

Mark kept his eyes locked on Jimmy. "How do you know so much about what it's like up there, anyway?"

"Television," he said. "Ice Road Truckers' is my favourite show. Seen every one of them. Even read up on the ice roads on the Internet . . ."

Mark turned to look at the officer once more.

"It's a dry cold," the sergeant said. "As long as you're dressed right, and your truck's in good working order, there shouldn't be a problem."

Mother Load, Mark thought. Sure, he'd driven her in cold weather before, but this would be hard driving for extended periods of time in extreme cold. He was going to have to get her thoroughly checked out, maybe even have some things upgraded, before he went anywhere. "We better get going," he said.

Jimmy snickered. "It's not getting any warmer up there."

Mark just shook his head and got up to leave.

When they reached *Mother Load*, Mark told Jimmy to do a quick circle check of the rig while he made a phone call.

He dialed the number and waited.

"Hello?"

"Bud, this is Mark."

"Mark who?"

"Marksicle, the soon to be frozen truck driver."

"Very funny," Bud said. "But it's not that cold in Alberta this time of year."

"No, but it is in the Northwest Territories."

"The Territories? Who's driving up there?"

"I am," Mark said.

“You can’t go north, you’ve got a load headed east to Toronto. Not only that, but my sister’s bugging me about when she’s going to see her son again.”

“It’s going to be a while,” Mark said.

Jimmy jumped into the cab then. “All good!”

Mark nodded and started up *Mother Load*. Then he switched the phone to speaker mode and set it on the center console.

“Why?” Bud said. “What’s going on?”

“Here’s the deal,” Mark said, explaining everything from the moment they were pulled over by the Alberta Department of Transportation, til now.

At the end of it all, Bud laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Mark said through gritted teeth.

“Everybody in the business wants contracts. You got one out on you, and you’re complaining.”

“Bud, this is no joke. Right now, this very second, there’s someone out there who is trying to figure out a way to kill me . . . and your nephew.”

Bud said nothing for a few moments. Then, “There’s a contract out on Jimmy, too.”

Mark shook his head as if to say, “Duh?”

“I was there with him, Uncle Bud,” Jimmy interjected. “I’ll be testifying too.”

“Right.” Bud was all business now. “What do you need from me?”

“Somebody to take my load the rest of the way to Toronto.”

“Okay, leave it there with all the paperwork, and I’ll have someone pick it up for you.”

“And somebody to drive for up north would be nice?”

“They left that up to you, did they?”

“Yeah, you know anybody there?”

“I think so,” Bud said. “A guy I used to drive for is a partner in a trucking company in Yellowknife called NWTT.”

“What’s that stand for?”

“Northwest Territories Transfer.”

“Nice,” Mark said. “You ever work up there?”

“One season.”

“No kidding. You never told me.”

“There’s lots of things I never told you, just like I’m sure there’s a bunch of things you’ve kept secret from me.”

Mark silently nodded. More than a bunch, he thought.

“What’s it like up there?” Jimmy asked.

Without hesitation, Bud said, “They’re all about safety. It’s more important to deliver your load in one piece and without an incident than it is to get it there quickly. You watch all those things you’re supposed to pay attention to, like your log book, and your speed, and circle checks and all the little things that you take for granted when the sun is shining and the weather’s warm, and you’ll be okay. You do things in a hurry, cut corners, or think you know better, and you’ll be in trouble so fast you’ll wonder how you got there.”

“Safety first,” Mark said. “I got it.”

“Yeah, and there are a bunch of other things you’ve got to get before you can drive up there. I think I’ve still got my list here somewhere . . .”

“What if I don’t have them?”

“Then you don’t drive.”

“Oh.”

“You got a pen?”

“Jimmy does.”

Bud began reading out the list. “APU, tire chains . . .”

Jimmy wrote them all down.

“I’ve got most of that stuff already,” Mark said.

“You’ve got to have it all. They’ll check.”

“Okay, okay, if I don’t have it, I’ll get it.”

“Heh,” Bud laughed. “You can say you’ll get it, but you won’t really get it until you’ve done a few runs over the ice.”

“Can’t wait,” Mark said, hoping the sarcasm was evident in his voice.

“It’s lonely, dangerous driving, but between the two of you, there shouldn’t be any problems. The ice road and the people working on it are a tight little community. They can spot strangers a mile away, and that’s what is going to make it safe for you up there.”

“But we’ll be strangers too, Uncle Bud,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah, but only for a little while.”

CHAPTER 4



Mark left the trailer he'd been hauling at the weigh station and gave the paperwork to the Department of Transportation officers inside the coop. Then Mark and Jimmy headed west for a time before turning north.

When they were outside Edmonton, they continued driving until they came upon a full-service truck stop where they could eat, fuel up and get some supplies. Mark also wanted to get *Mother Load* checked out so that she would be ready for the colder weather.

Mark booked an appointment in the shop, then he and Jimmy had a bite to eat in the restaurant. When they were done eating, they went their separate ways, Jimmy going to look for some warm clothes while Mark went to see what was happening with the truck.

"Hey," Mark said to the mechanic who was going over *Mother Load* as he approached his rig.

"This your truck?"

"Yeah."

"Got some miles on 'er, but seems to be in pretty good shape."

Mark was pleased to hear it, but he wanted to know what she needed to be ready for extreme winter driving. "What about for going up north... you know, onto the ice."

"You going that way?"

"Soon as we leave here."

The mechanic didn't say anything for a while, as if he were replaying what he'd seen of the truck in his mind. "You've already

got an auxiliary power unit and that's good. Only problem is sometimes they're not enough to keep you warm, and you have to keep the engine running anyway."

"Okay."

"I can set up some cardboard to block your rad to keep the heat in, and you'll want to consider a battery blanket and an oil pan heater to keep things warm if you ever shut her down."

"Put them in," Mark said without even thinking.

"You've got a manual transmission and that's good. All the advanced technology stuff isn't the best for cold weather operation. Last thing you want is to get frozen in first gear, you know what I mean?"

"I hear ya."

"I'll make sure everything's greased and oiled, including the door locks and that sort of thing."

Mark nodded in appreciation.

"You've got chains, right?"

He had them, because he was required to have a set in order to be allowed to drive through B.C.'s Rogers Pass, but he'd never actually driven with them on his tires. "I have them," he said.

"Good. If you're up there for any amount of time you're probably going to need them at some point."

Great, Mark thought, picturing himself outside of his truck in a blizzard, trying to hook up tire chains he'd only installed once . . . in a truck stop parking lot in the middle of August. "Anything else?"

"Depends how much you want to spend," the mechanic said, wiping his hands with a rag. "I could string a tarp under your engine compartment if you like."

"For what?"

"Keep the heat in for one. Keep the animals out for another. People aren't the only ones that like a warm place to sleep."

"How would you connect it?"

“Bungee cords. Rope.”

Mark thought about it, but could only envision the tarp coming off on some desolate stretch of road, wrapping around a front wheel and pulling the entire truck off the road or, even worse, through the ice.

“I think I’ll pass on that one.”

“Right. I’ll get to work on all the other stuff. Be about an hour or so.” When he told Mark the cost of it all, Mark’s jaw dropped and his eyes went wide.

“Not all that much, really,” the mechanic said. “Compared to the cost of a tow . . .” He extended the thumb of his right hand like he were hitchhiking and jabbed it skyward. “Up there.”

“Just do it,” Mark said at last. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

Mark caught up with Jimmy in the truck stop’s store. It didn’t have much in the way of clothes, but it had what Mark and Jimmy needed, even if everything was a size or two too big or too small.

Jimmy had already picked up all the stuff on his Uncle Bud’s list and grabbed a pair of winter boots for each of them, as well as some high-end thermal underwear and two pairs of winter gloves.

“I still need a hat,” Jimmy said.

“What’s the problem?”

“One hat looks cool while the other one’s kind of goofy looking,” Jimmy said, showing Mark a toque that was emblazoned with flames, and a old-school trapper’s sort of hat with earflaps and a chin strap.”

“Get the one that’s warmer.”

Jimmy was hesitant. “I already sound like a dork, do I have to look like one too?”

“Let me tell you a story,” Mark said. “One time I was driving a load up to Timmins. The company wanted me to use their truck, so I parked *Mother Load* and used their truck for the run. On the highway halfway to Timmins, there’s a seven-car pileup on the road. They said the clean up could take 10 minutes or 10 hours, so

I decided to take a detour. Well, the weather turns bad while I'm on the side road, and all of a sudden I can't see where the road stops and the ditch begins. Five minutes into the blizzard, I'm off the road and get hung up on a tree stump."

Jimmy stared at Mark, his attention never wavering.

"The stump killed the engine so that it wouldn't even turn over, and the rig didn't have an APU."

Mark paused then, letting the gravity of the situation settle in on Jimmy.

"Now because of the blizzard, there are no trucks or cars going by. And to make matters worse, there's no cell phone reception up there. So I'm stuck, alone and it's getting cold . . ."

Jimmy looked at the two hats in his hands, then at Mark.
"What'd you do?"

"I gathered up anything in the cab that would burn and started a campfire in the truck."

"Did you make it?" Jimmy asked.

Mark just looked at him, dumbfounded. "Of course I made it, but it was close. Help came just in time, otherwise I wouldn't have lasted more than a few more hours."

Jimmy looked at the two hats again, put down the toque and placed the other hat onto his head. "Looking cool is overrated." He glanced at himself in a nearby mirror. "There'll be no one around to see me in it anyway."

"Good choice," Mark said, grabbing the hat and the other stuff Jimmy selected and heading to the cash.

Jimmy was about to follow him when a voice behind him said, "Heading north are ya?"

Jimmy turned to see a man standing there. He was dressed in black, with cowboy boots, a dirty grey coat and slick black hair that was combed straight back over his head and all the way down to the back of his neck. "Sure are, mister."

"How far north?"

"Ice road north."

“Wow, just like on TV, eh?”

“Kind of. That show’s mostly shot in Alaska. We’re heading for the Northwest Territories.”

“A lot of work up there, is there?”

“Uh, I guess,” Jimmy said. “Enough work for us, anyway.”

“Good for you,” the man said.

“Jimmy,” Mark called from over by the cash. “Let’s go.”

“See you,” Jimmy told the man.

“You take care. Drive safe. I heard it can be pretty dangerous for drivers up there.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

The man waited until Jimmy was out of earshot, then he muttered, “I bet you will.”

Out in the truck stop parking lot, inside the black Freightliner, the driver dialed a long-distance number on his cellphone.

Someone picked up on the other end after just a single ring.

“Yes?”

“I need a job on the ice road out of Yellowknife.”

“That’s where they’re going?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Scorsese knows a lot of people in the business world, many of whom owe him favours. I’m sure one of them knows somebody who is in a position to arrange to have a job waiting for you when you get there.”

“Thank you,” the driver said.

“I’ll be in touch.”

The driver ended the call, then slipped the key into the ignition.

A moment later the black Freightliner rumbled to life, then eased forward out of the lot, heading north.

CHAPTER 5



After they took the ring road around Edmonton, the highway drive was uneventful. They passed the time talking about the ice roads and what they might expect driving on frozen water.

“It sure looks dangerous on TV,” Jimmy said. “Those guys are either brave or crazy.”

Mark smiled. “So then, which one are we?”

Jimmy thought about it. “Probably a little of both.”

“I can’t believe it’s as bad as they make it out to be on television,” Mark said, reminding himself of Bud’s assertion that safety was the number one concern of anyone involved with the ice road. “That show makes it seem like if you make the trip without going through the ice, it’s an event. But if a driver was ever in any real danger of falling through the ice, they’d shut the whole operation down in a heartbeat. You can’t take chances with people’s lives . . . not in this day and age. No matter how much money’s at stake.”

“Yeah, well . . . they’re always talking about how many people have gone through the ice,” Jimmy said. “I’ve heard that no one wears their seatbelt on the ice road, and some even drive with their doors open, especially near the end of the season.”

“I’m sure trucks have gone through the ice over the years, but I bet it’s been things like service vehicles and people taking chances on roads that were closed. I doubt a truck has ever gone through the ice on an ice road that was open and being serviced by the people managing it.”

“You’re not making it sound very exciting. In fact, you’re starting to take the adventure out of it.”

“I’ve had enough excitement for a while, and I don’t need any more adventure. What you’re talking about is a television show, that they have to make exciting so people will watch it. The reality is this ice road is something like a 16-hour drive at 20 or 25 kilometres per hour. How exciting does that sound to you?”

“Kind of boring, actually.”

“Good, just the way I like it,” Mark said. “I have an idea we’re going to have more trouble staying awake than staying on the road.”

“Yay,” Jimmy gave a muted cheer. “Can’t wait.”

Mark saw a sign on the highway informing him they were nearing the town of High Level, Alberta. There was also a sign for a truck stop up ahead, and Mark eased up on the accelerator to begin slowing down to cool off the engine.

“What are you doing?”

“We might as well fuel up?”

“But we’ve still got plenty of fuel.”

“I know, but after High Level we’ll be getting into the true north, the price of fuel is going to go up some 20 percent.”

“Oh, okay.”

“That, and I want to make sure I’ve topped up with winter fuel.”

“But we filled up outside Edmonton. They would have had winter fuel there. The last place we filled up with summer fuel would have been Vancouver, and surely we’ve gone through that fuel by now.”

Mark couldn’t argue with Jimmy’s logic, but he wanted to be absolutely sure his tanks were filled with the right stuff. Below zero degrees Celsius, wax crystals could form in the fuel, a process commonly known as gelling. That made start-ups and general operation of a truck difficult. Winter diesel had a different blend of diesel and additives to prevent gelling, and was generally available across Canada and the northern United States during the colder winter months. Up here, they probably sold winter diesel throughout most of the year, and it was probably of the highest quality.

“You’re probably right on both counts, but I figure the fuel they’re pumping here is the best winter fuel you can get at the best price we’re

going to see for a long time. Might as well top it up so we've got one less thing to worry about."

"Whatever you want," Jimmy said. "I've got to go pee."

Mark pulled to a stop at the outside pump closest to the truck stop parking lot and shut down the engine. But although *Mother Load* was off, inside the truck it sounded as if the engine were still running.

Jimmy opened his door and the sound grew louder.

Mark opened his own door and heard it too.

"Everyone's idling," Jimmy said, a hint of confusion in his voice.

"Maybe they're giving away fuel today," Mark said.

Jimmy scanned the lot, checking each truck in turn like he was counting them. "Every single truck in the lot is running."

With the sound of thrumming diesel surrounding them, Mark and Jimmy topped up *Mother Load's* tanks and went inside the cashier's booth to pay. While Mark was busy paying the fuel bill, Jimmy was in a mood for small talk.

"Business must be good," he said.

The cashier shrugged. "Same as usual."

"No, I mean all the trucks," Jimmy said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the rigs parked in the lot. "They're all idling . . . wasting fuel."

The cashier acknowledged Jimmy's joke with a weak smile. "Temperature's going down low tonight. Everyone wants to stay warm, make sure they can get going in the morning."

"But what about APUs and cab heaters. Doesn't anyone have one?"

"You're new up here, aren't you?"

Mark looked up from his papers.

"How can you tell?" Jimmy asked.

"Welcome to the North," the cashier said. "In December, the diesel engines go on, and they don't get turned off for three or four months."

"That can't be right," Jimmy said. "How much fuel is being wasted just by idling alone?"

“Sometimes shutting off a truck is not an option. It’s just part of doing business up here.”

Mark seemed satisfied by that answer, but Jimmy wouldn’t let it go. “There’s got to be another way.”

The cashier was smiling now, almost laughing. “Maybe you should invent something . . . like a magic heater. You’d make a million bucks.”

Jimmy was about to say something when Mark cut him off. “The restrooms are that way,” he said, pointing. “Go do your business.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Jimmy said, walking away.

“He’s young,” Mark said, not fully understanding it himself, but not wanting to make waves on the threshold to the northern territories. “What are you going to do?”

If Mark had been driving on his own, he would have been forced to lay over at High Level for eight hours before continuing on toward Yellowknife. But because he had Jimmy with him, the team was able to keep heading north. And so, with Jimmy behind the wheel and Mark tucked into the sleeper, they prepared to leave the truck stop.

“You sure you don’t want me to rest too?” Jimmy said as he got comfortable in the driver’s seat.

Mark lifted his head up off the pillow. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Jimmy shrugged. “I don’t know, it’s just that it’s dark out, and the road is unfamiliar and . . .”

“You haven’t driven all that much. Every road is unfamiliar to you.”

“I just heard some guys in the restroom talking about this road, and it wasn’t good.”

“What’d they say?”

“Well, one guy asked if there were cops or highway guys patrolling the highway. And the other guy said you probably wouldn’t see any police, but there was no need to worry since the highway’s patrolled by caribou, deer and muskox twenty-four/seven.”

“Ha!” Mark laughed under his breath.

“I don’t want to hit anything in the dark.”

Mark understood Jimmy's concern since he'd struck a moose once in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the damage to his truck had been extensive, not to mention that he could have been killed. But, moose and caribou were two widely different beasts. A moose was basically a one-ton cow on stilts while a caribou was smaller and softer, and most had been displaced by the construction of the highway. "Just take it easy, keep your high beams on and . . . if it looks like you are going to hit something, hit it. I'd much rather spend a few hours pulling caribou out of my grille than my truck out of a ditch."

"All right," Jimmy said with a sigh, "I'll be careful." He shifted *Mother Load* into first and eased out the clutch.

Mark drifted off, but never quite fell into a deep sleep. Mark could feel the undulations in the road and the turns it was taking. This was no Trans Canada Highway, and it was requiring all Jimmy's concentration to keep the ride smooth and consistent. Still, Mark was impressed by the way the young man was guiding the truck through the night and proud of the fact that he'd been the one who had trained him so well.

The other part of Mark's mind was thinking about the ice roads and wondering if this trip was a good idea. Sure, Jimmy wanted adventure, but Mark had had his fill of it. He'd already decided that after he'd dropped Jimmy off in New Brunswick he would get back to Toronto and take a long trip to somewhere hot — maybe even a cruise — where the driving would be left to someone else and his only responsibility was to have a good time.

What a contrast that would be, he thought, going from driving over frozen lakes and rivers where the ice was almost four feet thick, to the warm waters of the ocean where cresting waves were four feet high or more.

"Get ready!" Jimmy said, bringing Mark out of his semi-conscious state.

"Huh? What? What is it?"

"We just passed a sign that said the ice road is a kilometre up ahead . . . and it's open."

Mark wiped the sleep from his eyes. "An ice road already?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I wasn't sure where it was, but I knew you couldn't just drive into the Northwest Territories without passing over

some water. Most of the year there's a ferry that takes you over the Mackenzie River, but when the winter hits, they build an ice bridge across the river."

"Nature's own, eh," Mark said, crawling out of the bunk.

"Yeah, but there's always a period during the spring when the ice is breaking up, and the ferry can't run that cuts off northern communities, leaving them isolated."

Mark was in the passenger seat now, craning his neck to see if he could see the frozen road across the river. "I always just assumed that there was a permanent connection to the rest of Canada."

"There will be," Jimmy said. "They're building it now, and it should be open next year."

Mark scanned the darkness and could just make out the hulking mass of the bridge's superstructure ahead.¹

"Lucky for us we still get to drive on the ice."

Mark could feel the butterflies in his stomach. Driving over water — frozen or otherwise — wasn't natural, no matter how safe his mind told his body it was.

"I wonder if it's safe?" Jimmy said.

That was the kind of talk Mark wanted to hear least. "Of course it's safe," he said, placing a comforting hand on his own stomach. "They wouldn't let us cross if it wasn't. Right?"

Jimmy slowed *Mother Load* and began looking for some kind of checkpoint or staging area, but other than several signs reminding drivers to keep their speeds within the limit, there didn't seem to be a lot of fanfare about driving over the ice. It was as if it were a daily occurrence in the North, which of course it was, no matter how new the experience was for Mark and Jimmy.

As they approached the on-ramp that would take them onto the ice, Jimmy let out a cry of, "Here we go!" as if he were taking some seat on a ride at Canada's Wonderland.

But the reality of it was that it was nothing like a wild ride.

¹The Deh Cho Bridge across the Mackenzie River was officially opened on November 30, 2012. The bridge is part of the Mackenzie Highway in the Northwest Territories. It provides a safe, reliable, all-weather road that replaces the summer ferry and the winter ice crossing. www.dehchobridge.info

Instead, there was a gradual slope that took them down to the ice, and then everything got very smooth. The ice itself was flat — more so than even a freshly paved highway — but made a sweeping turn away from land before straightening out for the trip to the opposite side.

There, another sweeping turn took traffic to the river bank and another gradual incline led back up onto dry land.

“Made it!” Jimmy cried.

“That wasn’t all that exciting,” Mark said.

“No,” Jimmy said, all of the thrill gone from his voice. “No. In fact, it wasn’t exciting at all.”

“Straight and flat,” Mark said. “Just like a stretch of Alberta highway.”

“When you put it like that, it was actually kind of anticlimactic. Boring even.”

Mark rested his head on his hand, then leaned his body so that his shoulder and head were propped against the passenger-side door. “Just the way I like it,” he said, closing his eyes.

Back at the truck stop in High Level, a black Freightliner sat idling, its driver bedding down for the night in the sleeper. There was a proper notation for hours of service in his log book and eight hours of rest already penciled in. There was no rush, after all. It wasn’t as if he was going to lose this Dalton guy on the ice road. And it really didn’t matter if he killed him tomorrow or next week. As long as he was dead before the hearing, Mr. Scorsese would be happy.

CHAPTER 6



They arrived in Yellowknife just before 10:00 in the morning with Mark behind the wheel and Jimmy taking a turn in the sleeper.

“What do you want to do?” Mark asked Jimmy as the city appeared on the horizon.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you want to go to a truck stop and freshen up, or do you want to go straight to the NWTT yard and get a load.”

Jimmy was silent as he finished a big yawn and a stretch. “We’ll stop for a quick breakfast, but I do want to get a load right away. Let’s get going!”

“Fine, we’ll stop at a coffee shop and push on into town.”

“All right,” Jimmy said, squirming around in the sleeper as he got into his clothes. He was in the passenger seat scant moments later. “This is gonna be great!”

After a quick stop for coffee and a breakfast sandwich, they pulled into the NWTT yard. Dozens of trucks lined the back end of the lot and every single one of the trucks was idling.

“Doesn’t anyone like to save fuel up here?” Jimmy asked. “Doesn’t anyone need extra money in their pocket?”

“They’re probably sleeping,” Mark figured. “Most of these drivers don’t live in the territories so they’ve got no real place to go during their off hours. Where else are they going to stay but in their trucks?”

“But do they all have to idle?”

Mark didn’t have an answer. It was pretty cold up here, and he wasn’t about to judge anyone before he knew what the reality was of working in the far north. “I’m sure they’ve got their reasons.”

“I guess,” Jimmy said.

Mark guided *Mother Load* around to an empty spot across the lot directly in front of the NWTT front doors. He checked the gauges to make sure the engine had cooled down enough to shut down and realized cool down was the easiest part of driving in the Northwest Territories. Keeping things warm was the thing that was difficult.

Mark engaged the parking brake and opened his door to get out of the cab.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Jimmy said.

“What?”

“You didn’t shut off the engine.”

“I thought I’d leave it running while we go inside, like everyone else. You know, to keep everything warm.”

Jimmy just looked at him. “And if everyone else drove into a ditch, you’d drive into one too?”

“No.” Mark’s voice sounded small and weak.

“We’re barely in the north for a day, and you’re already forgetting about all the fuel-efficiency stuff we learned while we drove across Canada and down into the United States.”

“It’s not that -- ”

“And we did save fuel, didn’t we?” Jimmy said.

“Yeah.”

“And if you continued to save fuel like that over the long term, you’ll probably end up having your best year ever as an owner/operator, right?”

“Yeah, but -- ”

“So why would you give all that up now?”

Mark wanted to say, “Because it’s freakin’ cold outside,” but he wasn’t sure that was a good enough reason. So instead he said nothing in response.

“Besides, we’re only going to be in and out,” Jimmy said. “The engine’s not going to get that cold in less than an hour.”

He had a point there, thought Mark. They would be back on the road in no time, so it would probably be safe to shut down *Mother Load* for a little while.

Mark turned the key and diesel rattled to a halt.

“Let’s go,” Jimmy said. “You can thank me later.”

Inside the NWTT offices, Mark and Jimmy gave their names to a woman behind a desk just by the front door, and she asked them to have a seat and wait. A few minutes passed, and she returned along with a middle-aged man in a NWTT sweater. He had a black moustache and sideburns, and his black hair was just starting to recede from his forehead.

“Mark, Jimmy,” he said, shaking hands. “I’m Harry Bulau, the general manager, dispatcher, chief cook and bottle-washer here. Welcome to NWTT.”

“Glad to be here,” Mark said.

“Yeah,” said Jimmy. “We know how lucky we are that you had an open spot for us.”

Harry smiled. “There were actually a few open spots. Three of you are here today, and there’s another guy who isn’t here yet because he’s by himself and had to layover at High Level. He’ll probably show up sometime tomorrow, but we’ll be hiring more drivers as it gets colder... which they’re saying it will.”

“You mean it gets colder than this?”

“This is nothing. It gets a lot colder, which is ideal for us and the ice road season.”

“That sounds great,” Mark said, wondering about *Mother Load* out in the lot getting cooling off and getting colder by the second. “When can we get our first load and start heading north?”

“Whoa!” Harry said. “I love your enthusiasm, but there’s a lot we’ve got to do before you can start driving loads.”

“Like what?” Jimmy said.

Harry smiled. “Let’s go to my office.” He led them down a cluttered hallway past several filing cabinets and cardboard boxes, and into a small, cramped office. “Have a seat.”

Mark looked around and wondered if this was the office of a general manager or a bottle-washer, then concluded it was probably both.

“Before we do anything, we’ve got to make sure all of your paperwork’s in order. You know the usual criminal records check, driver’s abstract, resume, those sorts of things.”

Mark knew he had all that information up-to-date and with him, but he couldn’t be sure about Jimmy. He looked over at Jimmy and the young man was smiling. “No problem,” he said.

“And then, once that stuff’s all in order, we have to put you through orientation.”

“Orientation?” Jimmy said. “How long does that take?”

“The better part of a day,” Harry said. “You guys will probably be done by the this afternoon.”

Mark could see the disappointment on Jimmy’s face. He wanted to get out on the ice like a five-year-old at his first hockey game, and every minute that they sat there talking was killing him on the inside.

“Wow,” Jimmy said, leaning over to whisper to Mark. “For all their urgency in getting loads over the ice, they sure take their time about it.”

Mark gave Jimmy a wink. “Safety first,” he said.

Harry must have overheard them. “It’s not only the first thing,” he said. “It’s also second, third, fourth and last thing.”

Mark smiled, but Jimmy’s face turned a pale shade of red.

CHAPTER 7



Mark and Jimmy's orientation was a straightforward instruction about the rules of the ice road and how they were enforced.

They were escorted into a classroom where two other drivers were already waiting. The instructor was a middle-aged man in his late 40s named Ryan Dane. He'd driven on the ice roads for 10 years before taking a full-time position with the Joint Venture, developing and refining the rules of the road and making sure all the drivers — new and experienced — were aware of them.

"You probably have a ton of questions about driving on the ice road, but let's leave them until after, because you'll probably get a lot of answers as we go along."

He began with a PowerPoint® presentation about the ice roads and chose first to explain how the ice road worked and why the rules had to be followed.

Basically, he explained that a truck drives along a sheet of ice that is floating on the water beneath it. And while the ice can be up to 48 inches thick, it still can bend and flex under the weight of a truck and its load . . . and fully loaded rigs regularly weighed in at as much as 63 000 kilograms.

The bend in the ice is imperceptible to the naked eye, but the ice around a truck under load can become depressed up to three centimetres over a distance of 50 metres in front and behind the truck. That means that the truck is driving along in a shallow bowl that surrounds the truck the entire time it's on the ice. The bending of the ice creates a ripple in the ice sheet, just like a boat might do as it passes over water, and that ripple is known as a pressure wave.

“That’s why we require spacing of at least 500 metres between trucks,” Dane said. “If trucks come too close together, those pressure waves will collide, twisting and churning the ice chaotically, which causes cracks in the ice.”

Although Mark had seen the show “Ice Road Truckers” before, and plenty of people had told him the theory of pressure waves on the ice, this was the first time he really understood how it worked.

“Cracks are a big problem,” Dane continued. “The ice road’s strength isn’t compromised by a few surface cracks, but if a crack gets deep enough, the ice can lose all of its strength, and I don’t think I have to tell you what happens when the ice isn’t strong enough to support the weight of a truck.”

A muffled sort of nervous laugh swept through the room. There were plenty of pictures on the walls of trucks and vehicles that had gone through the ice, and it was obvious to anyone with a pulse that trucks and ice-cold water were a dangerous and deadly combination.

Dane went on to explain that weight and speed affect the depression bowl around the truck because the bowl deepens the faster you go and the heavier the load. For that reason speed limits were strictly adhered to: 25 km/hr loaded on the ice and 30 km/hr on portages — both of which created the world’s longest school zone — 10 km/hr on and off portages and 60 km/hr empty on return “express lanes.”

There was also a classification for partial loads coming back from the mines. If the load was under 3500 kilograms, the truck was considered empty and allowed to travel 35 km/hr on the ice roads and 60 on the return express lanes.

“These speed limits are radar enforced by security, and the penalties can be severe. For your first speeding offense of 2 or 3 km/hr over, you get a written warning. Your second offense is a five-day suspension, and the third offense is banishment from the ice road.”

Mark was impressed. It was one thing to say the rules were important but it was another thing entirely to back that up with a stiff set of penalties that were strictly enforced.

“The penalties are similar for following too closely, or failing to follow any of the other rules of the road — warning, suspension, banishment.”

Dane looked straight at Jimmy for a long while until Jimmy felt compelled to say something. “Got it!” he said.

Once the safety message was hammered home, Dane went over a number of housekeeping items that anyone driving the ice road needed to know.

For example, trucks drove north in convoys of four that were spaced up to 20 minutes apart. The leader of a convoy was usually the most experienced ice road driver, and it was his job to call out the portage numbers and kilometre markings along the way. The other drivers were responsible for keeping their truck at least 500 metres behind the truck in front of them, and calling out their spacing.

On the return trip, empty trucks travel singularly or in convoys, and are able to drive 60 km/hr on “express lanes.” A loaded truck can keep its empty status if its load does not exceed 3400 kilograms. Finally, bobtailing trucks can go even faster if they have been given prior permission or, “hotshot” status, by the Joint Venture.

There was so much emphasis on safety, that Mark wondered how “Ice Road Truckers” could make driving on the ice look so dangerous on television.

Finally, they were given some tips about driving safely on the ice road, especially about being aware of where you are in relationship to the road at all times. This was particularly important because visual reference points were limited, especially above the treeline, and it was easy to lose track of where the road is when everything around you is white.

Another tip that stuck in Mark’s mind was to keep a distance of five metres from any snowbank at all times. That’s because snow is a great insulator, and the ice beneath it is always thinner than it is on the road. And of course, thinner ice is weaker and won’t support the weight of a truck, empty or loaded.

“Any questions?”

One of the other drivers put up his hand. “Where do we eat, sleep and do our business?”

“Ah, right,” Dane said. “Excellent question. On your way north, you will first show up at Yellowknife Dispatch at least 30 minutes before you’re scheduled to leave. From there, on your way north,

you must check in at the Meadows Security Check-in, which comes just after the Ingraham Trail. There are bathrooms at each of those locations.

“Further north, the Dome Lake Maintenance Camp is an emergency stop, not a regular rest stop. Past that, there is an emergency washroom at Portage 20, so if you’ve gotta do a number two, that’s the place to do it.”

The driver put his hand up again. “What if we’ve got to do the other one and can’t wait for the portage or a camp?”

“I don’t need to tell you that some drivers keep a water bottle with them in their cab for just such emergencies.”

A slight chuckle went through the room.

“And I’m not telling you to do this, but some drivers have managed to get themselves on a long straight stretch of ice, set the cruise at 25 km/hr, open up the driver door, go out on the step and do it that way.”

Another laugh, this time louder.

“Obviously some talent is involved, but I’ll leave the decision with you.” A pause. “Lockhart Lake is a maintenance camp and a rest stop, so if you’re hungry, need a shower, want to sleep in a bed, you can do all that there. Lac de Gras is a maintenance camp and emergency stop, but if you’re headed to the Jericho Project or the Lupin Mine, it serves as a rest stop for both those destinations.”

Everyone seemed satisfied with the arrangements.

“Anything else?”

Nobody raised their hands.

“Then, good luck.”

Minutes later, a shipper from NWTT met up with Mark and Jimmy to give them their load. They would be taking a load of cement bags in a convoy to the Diavik Diamond Mine some 350 kilometres up the ice road.

They'd leave in the morning so their first trip on the road would be in daylight.

"Don't forget to show up at Yellowknife Dispatch 30 minutes before your start time," the woman said.

"We'll be there," Jimmy said.

"You better be. First time you're late you get a written warning."

"They didn't mention that in orientation," Jimmy said.

"It's not an ice road rule, it's my rule. Break it and you'll be waiting a while for your next load."

"Yes, ma'am," Jimmy said, his back straightening up as he said it.

Mark smiled. It was good to see that dispatchers were as crusty in the territories as they were everywhere else in the country.

CHAPTER 8



By the time they were through orientation and the rest of the formalities, it was 3:00 in the afternoon, and *Mother Load* had been sitting in the NWT parking lot getting colder for the past six hours.

As soon as Mark stepped through the door and was hit by a cold blast of sub-arctic air, he realized he should have left his truck running just like everyone else in the north.

“Damn it,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy asked.

“She’s going to be cold.”

“Awe, c’mon,” Jimmy said. “How cold could the engine have gotten in --”

“Almost seven hours,” Mark cut him off.

“Oh, that is a long time.”

“Yeah, and it’s about -30.” Mark shot a look at Jimmy that let the younger man know that Mark was holding him responsible for anything that happened . . . or didn’t, such as the engine not starting.

“I didn’t think we’d be in there that long. You said yourself that we should be in and out in no time.”

That much was true, but Mark wasn’t about to let Jimmy off the hook. “Short time or long time, I don’t think it’s a good idea to let the engine cool off at all when it’s so cold out.”

They had reached *Mother Load* by now, and she seemed eerily silent compared to the constant rumble of the all the other trucks in the lot.

“You think she won’t start?” Jimmy said. “No way. You keep your truck in top condition. I bet it starts up on the first try.”

“We’ll see,” Mark said, struggling for a moment to unlock the driver’s side door. He had to turn the key back and forth several times before the metal inside the locking mechanism agreed to turn.

Jimmy stayed outside the truck as Mark climbed up into the cab, sat down and inserted the key into the ignition. He turned it, and even that small turn to the right was tougher in the cold weather than it should have been. He wasn’t confident about the engine turning over, let alone getting it started.

He allowed several moments for the glow plugs to warm up, then turned the ignition key further to the right.

Wuh. Wuh. Wuh.

The engine turned over, but paused a moment between each turn.

Mark stopped a moment and glared at Jimmy through the windshield.

“It’ll start,” he said, his voice muffled. “Try it again.”

Mark tried it again, and again the engine turned over.

Wuh, wuh, wuh.

Mark took a deep breath and tried to remain calm. What sort of ice road trucker can’t even get his truck started in the cold.

He shook his head at Jimmy, then keyed the ignition again.

Wuh wuh wuh.

Once more the engine turned over, this time with a bit more pep, but it still wouldn’t fire. But while the engine seemed closer to starting, the battery was losing power. There were just a couple more cranks in it before it would be dead too.

Mark raised his fist at Jimmy and vowed to make the kid walk to wherever they’d be going next.

Jimmy didn’t look back at Mark, but was windmilling his arms as if to tell Mark to keep trying.

Mark turned the key again.

Wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh, vroom!

Mark exhaled a long, long sigh.

“Yeah, ha!” Jimmy shouted outside the truck.

“That was close,” Mark said under his breath.

Jimmy opened the passenger door and climbed inside. “Told you it would start.”

“Right,” was all Mark said. Then, “From now on, I will not be letting this engine get cold.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said, down but not defeated. “But think of all the fuel you saved while we were inside.”

Mark didn’t even bother to answer. Instead he said, “The least I could have done was plug in the block heater. There are plenty of outlets in the yard.”

“Then we’ll know for next time.”

Mark just nodded, conceding the point. The learning curve was pretty steep in the north, and they’d just made one mistake they would never be making again.

Since they wouldn’t be taking a load out until tomorrow morning, it made sense for them to take a room at a local hotel and spend the night in comfort. If they were going to be driving the ice roads for the rest of the season, it could be weeks before they had another chance to take a hot shower or sleep in a real bed.

They decided on a full-service hotel at the eastern end of the city that had a parking lot large enough to accommodate *Mother Load* and didn’t look out of place in the middle of town. There were three other trucks in the lot, one idling gently through the night and the other two shut down and plugged into the electrical outlets that lined the south side of the lot. There was one last outlet in the parking lot that wasn’t in use, but Mark wasn’t sure if he should plug in his truck, or let it idle through the night.

He decided to park it as close to the hotel as he could so at least he could listen to his truck idling and would be aware if anything went wrong with it in the night.

“You’re not parking it over here are you?” Jimmy said, when he realized Mark wasn’t going to plug the truck into the one available outlet.

“It doesn’t feel right shutting her down after what happened at the truck yard.”

“That was different,” Jimmy said. “You shut it down with nothing to keep the block warm. At least here we’ve got a power source to keep the engine oil warm. It’ll be a snap to start her up in the morning and in the meantime you will have saved four litres of fuel for every hour you didn’t leave it idling. It’s still early, so we’re going to be out of the truck at least twelve hours, maybe fourteen . . . That’s between 48 to 56 litres of fuel saved just because you used an extension cord to plug in your block heater instead of idling your truck all night.”

Mark nodded. Jimmy was right, but . . .

“And the hotel is set up to let you plug your truck in. The electricity you’ll be using is on their dime, and they’ve probably already worked the cost of it into their room rate. You’re supposed to plug your truck in.”

“I guess,” Mark said, backing the truck out of its current spot. “But if anything goes wrong, it’ll be on your head.”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong,” Jimmy said. “You’ve plugged your truck in overnight hundreds of times before.”

“Maybe,” Mark said, began backing into the spot in front of the outlet to leave the engine compartment facing the open lot in case something did go wrong and he’d have to have the engine serviced. “But I’ve never done it in the Northwest Territories before.”

Jimmy jumped out of the truck to back Mark into the spot. When Mark was in position, Jimmy crossed his arms — like a referee calling an interference penalty — and Mark stopped and engaged the parking brake.

Before Mark got out of the truck, Jimmy had accessed the side storage compartment where Mark kept his extension cords, and was unravelling the cord out across the parking lot.

“Plug it into the truck,” Mark said, handing the female end to Jimmy. Then he picked up the male end of the cord and dragged the length of wire over to the post where an outlet was bolted to a 4×4 post embedded into the ground.

“You got it?” Mark asked Jimmy.

“Yeah, plugged in.”

Mark pulled back the flap that covered the outlet and plugged in the cord. Then he pulled the cord out, repeating the process several times until he saw a spark arc between the outlet and the cord’s prongs in his hand.

“At least I know there’s power,” he said under his breath.

“Does it work?” Jimmy asked as he came up behind Mark.

“It works,” Mark said, hoping he was doing the right thing not leaving the truck idling overnight.

“That’s good. Cuz it’s supposed to go down to -40 tonight.”

Mark shuddered. Man, that’s cold, he thought.

“It should be fine,” he convinced himself. “Let’s get some rest.”

CHAPTER 9



After checking into the hotel, Mark and Jimmy dressed as warmly as were able and walked into downtown Yellowknife to find some place to have dinner. They passed on each fast food joint they found and kept holding out for something better. After all, this was their first time in Yellowknife and the last time they might be able to eat a nice meal out for who knew how long.

On the advice of some locals, they ended up on the eastern end of town at an unlikely looking restaurant called Bullocks Bistro. At one time the building might have been a houseboat or barge of some sort, but it had since made the lofty transformation into someone's garage or backyard shed.

"This can't be the place," Jimmy said.

Mark was just as impressed, but he'd never been this far north before and wasn't about to judge a restaurant by its siding. "They said they serve really good food here," Mark said. "I'd hate to have to walk all the way back to the hotel without even stepping inside to warm up."

"All right. Maybe we can get a coffee or something for the walk back."

They stepped inside, and to no surprise, found that the inside was just as hardscrabble as the outside. Every inch of wall and ceiling space was covered in photographs, business cards, or graffiti. The ceiling itself was low and space inside the single room that comprised both the kitchen and dining room was tight.

Despite the rough decor, the place was jam-packed with people.

"Maybe the food here is good," Jimmy said.

Mark scanned the room. “I don’t think there’s an empty table.”

“Hi guys, two?” the woman who seemed to be cook/hostess/server asked.

Mark nodded and she led them over to the end of the counter that faced the grille. They sat down on a pair of barstools and were presented with a couple of menus.

“It’s expensive here,” was the first thing Jimmy said.

Mark looked over the menu. Sure, it was pricey, but where else were you going to get muskox and six kinds of fish out of Great Slave Lake? Judging by the number of Japanese tourists spread around the room, this place was obviously a local attraction, but Mark was sure the food still had to be excellent for the place to be this popular.

It had to be the food, because it sure wasn’t the decor. “Relax about the prices,” Mark said. “It’s on me.”

Jimmy seemed at ease immediately and ordered himself a \$7 bottle of beer. Mark ordered one too . . . what the hell.

They both ended up ordering a grilled fish platter that had a giant serving of several types of local fish including pike, pickerel, whitefish and char. At first it seemed an unlikely mound of food to eat at one sitting, but both men were able to work their way through it all.

“I don’t think I’ll have to eat for another day or two,” Jimmy said when he was done.

“That makes two of us,” Mark concurred.

Mark paid the bill, leaving a decent tip, and the two of them bundled up and headed out into the darkness for the long walk back to their hotel.

“Does it seem cold to you?” Jimmy asked.

Mark kept walking. “No, not really.” It was certainly colder than when the sun had been shining, but for some reason the cold didn’t seem to bother him as much now. Maybe it was the big meal or maybe it was some sort of natural adaptation, and they were already adjusting to life in the north. After all, cold was a relative thing, and if you were okay at -20, then -25 was no big deal. And by that reasoning, how bad could -30 be? Just another layer of clothing.

A half-hour later they arrived at their hotel, walking past a still plugged-in *Mother Load*. They stopped at the desk, asked for a 6:00 a.m. wake-up call and headed off to their room for a good night's sleep.

In the morning Mark decided to start up *Mother Load* before they ate breakfast so the cab would be warm by the time they were ready to roll. It was still dark out, and quiet, except for three idling rigs in the lot.

“Should’ve plugged their trucks in,” Mark said under his breath as he walked across the lot. “Save you a lot in the long run.”

When he got to *Mother Load* Mark unlocked the door and climbed inside the cab. The key was difficult to turn in the ignition, but once he had it rotated everything came alive as it usually did... all except for the oil temperature gauge. Whenever Mark had plugged in his block heater, there was always some sort of temperature difference noted on the gauge, even if it were a millimetre's movement of the needle. But this morning, the needle was buried far to the left and Mark got the distinct impression that it would have been even further to the left if the instrumentation had allowed for it.

Must be too cold to register, Mark thought. That made sense. After all, even if the block heater was keeping the oil pan warm, the temperature of the oil was probably still colder than the temperature gauge could register.

Hoping that was it, Mark turned the key to start the engine.

Nothing, not even a half turn of the starter motor.

“Tell me this isn’t happening,” Mark said.

He tried the key again, and again nothing.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Mark got out of the truck and checked to see if the cord was still plugged into his block heater.

It was.

Last night he’d checked to make sure there was electricity flowing from the outlet, but now he wasn’t so sure. He picked up the cords and pulled them apart at the connection hoping to see a telltale spark. There

was none. He plugged and unplugged the cord several times in rapid succession, but there was never any spark.

No wonder *Mother Load* wouldn't turn over. Her engine block was frozen and wasn't about to be turned over by any battery-charged starter motor.

What do I do now? Mark wondered.

His options were simple, but few. He could either wait three months for the weather to warm up and start her up on his own, or he could call NWTT and ask them for their help. Of course they would come and help him, but they wouldn't be happy about it since he hadn't even hauled a single load for them yet.

Man, was there ever a steep learning curve up here in the far north, Mark thought.

Mark headed back to the hotel.

At the front desk, he stopped to talk to the clerk behind the counter and asked about the outlet he'd been plugged into all night.

"Oh," she said. "You must have been using the one that's a bit wonky."

"Wonky?"

"Yeah, a truck driver ran over it during a snowstorm a few weeks ago. We got it working, but it cuts out if you draw too much power on it. I thought we put a sign on it 'For Cars Only.'"

"There was no sign," Mark said.

"Sorry," the clerk smiled. "Would you like to use our phone to call someone?"

So helpful, Mark thought, teeth clenched. "Sure."

She handed him the house phone.

Mark searched his pockets for Harry Bulau's card. When he found it, he placed the card on the counter and dialed the number.

"NWTT," said a woman's voice, maybe the one that greeted them at the front desk the day before.

Mark didn't ask for Harry right away, but instead explained who he was and that his truck wouldn't start.

“So you need some help getting going?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll send one of our mechanics.”

“When might that be?”

“Did you eat yet?”

“No, but -- ”

“Go have breakfast. Even if he gets there in five minutes, it’ll take an hour to warm up your truck enough to start.”

“Thanks,” Mark said, his voice tinged with a mix of relief and embarrassment.

“Relax,” she said. “You’re not the first driver this has happened to, and it won’t be the last time it happens to you either.”

“That’s encouraging,” Mark said. “I think.” He hung up the phone and pushed it back across the counter to the clerk. “They’re sending a mechanic.”

The clerk looked past Mark at the front door of the hotel as if the mechanic might already be there.

“They said it would be awhile.”

The clerk shook her head. “It might take a while to get your truck started, but they’ll be here right away.”

She must have noticed a look of scepticism on Mark face, because she said, “Every minute you’re not driving for them . . . you’re losing money, they’re losing money, and the mine isn’t getting their stuff.”

Mark knew that time was money, but the way she was talking, every minute up here was measured in dollars and every second measured in cents.

“Here he is now,” she said, gesturing to the front door.

Mark was dumbstruck. “That was fast.”

The NWTT mechanic opened the front door to the hotel and stuck his head into the lobby. “Is it the green Peterbilt?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Mark said, still in disbelief.

The mechanic nodded. "Take about an hour to warm her up."

"Can I get you a coffee?" Mark asked.

"Sure, double-double." And he was gone.

Mark left the lobby and joined Jimmy in the hotel restaurant.

"Everything okay?" Jimmy asked, when he saw Mark enter to the room.

"No," he said. "There was no electricity overnight, and the engine block froze. She wouldn't turn over this morning . . . at all."

Jimmy's mouth opened in an "O" of surprise.

"But an NWTT mechanic is already in the lot working on getting her going."

"That was fast."

"Apparently, time is money up here," Mark said.

"I ordered you breakfast," Jimmy said, gesturing to the food on the plate across the table from himself.

Mark sat down and began eating. "Order three coffees to go, the third one a double-double."

Mark devoured his breakfast and paid the bill, then hurried out to the parking lot to give the mechanic his coffee before it got cold as well.

"Appreciate it," the man said, a native to the north judging by his facial features and black hair and moustache. Like every other mechanic Mark had ever seen, his clothes were worn and grease-stained, but they looked to be the warmest coveralls in existence.

And they had to be. In the 20 minutes they'd been eating breakfast, the man had opened up the engine cowl and had the engine itself covered in a big canvas bag. On the back of the flatbed NWTT truck was what looked like a large diesel generating unit that was connected to the canvas bag by a big canvas hose. The generating unit was running, making a loud rumbling noise that surely had everyone in the hotel awake and cursing.

"What is that?" Mark asked, taking a sip of his coffee, which had already cooled off in his hands.

“It’s called a *Herman Nelson* after the guy who invented it . . . something like 60, 70 years ago. Basically, it’s a blow-dryer for your engine.”

Mark nodded. That’s what it looked like all right, a big machine designed to blow hot air. It also looked old, like it was made out of spare parts in the 1950s and repaired with whatever parts happened to be lying around since then. Even the truck the machine was mounted on looked to be from the early 1970s. He walked over to *Mother Load* and put his hand on the canvas bag shrouding his engine. It was warm to the touch. “How often do you use this thing?” Mark asked.

“Once in a while. Most guys leave their trucks running when it gets this cold.” He looked at Mark and Jimmy, then said, “You two must be new.”

Is it that obvious? Mark wondered.

“Welcome to the Northwest Territories,” the mechanic laughed. “Don’t worry. Everyone makes mistakes. The trick is to never make the same one twice.”

Mark nodded silently, getting the message and vowing never to turn off *Mother Load’s* engine again while he was in the territories.

Period.

Mark and Jimmy finally pulled into the NWTT yard around 10:00 that morning. Inside the shipping office Harry Bulau greeted them with a shake of his head, “You’re late.”

“We know,” Mark said.

“It won’t happen again,” Jimmy added.

“Yeah, well I’ve been scrambling all morning to bump you down about six convoys.” A pause. “You ready to go now?”

“Yes sir,” Mark said.

“Good.” He gave Mark an envelope with all the papers he’d need to take the load and get payment when all was said and done. “Get it up there, then get the hell back here for another one.”

Mark took the envelope, then turned to go, but Harry grabbed him by the arm to slow him down. “And above all,” he said. “Do it safely, or you won’t be doing it at all.”

“Understood.”

Jimmy nodded in agreement.

“Now get the hell out of here.”

They left the office without another word.

Outside in the lot, Jimmy asked, “What kind of load are we taking?”

“He told me yesterday . . .” Mark cracked the envelope and studied the papers inside. “Yup, bags of concrete.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “That sounds real exciting.”

“Well, considering it weighs more than 40 000 kilograms and we’ll be driving it over frozen water, that’s more than enough excitement for me.”

“Sounds dangerous more than anything.”

Mark looked at the far end of the lot where dozens of flatbed trailers were lined up, each one with 12 or 15 huge canvas bags loaded onto the bed. The bags were white, with huge straps on them so they could be loaded and unloaded by a crane like giant shopping bags. Mark shook his head. “No, those are probably the safest loads they have. Good to start with. They’re low, stable, and well-distributed over the entire trailer bed. It’ll do for our first time on the ice.”

“They must use a lot of cement in the mines,” Jimmy said, counting the trailers.

“Probably, but they’ve got just six weeks to move a year’s worth of supplies — ”

“So we better get moving.”

“Right.”

Mark matched up the trailer code on the paperwork with the code on the trailer in the yard and turned around to get himself hooked up.

With Jimmy’s help, Mark backed up to the trailer and, despite the cold, the jaws inside *Mother Load’s* fifth wheel had no trouble locking into place around the trailer’s kingpin.

So far so good, thought Mark. He left *Mother Load* idling as he got out to secure the trailer. “Do a good circle check,” he told Jimmy. “I’ll bring up the landing gear and secure the air lines.”

“Sure thing,” Jimmy answered, already fishing inside an outside compartment for a mallet to check the tires and a flashlight to check everything underneath the trailer.

Mark put on a thick pair of gloves and grabbed hold of the landing gear’s crank . . . and began turning.

“Ugh,” he exhaled, turning the crank just once.

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy asked.

“It’s barely turning.”

“Probably frozen too.”

No doubt, thought Mark. The oil inside the crankcase was unheated and was probably thick as cookie dough in this extreme cold. Mark grabbed the crank with both hands and doubled his efforts. With each turn the crank moved more easily until he had it turning fast enough to see the gear actually lifting up and out of the snow.

By the time the gear was set, Mark’s body was damp with sweat, and his skin felt frozen to his face. And he still had to connect the air lines.

Mark climbed up onto the back of *Mother Load* and grabbed the two coiled air lines that would power the trailer’s brakes. But instead of moving freely, the lines seemed stiff, and he was afraid to pull on them too hard in case they snapped in the cold. He made a mental note to get the plastic lines on *Mother Load* changed to black rubber as soon as he could. The last thing he needed was to lose the trailer’s brakes coming down some ice-covered roadway that was just wide enough for a single truck with no wiggle room on either side.

He managed to get the lines to reach the trailer without pulling too hard on them and was pleased at how easily the glad hands came together. There was that familiar hiss as he connected them, then silence as soon as they were connected. A perfect fit.

“Everything okay?” he called down to Jimmy.

“It’s all good,” came the reply.

“Then let’s hit the ice.”

Mark and Jimmy climbed inside *Mother Load* and took a few moments to soak up the warmth inside the cab. Then, when Mark began to feel comfortable, he unzipped his coat and took off his hat.

“Man, is it ever cold out there,” Mark said under his breath.

“Just imagine how cold it’ll be the farther north we go.”

Mark looked at Jimmy with narrowed eyes. “I hate you.”

“I’m just saying.”

Mark disengaged the parking brake and put *Mother Load* in gear. “Here goes nothing.”

He eased out the clutch, and the truck lurched forward. Something didn’t feel right. “You sure everything looked good?”

“Yup.”

Mark tried it again. This time there was a shudder, but then *Mother Load* began to move. He gave it a bit more fuel and they were on their way.

Or so it seemed.

From the other side of the lot, somebody was running toward them waving his arms like they wanted them to stop.

“What now?” Mark said, stopping and engaging the parking brake. He waited until the man was at the side of the truck, then he rolled down his window. “What’s the problem?”

“One of the axles on your trailer isn’t turning.”

“What?” There had been no lights or warnings on the dashboard suggesting anything was wrong.

“It’s probably a frozen brake drum,” the man said.

Mark shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. How did anyone get anything done up here? “Get behind the wheel!” he told Jimmy. “And drive it a few feet when I tell you.”

He exited the cab and joined the other driver at the side of the truck.

“The middle wheel on the other side is stuck,” the man said as he walked around to the *Mother Load’s* passenger side. “Probably a bit of moisture in the brake line. Usually they unstick once you get going, but if they don’t start to move you can burn the wheel off the rim in four or five kilometres.”

“Thanks,” Mark said. Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Move it a bit!”

Jimmy put her in gear and advanced about 10 feet. Just like the man had said, the wheel of the middle axle didn’t move.

“See?”

“Yeah, how do I fix it?”

“You got a big mallet?”

“Rubber one for thumpin’ tires.”

“Not good enough. Hang on.”

The man walked across the lot to a white Volvo and retrieved a huge mallet from inside the cab. This was more than a hammer, with a giant iron head that looked big enough to drive a railway spike.

“A couple of whacks with this should do it,” he said.

He planted his feet, gripped the mallet firmly with two hands and swung it so the big iron head pounded the wheel’s rim. A loud metallic clink cut through the air, followed by another, and another.

“That’s probably enough.”

“Move it again!” Mark shouted.

Jimmy pulled forward, and this time the middle wheel turned with the others.

“There you go,” the man said. “If that didn’t work, then we could’ve tried banging on the brake drum itself.”

“This is good to know.”

“Some companies paint lines on their trailer tires to make stuff like this easier to see. It doesn’t happen every day, but often enough to be a problem.”

“Yeah, a wheel not turning would have been bad,” Mark said, especially considering the kind of start he’d already had to the day.

“Every time you do your circle check, pound on the wheel rims a couple of times. The vibration’s usually enough to unstick the brakes.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

Jimmy stuck his head out the window. “Hey Mark, the other guys in our convoy are on the radio wondering where we are.”

Mark shook the man’s hand. “I gotta go.”

“Have a safe trip.”

“Thanks.” Mark had every intention of driving safely to the end of the ice road.

If only he could get to it.

As Mark and Jimmy pulled out of the NWTT lot, a single black freightliner bobtailed past them, on its way in.

CHAPTER 10



Mark and Jimmy pulled up to a cluster of three rigs already parked along a red line at Yellowknife dispatch. All were carrying bags of concrete similar to the ones on the back of Mark's flatbed. Obviously concrete was a supply that was much needed by the mines, as was fuel, since every other truck heading north seemed to be a B-train tanker hauling diesel. Seeing those tankers, and knowing they had to weigh upwards of 60 000 kilograms each, Mark was happy to be hauling concrete.

Mark brought *Mother Load* to a stop and left her idling while he got out to speak to the other drivers. Jimmy followed a few steps behind.

"Where you been?" asked an old-timer who was bundled up in some of the thickest — and no doubt warmest — coat, pants and boots he'd ever seen.

Mark smiled. "Let's just say I've been learning a lot about extreme cold-weather driving these last couple of days."

"You a rookie?"

"I've been driving for half my life," Mark said. "But this is the farthest north I've ever been."

Jimmy came up beside Mark then, and Mark realized that the two of them probably looked to the others like the greenest drivers of the season.

"And you're a team?"

The other two drivers chuckled and Mark wondered what was so wrong about being a team. "I don't get it," Mark said. "What so funny?"

“We don’t get a lot of teams up here,” said the old-timer.

“The point of driving the ice road is to make a lot of money in a short period of time. Between the two of you, you’ll get extra loads, but you won’t get twice as many loads.”

“Yeah, well money isn’t everything.”

“Don’t tell me,” said one of the other drivers, his voice coated in sarcasm. “You saw that ice road trucking show on TV and thought you’d come up here for some excitement?”

This time it was Jimmy who spoke up. “No, it’s not like that at all.”

Mark wondered if Jimmy would blurt out that they were there because someone was out to kill them, and they were trying to vanish off the face of the earth for a while, but he managed to keep that bit of info bottled up inside. It didn’t matter anyway, because the other driver had already made up his mind about who they were and what they were about . . . and it wasn’t favourable.

“Look, we don’t need any ice road tourists up here. This kind of trucking isn’t about adventure and danger, it’s about safety and professionalism. The last thing we need is for one of our lives to be placed in danger because you came up here for a little adventure.”

“I never thought that — ” Mark tried to say, but the man just kept on talking.

“You want to be a hero, join the army. They need truck drivers too, you know.”

Mark couldn’t see Jimmy’s face, but he could hear him breathing hard behind him. Mark didn’t like this guy’s rant any more than Jimmy did, but Mark was a realist. These guys were out making a living and along comes a show that tells the world that if you drive across a frozen lake and make it to your destination, it’s a miracle. They’ve no doubt seen countless drivers coming north in search of adventure, making their job harder and more dangerous in the process. Mark didn’t begrudge them their opinions, and he wasn’t about to challenge them on it.

“Mark’s a great driver,” Jimmy said. “You should’ve seen the time — ”

Mark put out a hand and cut Jimmy off. “What Jimmy’s saying

is, I'm happy to learn from experienced guys like you, and if you see anything I'm doing wrong or could do better, don't hesitate to let me know. If it makes you fellas feel any better, I don't really want to be here. See, a crazy set of circumstances brought me here, but now that I am here, I want to do this job as safely as you guys do it so I can go home with a pocketful of dollars and a truck that's still in one piece."

Jimmy closed his mouth.

The other drivers were silent a while. Then the old-timer said, "All right, then. Let's go. I'll take the lead," he pointed to the others, "you take second, you third." He looked at Mark, you guys bring up the rear."

"Last," Mark said. "Is that good or bad?"

The third driver, the one who hadn't spoken yet, stepped forward and put a hand on Mark's shoulder. "Since it's your first trip on the ice, you'd be last no matter whose convoy you were in. See, when someone drives too fast over the ice, a pressure wave builds up in front of the truck."

"Yeah, they told us about that in orientation."

"Right, well the pressure wave is one of the most dangerous things about driving on the ice. The wave can crack the ice in front of you as it rolls, but more dangerous is what happens to the guy driving behind you."

Mark didn't quite understand how that worked, and his face must have expressed his confusion.

"I know, it's hard to imagine, but hear me out." He took a breath. "When you come upon land, that wave rolls out in front of you, reaches the shoreline, then bounces back out over the ice. The guy traveling behind you has a pressure wave of his own building in front of his truck and when the two waves meet, it can cause the ice to crack and shatter. They call it a blowout."

A blowout, Mark thought. That sounded serious.

"The ice can break up and the guy following you — who had been driving the limit and doing everything right — has suddenly got a couple of wheels in the water and he's jumping out of his truck like it's on fire."

“I see,” Mark said, understanding now. If he had his choice, he wouldn’t want to be following a rookie on his first trip either.

“So, that’s why you’re last. If you screw up, at least you won’t get one of us killed or put one of our trucks through the ice.” He extended a hand to shake Mark’s hand. “So, no hard feelings.”

“No,” Mark said, reaching out. “No offense taken.”

“Good,” the driver said, giving Mark’s hand a few extra shakes. “Welcome to the north.”

They drove northeast along the Ingraham Trail, a road that rose, dipped and wound for some 70 kilometres until it met up with the southern tip of Tibbitt Lake and the start of the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road.

The Ingraham Trail was somewhere in between a trail and a road, and although it was never meant to be a highway, it had been pressed into service as a very busy commercial highway carrying thousands of big rigs and other vehicular traffic each winter. Like most roads in the north, even though it was a pretty good for the territories, anywhere else in Canada, it would be considered a secondary road in both quality and construction.

But that didn’t matter now.

Mark and Jimmy were rolling with a heavy load of concrete, and they were about to embark on an ice road adventure.

Every so often Mark would glance over at Jimmy and smile. The kid reminded him of a puppy who was on his first ride in a truck and thought that the open window and the wind blowing in his face was the best, thing, ever!

“This is it!” he would shout as if they were moments from the ice. Then, after five or so kilometres he would add, “We’re getting closer to the ice!”

He’d gone through his routine twice — once when they passed a large frozen lake on their left that was just that, a large frozen lake — before the convoy actually began to slow down.

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy asked.

“I think we’re here.”

“You mean, this is it!?”

Mark nodded. This was it. Although he wasn’t jumping up and down in his seat like Jimmy was, Mark was still plenty excited to be heading out over the ice. Or perhaps anxious was a better word. They’d already driven on the ice road over the Mackenzie River, but this would be with a load. If he thought trucks weren’t meant to drive over frozen water before, he sure as hell hadn’t changed his mind now that there was 45 000 kilograms of load behind him.

Two of the trucks ahead had come to a stop at the end of the trail, meaning the first truck was already on the ice.

“500 metres,” said the driver of the first truck.

The radio was set to LADD 1. Everyone truck in the Northwest Territories was required to have a VHF radio, and every truck on the ice roads had to be on LADD 1. Fortunately, *Mother Load* had always been equipped with a VHF radio that had the LADD 1 frequency, so he didn’t have to upgrade his radio for the trip north.

As the call came from the first truck, the second truck in the line headed out onto the ice, slowly at first, and then slowly the rest of the way.

“Wow, he’s really moving!” Jimmy said.

Mark detected the sarcasm in Jimmy’s voice and didn’t bother responding.

Another minute or so passed, then there was another “500” over the radio.

The third truck in the convoy headed out.

Mark moved forward until he was at the top of the decline that led down to the lake.

Then he waited.

It seemed like forever, but eventually the truck ahead of them called out the half-kilometre mark.

And just like that, it was time for Mark and Jimmy to become ice road truckers.

“This is it!,” Jimmy said yet again.

“This is it,” Mark agreed.

Mark shifted *Mother Load* into first and moved forward. He kept his speed to 10 km/hr going down the incline and kept that speed constant until he was safely onto the ice road. When he was on the ice, he pressed slightly on the accelerator and gradually brought the truck’s speed up to a blistering 25 km/hr as he completed the long, sweeping right-hand turn that put him on the longest, flattest and whitest sheet of ice he’d ever seen in his life.

“We’re on the water!” Jimmy said.

“Yes, we are,” Mark responded. It took him a few moments to realize it, but for some reason, Mark had been holding his breath. What had he expected to happen, that he’d fall through the ice or hear some crack occur beneath his rig that would have him driving for his life?

He took a deep breath and settled into the task of driving at 25 km/hr and calling out his spacing. If speeding and spacing were the most common infractions on this road, then he was going to do everything in his power to avoid making those mistakes.

“Ice road trucking,” Jimmy said with a slight pump of his fist. He was still bouncing a bit in his seat, but there wasn’t much urgency or excitement in the bounce.

Jimmy, like Mark, must have realized that traveling 25 km/hr for 16 hours on some of the straightest, flattest road they’d ever been on made their biggest challenge simply not to fall asleep or be overcome by boredom.

And then, there it was.

Jimmy yawned.

Mark sighed, thinking, Geez, I hope we make it.

CHAPTER 11



After just two kilometres on the ice road, the convoy reached the first portage, and on it, the Meadows Security Check-in. The trucks had to stop there for convoy grouping and spacing control, and Mark took his spot on the northbound side of the road and waited.

When he saw the other drivers get out of their trucks and walk over to the security trailer to check in, he told Jimmy, “Wait here.”

“See if they have coffee,” Jimmy said.

“I’ll see,” Mark said, leaving the truck to check in himself.

The inside of the trailer was sparse, with a sink, bathroom, cot, and a larger room that had a computer in it. On the computer screen was a chart with every truck on the ice road on it — where they were, where they should be, when they should be arriving at the checkpoint — anything to do with scheduling and safety.

Everything was good with Mark and the rest of the convoy, and they were all given the green light to be on their way.

“You have any coffee here?” he asked.

“Just finished the pot,” the security man said. “Be a few minutes before a fresh pot’s ready.”

One of the other drivers, the third in the convoy, stepped up and said, “You haven’t got the time to wait. Besides, the coffee here is terrible. If you can wait a bit, it’s a lot better at Dome Lake.”

The driver left the trailer, and Mark followed him outside.

“How long before we get there?” Mark asked.

“‘Bout an hour. It’s just a maintenance camp and haul trucks don’t really stop there, but they’ve got a kitchen. If you can hold off, it’s worth the wait.”

“We’ll be making another stop in an hour?”

“I think the lead driver can be persuaded.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” the man said. He was an old-timer, and judging by his well-worn coat and heavy pants, you could just tell he’d been driving the ice road for years. “You would have found out about the coffee yourself as soon as you got to the camp.”

“No, not about that so much,” Mark said. “I mean thanks for talking to me. I wasn’t feeling so warm and fuzzy back at NWTT.”

The man laughed. “There’s not a lot that’s warm and fuzzy on this road.”

“I might be new, but I’m a good driver.”

“No doubt. But you gotta understand that there are a lot of guys who come up here looking to make money for themselves . . . at everyone else’s expense.”

“I don’t want to be that guy.”

“Good. Keep to the limit, and you’ll be fine. You start going too fast, even five kilometres over the limit, and you’ll damage your truck, the ice, and maybe somebody else on the road.”

Mark recalled what he was told in the orientation session. It was 25 km/hr loaded, 60 km/hr empty on the return trip express lanes, 30 km/hr on the portages and just 10 km/hr getting on and off the portages. It seemed simple enough, but it really helped having an experienced driver restate it for him outside of a classroom where the best learning always seemed to take place.

“Appreciate that,” Mark said. “Anything else you can tell me?”

“Not to beat a dead horse, but it can get cold up here. Real cold. It sometimes goes down to -70, and steel on your truck will start to snap and break. You go too fast, that’s going to help it along. And if you break down on the road, the quality of the rescue you’re going to get isn’t all that good at -70. Drive the limit, and keep your truck running.”

Mark hadn’t thought of that aspect of operating in cold weather, so it was another nugget of knowledge he’d rather be told about than learn first-hand.

“On other roads alcohol is a problem. That’s not a problem up here, but drugs are, especially the ones that help keep you awake. The money’s tempting, but don’t risk your life to get it. If you want to last up here, keep your hours straight and get your rest. You’ve got 67 days or so to make as much money as some drivers make in a year, but you can’t make a dime while your truck is sitting in a ditch.”

Mark nodded. “I think I’m getting it. Safety first. Keep to the limit and get plenty of rest.”

“That’s it,” the man said. “You do that and you’ll do fine.”

The first truck in their convoy started moving then. Time had come to drive the ice road for real. Mark felt he was ready.

As he walked toward the idling *Mother Load*, he saw a minivan coming down the ice road. It was an odd sight, like a fish out of water, and Mark stopped to watch the minivan pass.

It was full of tourists.

Japanese tourists, it seemed. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen them in the north, and they seemed like they were having themselves a good time. Mark couldn’t imagine coming to this forsaken place for a pleasure trip himself, but he could understand the attraction.

The minivan beeped at Mark as it passed him.

He waved.

Six people inside waved back.

He continued on to *Mother Load*.

“Were you able to get me a coffee?” Jimmy asked when he got inside.

“Relax,” Mark said. “What’s your hurry?”

Jimmy had a confused look on his face. “I’m not in a hurry. I just want a cup of coffee.”

“Dome Lake Maintenance Camp is about an hour up the road. I was told you can get coffee there.”

“All right,” Jimmy said. “I’ll wait.”

Mark put *Mother Load* in gear and inched forward. When he heard the truck ahead of him call out the 500-metre mark, he eased up fully on the clutch and they were back on the road.

Later that day, the black Freightliner pulled up to the offices of the Yellowknife Dispatch yard, near the Bristol Airplane Monument at the intersection of Old Airport Road and Highway No. 3. The driver left his truck running, then walked over toward the security trailer, his black clothing a stark contrast to the surrounding ice and snow.

“Hey, how’s it goin’?” he asked as he stepped through the door.

The man at the computer asked the driver’s name, who he was hauling for, and what kind of load he had on board.

After the man in black gave him the information, the dispatcher said, “You’re early.”

The man smiled. “I guess I got a jump on the others in my convoy,” he said. “They should be here any minute.”

The dispatcher seemed unimpressed. “You don’t get points up here for being early. You get them for being on time.”

Obviously, it was great to be a keener, but not at the expense of the rules.

“I guess I’ll have to wait for them, then.”

“Yes you will,” the dispatcher said, turning his attention back to the chart on his computer screen.

The man in black took an empty chair and sat down. “I wonder if you could help me. I heard a guy I know was up here driving, but I haven’t run into him yet.”

“It’s a big, long road. Lots of drivers.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m seeing, but maybe you seen him pass through here.”

“You have a name?”

“Dalton. Mark Dalton.”

The dispatcher slid his mouse across the table and clicked it a couple of times.

Finally he turned his head away from the screen. “He’s headed north. Six, seven, eight convoys ahead of you.”

“That’s great.”

“Friend of yours, is he?”

“You could say that. He’s a friend of a friend, and my friend was hoping I’d run into him up here on the ice road.”

“Well, he’s not too far ahead of you. You’ll probably catch up to him when you reach Lockhart Lake. They’ll probably be stopped for a rest there when you arrive.”

“That’s great,” the man in black said with a smile. “I’m really looking forward to meeting up with him.”

CHAPTER 12



As they approached the Dome Lake Maintenance Camp, Mark listened carefully to the radio for any indication they'd be stopping for a rest or break.

But all there was on the radio was the continuous calling out of spacing numbers.

"Are we going to stop, or not?" Jimmy asked.

Mark shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I'm at the back of this convoy, not the front. How badly do you need a coffee?"

"I'd like to have one, but more importantly, I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Okay, then." Mark was about to get onto the radio, but stopped himself. He didn't want to use the radio for anything that wasn't urgent, but then again if it was no big deal and he missed a chance to stop, Jimmy wouldn't let him forget it the rest of the way.

He picked up the radio.

"This is *Mother Load* at the tail end . . . my rider wants to know if we're stopping at Dome Lake. Seems he needs a bathroom break."

The radio was silent for several long, awkward seconds.

"Don't you have a bottle on board for this sort of thing?" came one response.

Mark looked over at Jimmy, and the young man didn't look too thrilled at the prospect of peeing into a bottle.

“I have one,” Mark responded on the radio. “But it’s just for emergencies.”

“How bad does he have to go?” said one driver.

“Use the bottle if you have to,” said another, “just hang onto it until the next stop.”

Again, Mark looked at Jimmy.

Jimmy shook his head, no.

“He says he’ll wait,” Mark said. “But I’ve got the bottle ready.”

“Relax *Mother Load*,” said the lead driver over the radio. “We’ll be stopping at Dome to inspect our rigs. There are facilities there.”

Jimmy seemed relieved, even though he still needed to go to the bathroom.

Up ahead, the first truck in the convoy reported reaching the portage that led to the Dome Lake Maintenance Camp.

“Glad I waited,” Jimmy said.

They were able to use the facilities at Dome Lake Maintenance Camp, and the convoy was ready to go about 15 minutes after their arrival.

When Mark saw Jimmy return to *Mother Load* he said, “Feeling better.”

Jimmy nodded.

“I saw coffee in there. Why didn’t you get some?”

Jimmy smiled. “I talked to a couple of guys inside and they suggested I hold off on the coffee for now. We’re going to be on some really long ice roads and unless I want to use the bottle to relieve myself, I should try and avoid any liquids, especially diuretics that will help make me go. I’m just going to have some orange juice and leave the coffee for the rest stop at Lockhart Lake.”

That made sense to Mark. The next stretch before the rest stop was close to 150 km and 50 of those were over Gordon Lake. One

of the prime rules of the ice road was no stopping over lake ice, and Mark wasn't experienced enough to be comfortable with going to the bathroom on the move. So, it was best to avoid that scenario, especially on their first trip north.

"I think you're wise," Mark said.

"Thanks, but I am wondering what we're going to do for snacks along the way. We've got at least a six-hour stretch ahead of us and there's no gas stations or snack bars along the way."

"I've got some stuff in the fridge . . . a couple of granola bars. We should be all right."

The truck leading the convoy started moving.

"All right, then," Mark said. "Let's go."

Jimmy sat up straight in his seat. "I can't wait to see what the rest of the road looks like."

Mark turned and stared at him.

Jimmy broke out laughing. "I've seen snow and ice," he said. "Maybe now I'll get to see some ice and snow."

Mark laughed too. "Chances are good."

They pulled into the Lockhart Maintenance Camp about six and a half hours later. Mark and Jimmy were both feeling stiff and sore, but neither of them were in desperate need to use the facilities, and drowsiness had never been an issue on the road.

Mark was pleased. An uneventful few hours to the midway point of their drive was exactly what he'd hoped for. Now that he'd done it, he was confident he could do this ice road thing and was beginning to consider the possibility of doing ice road trucking annually. He still had a long way to go, but what he'd experienced so far hadn't been too bad. Six weeks of this kind of driving each year sounded about right. Hopefully he'd feel the same way when he finished the run.

The parking lot of the camp was huge, stretching out for what seemed like acres in every direction. Just from what Mark could see, there were eight B-train tankers, 10 empty flatbeds heading

south, and four flatbeds loaded — like Mark’s truck — with bags of cement. In 20 minutes the makeup of trucks in the yard would change and probably did so minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, around the clock, just like it would at any busy truck stop on the 401.

Mark pulled up even with the truck that had been in front of him in the convoy. After he’d set the break he found himself reaching for the ignition key to shut the motor down, but he caught himself as his fingers reached the key and he pulled his hand back as if the key had been hot to the touch.

“You okay?” Jimmy asked, noticing Mark’s jerky movement.

“I nearly shut it down.”

“Old habits die hard.”

As Mark did a quick check of his gauges, there was a knock on his window. He looked over and saw the old-timer who’d been third in the convoy.

Mark rolled down his window.

“Before you leave your truck,” he said. “Rock it back and forth a few feet.”

“Why’s that?”

“It compacts the snow in front and behind your tires and prevents them from freezing to the ground or settling into a rut.”

Mark had never thought about it, but it made sense. His wheel had to be warm from the drive and if he left them in place without any preparation, they could melt the ground beneath them slightly and he’d find himself trying to get out of a rut in the morning — an 18-wheel rut.

“And if you can, look for a bit of a downgrade. It’s all pretty flat here, but if you can find a slight hill to park on, it can really help you get moving if you’re frozen in place.”

“Thanks for the tips,” Mark said, reversing his truck five or six feet, then moving forward the same distance. He repeated that twice more, then settled the truck in the middle of his tracks and set the parking brake again.

This time, he didn’t even think about reaching for the key and shutting off the engine.

Outside the truck, Mark and Jimmy met up with the other three drivers in their convoy. They were smiling now, seemingly over their distrust of a new driver, but not exactly ready to accept Mark into their fraternity.

“How’d you like that?” the lead driver asked.

“As far as driving goes,” Mark said. “It’s been pretty boring, but you can’t mistake boring for easy.”

The other driver smiled and nodded his approval.

“The challenge, is all up here,” Mark continued, tapping a finger to his temple. “And I think driving an ice road is harder on my truck than it is on me.”

“Let’s hope you’re still talking this way in three weeks.”

“Why? What’s happening in three weeks?”

“Nothing,” said the first driver. “It’ll be exactly the same kind of driving, only there’ll be more snow, less sleep and a customer that wants to give you as many loads as you can take.”

The number three driver took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. “There’s plenty of money to be made,” he said, “but there’s a temptation to do too much.” He took a drag on his cigarette. “See, the driving’s not bad when you’re rested, and the sun’s shining. But then you get tired, and the weather gets bad, and you start to cut corners.”

Jimmy took a step forward, joining the conversation. “Like how?”

“You start fudging your log book, or you drive a few hours over to squeeze in another run, or you run your truck with something broken on it figuring you’ll get it fixed at the end of the season.”

“But how could that happen?” Jimmy asked. Mark was pleased he was curious and not afraid to ask questions of these more experienced drivers. “I thought safety was the number one thing up here?”

“It is,” said the old-timer driving third in the convoy. “But you get some experience on the ice road, and it gets easier for you, and

you begin to take things for granted. Things that could save your life.”

Driver two exhaled a plume of smoke. “The problem is, this kind of driving can get routine, and it isn’t routine. There’s nothing routine about driving in -30 weather, or driving over frozen water.”

“If you drive every trip over the ice like it’s your first, you’ll be all right. It’s when you drive your hundredth trip like it’s the hundredth time you’ve done it that will get you into trouble.”

“That’s good advice,” Jimmy said. “Thanks.”

“Now that that’s out of the way,” the lead driver said. “Our hours are up and we’ll all be staying here overnight. You two, as a team, can hook up with another convoy if you like, or you can sleep here and continue on with us in the morning.”

“They’ve got beds here, right?”

The lead driver nodded. “Yup, and laundry and showers and a pretty good cafeteria.”

Jimmy looked over at Mark as if to ask what they would be doing, but he already knew what Jimmy wanted, and what would be best for the both of them. “We’ll stay with you guys.”

“Glad to hear it,” the lead said. He turned toward the number two driver. “Now if you’re done smoking, let’s get the hell inside. It’s cold out here, if you haven’t noticed.”

The man put out his cigarette in the snow, then carried the butt with him so he could toss it in the trash when he got inside.

Mark smiled, knowing that the penalties for littering up here were just as stiff as they were for speeding.

CHAPTER 13



The accommodations at the Lockhart Camp were better than Mark had expected. There had been a selection of foods in the cafeteria to satisfy drivers who were at different parts of their day. While it might be 5:00 in the afternoon, it was possible for a driver to be just awaking from a long sleep and wanting a meal that was closer to breakfast than dinner. Then there were drivers who stopped for a short time wanting only a hot cup of coffee and a muffin, and maybe a sandwich or two for the road.

Mark had eaten a classic meal of meat and potatoes, veggies and salad, finishing with a coffee and piece of apple pie. After dinner he and Jimmy did a load of laundry each, and finished off with a hot shower before bedtime.

When they were ready for bed, they picked out a pair of beds in the dormitory.

“You think this’ll be okay?” Jimmy asked.

Mark pulled back the sheets on his cot and began getting out of his driving clothes. “What do you mean?”

The man sleeping on the cot behind Jimmy farted. Jimmy just looked at Mark as if asking if he needed to say anything more.

“So what? You won’t be passing gas through the night?”

“Probably, I guess so.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“It’s noisy.”

Mark said nothing for a moment and just listened. There were probably six men snoring in the room, while random farts and

coughs cut through the snores every so often. It was the sound of hard-working men at rest. “Yeah, but it’s the kind of noise that, after a while, you get so used to it you don’t hear it any more.”

Jimmy sighed. “I suppose.”

Mark sat down on the edge of his cot and undid his boots. “You’re welcome to sleep in the truck if you like.”

Jimmy thought about it, but Mark knew he wouldn’t venture outside. Even with the truck running and an APU providing additional heat, it would never be warm enough inside the cab to be truly comfortable. “I’ll stay,” he said at last, his voice all drawn out in disappointment.

“Good,” Mark said, knowing Jimmy wasn’t really okay with it, but was saying so just so he didn’t make any waves.

Obviously, Jimmy needed a little pick-me-up. Mark had thought he’d wait until the morning to tell him, but he needed something now to help get him through the night. “You’re going to need all the rest you can get seeing as you’ll be driving tomorrow.”

“What?” Jimmy’s entire face went from dark to bright as if a flashlight had been beamed into his eyes. “I’m going to drive . . .”

“Yeah, why not. You’ve got as much experience as I had when I started on ice.”

“But you didn’t have any.”

“Exactly, so get some sleep.”

“I’ll try.”

Jimmy hurried to change and was in his cot and under the covers in minutes.

“Don’t you want to brush your teeth?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jimmy got up and headed to the bathroom.

Mark lay down, confident Jimmy would do fine out on the ice.

Mark rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling. The accommodations were comfortable enough, but he was still having trouble sleeping.

As Jimmy had pointed out, the dorm room was noisy with a dozen or so snoring drivers, none of them seemingly able to get through the night without getting up to go to the bathroom two or three times each. On top of that, the trucks outside — going north and south — rumbled continuously as they came and went all night long.

But the noise and activity wasn't what was keeping Mark awake. Jimmy certainly wasn't bothered by it anymore, his snores sometimes sounding like a Cummins running up through the gears. Mark should have been sleeping like that as well, but he was too concerned about the fact that someone wanted to kill him. It was sort of a difficult thing to get out of your mind.

Were the authorities looking for this person?

Did they have any leads?

Was there just one person out to kill him or were there many? Bruno Scorsese was a very well-connected man, not to mention rich, and if he wanted someone dead, there was nothing he wouldn't, or couldn't, do to make sure that person ended up that way.

If the end came, how would it happen? Would it be painless, like a gunshot from a distance, or would it be long and painful like slow torture that sent a message?

And what about Jimmy?

Mark had taken him on to teach him how to drive a long-haul big rig, but instead he'd put him in harm's way and got him a death sentence that had forced him into hiding. What he should have done was pay Jimmy out and buy him a plane ticket for Moncton as soon as they'd reached Vancouver. If he'd sent him on his way, the boy would be driving across the Maritimes in his very own truck by now.

Some coach Mark turned out to be.

Not only was he teaching him how to drive, but also how to hide. Surely, whoever was looking for Mark was looking for Jimmy too and would kill the boy as well, probably just as an add-on to the contract . . . at no extra charge.

The question now was, how close was this person to finding them?

Mark rolled over onto his side and put his pillow over his head to block out the noise in the room.

Muffled by the pillow over his ears, Mark heard another driver enter the room. But instead of walking directly through the dormitory back to his bed like the rest of them, this driver walked slowly through the room.

Purposefully, it seemed.

Mark pulled the pillow away from his ear and listened. The man's footsteps were slow and intermittent, as if he were doing a bed check or head count.

There would be a step or two, then nothing. A step or two, then nothing.

Mark thought about taking a look to see what was going on, but he was comfortable and he could feel sleep just starting to envelop him.

The man was moving through the entire dormitory, stopping at the foot of each bed, then continuing on. Mark could hear him getting closer to where Mark and Jimmy were sleeping.

It was as if he were looking for something.

Or someone.

"Everything okay?" someone whispered to the man, obviously annoyed.

"Yeah, it's good."

Mark rolled over just enough to catch a glimpse of the man standing over him. He was a big man, dressed in black . . . except for the patch on his sleeve near the shoulder. It was white, with yellow and red markings and blue writing, one of the words being security.

Det'On Cho Scarlet Security.

Mark smiled in relief.

"Then find a bed or get the hell out of here," the sleeping driver moaned. "People are trying to sleep."

“Right, sorry,” the security guard said, then exited the dorm.

The man hadn’t been someone sent to kill him after all, but rather a security guard charged with Mark’s safety and security, as well as the safety and security of hundreds of other drivers on the ice road.

Mark decided his fears had been unfounded. There was no one up here trying to kill him, and the only thing he needed to worry about was driving over the ice.

He took a deep breath, sighed, and soon found himself drifting off to sleep.

CHAPTER 14



In the morning Mark and Jimmy awoke rested and ready to take on the ice road.

Their first task was to check on *Mother Load*, still idling out in the yard. Mark climbed up into the cab and checked all the gauges and decided everything was in order. Not bad for an overnight chill that dipped below -40. He turned on the APU to get some extra heat into the cab while they ate breakfast.

Back in the cafeteria, Jimmy had already taken a seat at a table with the three other drivers in their convoy.

“Your truck okay?” one of the drivers asked.

Mark nodded. “Idling’s okay. Not too cold in the cab. All the gauges look right.”

“Did you check under the cowl around the motor?” the lead driver asked.

“No,” Mark said. “What for?”

“It doesn’t happen too often, but it’s not a bad idea to check for any animals that might have crept up inside overnight. It’s cold for them out there, too, and if they can find a warm spot to sleep in, they’ll take it.”

“Saw a fox once,” said the old-timer. “Crawled up into a ball inside a wheel well. Took a while to scare ‘im off.”

“So, caribou isn’t the only animal I have to watch out for?” Mark said.

“Feh,” the old-timer snorted. “The ice road is policed by caribou, but they’re soft. Not like moose. Caribou versus a big rig, big rig always wins. Still cost you a fortune in repairs, though.”

“What about polar bears?” Jimmy interjected.

The old-timer laughed. “The territory likes to use polar bears on all their literature and logos, but you won’t be seeing any on the road. You’ve got to be on the ocean for that, and we don’t go that far north.”

“Oh,” Jimmy said, a little defeated.

“C’mon, Jimmy,” Mark said. “Let’s eat.”

Jimmy’s face brightened. “I’m starved.”

The breakfast served up at the Lockhart Lake Camp was as good or better than those served in any all-day-breakfast diner in the country. It was a great start to the day, but the conversation proved even better.

There was still a lot Mark and Jimmy needed to know, and although the learning curve was steep in the north, there was a lot of info they could get just by asking the right questions.

“Any of you guys gone through the ice?” Jimmy asked to get the discussion going.

They all shook their head, but it was the old-timer who answered the question with words. “There are a bunch of rules for driving the ice road, and they didn’t just think them up last week. They came up with them over 30 years to make sure a mistake that happened in the past doesn’t happen in the future.”

“I remember hearing about three trucks that went through the ice last year in Alaska,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah, I heard about them too. Driving too fast and too close together.”

The other drivers nodded in agreement.

“Look at it this way,” the old-timer continued. “The ice road has rules, just like any road or highway has rules. For example, every road has a speed limit and lines on it. You drive the limit and stay in between the lines, you’ll be fine. But if you go beyond the limit and start driving outside the lines, you still might be able to reach your destination in one piece but the chances of something going wrong go up exponentially. And on top of that, if something bad happens, you’d got nobody else to blame because there wasn’t anyone around you for

half a kilometre in either direction. Every accident you're in is your fault because you weren't following the rules."

"Sure is hard to get the thought of falling through the ice out of your head, though," Mark said.

"Of course it is, and it should be," the lead driver said. "No matter how safe they make the road, you're still driving on frozen water, and that's not natural. On top of that, you've got B-train fuel tankers weighing 63 000 kilograms. That's a lot of weight for any road, never mind ice that's three and a half feet thick."

The second driver stirred the coffee in his cup and set down his spoon. "Remember too that the condition and thickness of the ice road is dependent on the weather. If the weather stays cold, no problem. But every once in a while Mother Nature doesn't cooperate, and the whole operation suffers."

"Like in 2006."

"What happened then?" Jimmy asked.

"It was the warmest winter in decades," the old-timer said. "The average temperature was 7° above normal all winter long. The road opened a week late and closed early, never even reached maximum thickness."

"Only half the loads got through," said the second driver. "The rest had to be sent by air. Cost everybody millions and millions of dollars."

"Did anyone go through the ice?" Jimmy asked.

Mark knew the answer, but he still wanted to hear what the other drivers had to say.

"No," the old-timer said. "There were some real big cracks, but they were able to shore them up with big wooden mats that spread the weight around. After they closed the road down and took a good look at some parts of the ice, it seemed a miracle no one went through. Now they make the road better . . . smarter. The road goes around any problem spots, the ice is stronger, and there are extra lanes for the return trips, making your turnaround time quicker."

Jimmy sat up in his chair. "So you can make more money."

Mark took note, thinking Jimmy might have started thinking about himself as an owner/operator and his business options, not just about buying a truck of his own.

“That’s right. The only thing that matters is delivering your load safely and on time. You do that, you can have as many loads as you like.”

Jimmy was smiling, and Mark had an idea the boy had plans of driving the ice roads on his own in the very near future.

Fifteen minutes later, the convoy was ready to roll out.

When they got to *Mother Load*, she was still idling dutifully in the yard. Mark and Jimmy both did the circle check, Jimmy looking at their load of cement and Mark taking care of the trailer, fifth wheel and everything under the cowl. When they got into the cab, it had warmed up to where they could start the day off without having to wear their heavy winter coats for the first 15 km.

“Ready?” Mark asked Jimmy when the younger man was sitting comfortably behind the wheel.

“I’m a little nervous, but from everything I’ve heard, that’s a good thing.”

“That’s a very good thing.”

They waited for the other trucks to move out, calling out their spacing 500 metres at a time.

Finally, it was Jimmy’s turn to roll.

He was gentle on the clutch, and the entire rig eased smoothly forward without a hint of having frozen tires or driving out of a rut. The smooth start reminded Mark of the rough one he’d had back in Yellowknife, and he rolled down his window to shout out to a couple of drivers heading into the camp office.

“Are all my wheels moving?” he shouted.

The two drivers immediately scanned the length of his trailer a moment, then gave him the thumbs-up!

Mark waved his thanks to the drivers, then said to Jimmy, “We’re all good.”

“Then let’s roll.”

Jimmy pressed down on the accelerator, and *Mother Load* picked up some speed, heading north on the final leg to Lac de Gras Maintenance Camp and the Diavik Diamond Mine that lay just beyond it.

Inside the office of the Lockhart Lake Maintenance Camp, drivers from a convoy that had driven through the night were checking in.

One of the drivers was a large wiry man dressed all in black. After checking in with the dispatcher and making sure everything was in order, he asked a question.

“You know, I just heard a friend of mine is driving the ice road, and I haven’t been able to cross paths with him yet.”

“Oh yeah, what’s his name?”

“Mark Dalton.”

“Mark who?”

“Dalton. Mark. Dalton.”

The dispatcher looked at his computer screen, then checked the pile of papers on the desk in front of him. “Ah, I thought that name sounded familiar. You just missed him.” The dispatcher leaned to the left to better see out his window. “In fact, that’s his truck just pulling out of the yard now. You want me to call him on the radio for you?”

“No. No, that’s all right. I think it’ll be better if I surprise him.”

CHAPTER 15



“How you making out?” Mark asked.

“Good,” Jimmy answered. “I like this driving.”

They’d been on the ice road for more than three hours, and Jimmy had been keeping his speed constant, had never been far off on his spacing and his eyes were constantly moving from windshield to gauges to mirrors and back again in one continuous cycle. Mark would never admit as much to Jimmy, but the boy had taken to this type of driving better than Mark had.

“What do you like about it? The endless stretches of straight flat roads, the breakneck speeds or the fantastic scenery?”

“Yeah, okay, those things kind of suck,” Jimmy said, then shrugged. “I don’t know . . . I find it peaceful. You look around, and you can’t see a thing except snow and trees for miles and miles. There’s only one other truck you really have to worry about and even that’s a half kilometre in front of you.”

“Some people might call that boring.”

“Maybe, but driving in city traffic or even on a busy highway can be stressful. You can drive as carefully and safely as you like, but you’re always at the mercy of the drivers around you, and a lot of them don’t care about anyone but themselves. Up here, everyone seems to work together because their lives and livelihood depend on it.”

Mark understood what Jimmy was talking about and was glad that he hadn’t mentioned the money. The money was good, and you could make a lot of it in a short period of time, but Mark had a feeling that if you came north just looking to make money you

probably weren't going to make it on the ice road. Like anything else in life, doing the job well came first, and if you looked after that then the money would look after itself.

"So you think you might want to do this again?" Mark asked.

"Are you kidding, I'm already thinking about specking whatever truck I buy for this road and being here for the start of next year's season."

"Really."

"And I've also been thinking about fuel-efficiency on the ice roads."

"There's not much to be saved when engines run for three months at a time," Mark said.

"But that's where you're wrong."

"How so?"

"If your engine is precisely tuned, you can save fuel even when you're idling."

"Okay."

"And using cruise control as often as possible can ensure you're always driving the limit."

"I suppose."

"Even little things can change the aerodynamics of a truck . . . like taking down any big antennas or removing them completely since there's no radio reception up here anyway."

Mark nodded. That made sense.

"Smaller mirrors since you're not backing up that often. Keeping your windows shut, cleaning the ice and sludge off your fenders and fuel tanks for aerodynamics and weight. It all adds up, you know."

Mark could not disagree, and it was at that moment that he was certain that Jimmy would not only be a good driver, but a successful owner/operator too. He liked what he was doing, he was safety and fuel conscious, and he was thinking like a businessman, not just a truck driver.

As they rumbled on across the ice of MacKay Lake, Mark took a long look out his window. For some reason, the trees were gone, and now the landscape was an endless vista of varying shades of white. “Where did all the trees go?”

“We’ve passed the treeline,” Jimmy said. “They don’t grow anymore this far north.”

That would explain it, thought Mark. But without trees, or anything else to break up the horizon, driving just got that much more monotonous. “It’s like we’re driving on the moon.”

“I know,” Jimmy said. “Isn’t it cool?”

They reached the Lac de Gras Maintenance Camp roughly six hours after they left Lockhart Lake. Mark had wondered if they might stop here but the other members of the convoy wanted to push through to the Diavik Diamond Mine, just a few more kilometres past the camp.

As they came upon the mine, Mark was amazed at the size and scope of the operation. He’d seen pictures of the mine taken from airplanes but that didn’t help much when you were looking at the mine from ground level. The mine was spread out over a 20-km² island on Lac de Gras, so even though they were on site, it wasn’t like they could see where the mine was, or where anything was for that matter.

The most noticeable feature of the Diavik Mine in all the overhead photographs were its two huge funnels where dikes had first been built to gain access to the earth. Open sky mining created the two large pits that have since given way to underground operations that would be continuing on for the next 15 or so years.

Arriving on site, they checked in at the front gate. Mark was forced to ride in the sleeper as they picked up an escort that would guide them through the mine site to where their truck would be unloaded.

“I didn’t think the place would be so big,” Mark said, as they got underway.

“It’s easy to make a wrong turn if you don’t know where you’re going.” Their escort was a native man who wasn’t much for small talk. “This way,” he said pointing off to the right.

Both Mark and Jimmy were in awe of the traffic that was moving in and out of the camp. Trucks were constantly coming in and going out of the camp, no mean feat just 210 km south of the Arctic Circle.

The only thing Mark could compare the scene to was the Ontario Food Terminal, which was one big buzz of activity. This operation was like that, but everything was 10 times bigger and 100 times heavier.

With their escort directing them, they snaked *Mother Load* past the plant site and several waste and containment areas until they had reached the storage area where several trucks carrying bags of cement were waiting to be unloaded.

“Thanks,” Mark said, but before he could get the word out the escort was out the door and getting ready to guide an empty truck out of the camp.

Even though they were third in line, the wait was less than 10 minutes as a dedicated crane with a huge hook made quick work of the two dozen cement bags on the back of their flatbed.

When they were unloaded, they were directed to a staging area just off the storage site where they joined up with the other drivers in their convoy.

“Congratulations!” said the old-timer. “You made it.”

“Still have to get back to Yellowknife,” Mark said.

“You’ll be fine. Driving southbound with an empty trailer is easy. You can drive faster, and they’ve made twin express lanes to cut your turnaround time. If you’re lucky you can get back and be loaded before you run out of hours.”

“We better get going then,” Jimmy said.

“Take your time, young fella,” the old-timer said. “They’ve got a great cafeteria here. And if you’re going to get back to Yellowknife today, you won’t be doing it on an empty stomach.”

Jimmy rubbed his stomach. "I am kind of hungry."

"I could use a coffee," Mark said.

"Good, because you know what they say about drivers on the ice roads."

"No, what?"

"The good ones never speed, never get cold, and never go hungry."

The cafeteria at the Diavik Diamond Mine was just as well-stocked and staffed as the one at Lockhart Lake. There was an assortment of fresh foods, salads and beverages. Mark and Jimmy decided to have some meat and mashed potatoes, with a garden salad, apple pie and coffee. Since Jimmy had driven the second leg to the mine, Mark had a full sixteen hours of driving time available to him. And since they'd be driving back empty and allowed to go at 60 km/hr, they would be able to make it back to Yellowknife in a single go.

"I guess you don't have to worry about the ice as much when you're not loaded," Jimmy said.

The old-timer at table with them nodded. "The ice roads are built to specks that can handle more than 60 000 kilos. You've got an empty truck that weighs a fraction of that, and it's like a bicycle on a concrete slab."

Jimmy smiled. "We should be able to get another load by tomorrow morning, then."

"You're eager," said the old-timer. "That's good, but before you start counting your money, worry about getting back to Yellowknife in one piece."

"One thing at a time," Mark said.

"That's right," agreed the old-timer. "I remember my first year on the ice road —"

Suddenly there was a noise behind them of someone banging their hand down hard on a table top.

They all turned to see what was going on.

Two tables over, a driver was slumped over in his chair. One hand was still on the table while another one was digging inside his coat around his chest.

“What’s going on?” Jimmy said.

Mark stood. “He’s either choking or having a — ”

The driver rocked forward, hitting the table in front of him with his shoulder, then falling out of his chair onto the floor.

“ — cardiac arrest.”

Mark and Jimmy rushed over to where the man lay on the floor.

The man was curled up on his side and gasping for breath. There was a definite greyish color to his skin.

Mark wasn’t sure what he should do exactly, but he knew the man needed to be made comfortable. His coat was large and bulky and one sleeve came off as soon as he pulled at the cuff.

“Ugh,” the man groaned.

“Maybe we should try a defibrillator?” Jimmy said.

Mark turned and looked up at Jimmy. “That’s a good idea. Is there one around?”

“I’ll get it,” someone said.

Mark knew that if he was going to hook up a defibrillator, he’d need to get access to the man’s chest. Mark eased him flat on his back and began unbuttoning his shirt. There was an undershirt beneath and before he could even ask, there were two large knives offered to him to use.

Mark grabbed one of the knives and cut the undershirt from the bottom to the neck.

The defibrillator was there now, but Mark hadn’t a clue what to do with it. “Does anyone know how to work one of these things?” Like Mark, everybody in the room had probably had training on the machine at some point in their lives, but no one seemed to be stepping up . . .

Except for Jimmy.

“I’ll do it,” he said, opening up the machine’s case. “It’ll give instructions. You just have to do what it says.”

Mark watched as Jimmy took the pads out of the case and placed them on the man’s chest where the illustrations on the machine instructed.

Then a voice came on telling them to “Stand by.”

They waited.

Then it told them to “Move away from the patient.”

The crowd around them took a step backward.

“Prepare to defibrillate.”

Mark wasn’t sure what that meant, but it gave clear instructions to press a red button inside the case.

Jimmy searched the inside of the case for a clearly marked red button, and pressed it.

There was an unmistakable noise from the defibrillator that let everyone know that energy was being passed from the machine to the man’s body.

The machine told them to “Check for a pulse.”

Mark placed a finger on the man’s neck, but felt nothing.

“If no pulse, conduct CPR.”

The machine then gave clear instructions on how to perform the operation. Mark had taken CPR and First Aid before, but the instructions were helpful, especially on when and how many chest compressions to give.

Everyone waited for Mark to finish.

Again, the machine said, “Move away from the patient.”

Another second passed, and it told them to defibrillate.

Jimmy pressed the button.

Even before it asked, Mark was checking for a pulse.

“I think it’s there,” he said.

He could just feel the slight movement of blood under the pad of his finger.

Then it told them “Do not defibrillate.”

“Does that mean he’s okay?” Mark said.

“I think it means his heartbeat is regular again.”

Along with everyone else in the cafeteria, Mark and Jimmy watched as the man’s colour began returning to normal. His breathing also eased until it appeared he was at least comfortable.

By now someone had brought a pillow for under his head and a blanket to keep him warm.

At last the man blinked a couple of times, then opened his eyes. “What’s everyone looking at?” he said to the assembled crowd.

A mix of a cheer and a sigh of relief washed through the room.

“You okay?” Mark asked.

“Of course I’m okay,” he said. Then, “Who the hell are you?”

Mark smiled. The man seemed well on his way to being back to his old self again. “I’m Mark, and this is Jimmy. You were in some kind of cardiac distress.”

The man glanced down to see his exposed chest and the defibrillator paddles attached to him. “Like a heart attack?”

Mark nodded.

“No, no. I’ve got no time for a heart attack. I’ve got to deliver my load.”

“Sorry, Ron,” said someone behind Mark. He turned around and saw that it was someone from the mine who had something to do with ice road operations. “You know we can’t let you back on the road without being checked out by a doctor, first.”

“Really?” Ron said. “Since when do you have a doctor up here?”

There was a small chuckle from the crowd.

“We don’t. But there’s a supply flight coming in this afternoon. You’re going to be on it when it leaves.”

Ron took a deep breath, no doubt coming to the conclusion that it would be dangerous for himself and other drivers if he got

back behind the wheel. “What about my truck?” he said. “It’s got to keep running.”

“Maybe we can find a driver for you.”

Mark looked at Jimmy, but the boy didn’t need any encouragement.

“I could drive his truck,” Jimmy said. He pointed in Mark’s direction. “We’ve been driving as a team, and I’ve had my orientation and everything.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone in the room seemed to consider the offer.

“What do you say, Ron?” the man from the mine said. “I’d say that’s pretty lucky.”

Ron put a hand over his heart and felt the defibrillator pads still stuck to his chest. “Yeah, my lucky day.”

“You guys get him comfortable in a bed,” the mine man said. Then he looked at Jimmy. “You come with me.”

Mark watched Jimmy walk away with the company man, a slight swell of pride in his chest knowing that he’d done his best to prepare Jimmy for just such an opportunity. Mark was also proud that Jimmy jumped in to help with the downed man without a second’s hesitation. If he hadn’t, who knows what other arrangements the driver, and the company, might have had to make.

“Let’s get him onto the board,” someone said.

Mark looked around and saw that members of the mine’s safety crew had arrived with a board to transport Ron to somewhere he could be comfortable while he awaited for the plane to arrive to take him to Yellowknife.

The team worked quickly and efficiently to get Ron onto the board. As they worked, one of the crew asked Mark. “You the one who used the defib on him?”

“Yeah, myself and my co-driver.”

“Good job.”

Mark shrugged. It hadn’t been that hard. “The instructions were pretty easy to follow.”

“Still, you stepped up, and that’s pretty cool.”

The other drivers who’d been there the whole time, along with a bunch of other people who seemed to have showed up to see what was going on, chimed in, patting Mark on the back and telling him he was a hero.

What else was there to say but, “Thanks.”

He went back to his table, sat down, took a deep breath and sighed. He reached for his coffee cup and took a sip, but the coffee was cold.

He was about to refresh his cup, when Jimmy came back into the cafeteria, a set of keys in his hand and a grin on his face that went from ear to ear.

“Well,” Mark said, “what’s the news?”

“I’m taking over for Ron. He was part of a convoy headed to the Ekati Mine. Because of their hours, all of the drivers were going to stay overnight here, then head out in the morning. I’ll be with them then.”

“And after that?”

“They don’t know how serious it is, but they’re going to let me drive for him for as long as he’s out of commission. Could be a few days, could be a few weeks. The company man on the phone said if I don’t screw up, they’ll probably have a spot for me when Ron comes back anyway.”

And just like that, Mark was on his own. “Congratulations,” he said. “You are now the first, and probably only, student to graduate from the Mark Dalton Truck Driving Adventure School.”

“I’m honoured.”

“You should be.”

Mark was silent for a moment. “I guess I’ll be seeing you.”

“Maybe you can give me a ride back home when the season ends.”

“That’d be great,” Mark said. “I bet we’ll have some stories to tell.”

“I look forward to that.”

The two men hugged.

“In the meantime don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Mark said, slapping Jimmy on the back.

“That leaves me open for just about anything.”

“Yeah, I suppose it does.”

CHAPTER 16



Before Mark had finished his meal, the man from the mine came and sat down at his table.

“I just wanted to thank you for saving Ron’s life,” he said.

“I don’t know if I saved his life,” Mark said. “He might have pulled through if I hadn’t done anything to help him.”

“Maybe, but you did help him, and the company is grateful. We’ve got a good reputation for safety and having a driver die on mine property would be a bad thing for a lot of people.”

“Could have been worse.”

“Sure, he could have had his episode on MacKay Lake, driven off the ice road and gone through the ice somewhere where it’s too thin to support our salvage equipment . . .” He was silent a moment as no doubt the image of what he’d just talked about flashed across his mind. “But let’s not even think about that.”

“Okay.”

“Like I said, the company is grateful, and we thought we’d show you by giving you a load going south.”

“Southbound load?”

“They’re called backhauls. We don’t get a lot of them, about five or eight hundred a year compared to five to seven thousand northbound loads, but we do get them.”

Mark understood. He was being given the chance to make some extra money by carrying a load instead of driving back to Yellowknife empty. “Thanks, I appreciate that.”

“We’ve got four loads of machine parts. We’ve known we had to send them south for a few days now, but it’s on a NWTT contract so we were waiting for a bunch of their drivers to take them. They’re bulky, but none of the loads are over 3500 kilos, so you’ll still be classified as ‘empty.’ If they’ve got to go south, there’s no reason why you can’t take one of them.”

“That’s great!” Mark said. “Maybe I should save someone’s life more often.”

“No thanks. One medical emergency is more than enough excitement for the season.” He handed Mark a map of the mine. There was a X drawn onto it with a red pen. “Here’s where you can get your trailer loaded. One of my men will meet you at your truck and guide you there. The guys working in that area know you’re coming, and they’re waiting for you.”

“I guess I’ll be on my way then.”

“Drive safely.”

“I always do.”

Mark met his guide at *Mother Load* and followed the man’s direction around the plant site, past the six huge fuel tanks that held millions of litres of fuel each, and eventually arrived at his destination at a small yard between the two powerhouses that provided electricity to the entire mining operation.

Just like he’d been told, there was a crew there waiting for him, three on the ground and two others driving forklifts. Several pallets were lined up at one end of the yard and as he pulled to a stop, one of the forklifts already had a pallet ready to be placed on the back of his trailer.

“I guess they want this stuff gone, now!” Mark muttered under his breath as he set *Mother Load’s* brake. He took a moment to check that all his gauges were normal, then began putting on all his winter clothing.

A minute later he ventured outside. The cold grabbed him immediately and he could feel it beginning to bite at his skin through the several layers he had on. I bet no matter how much you put on, it’s never enough, he thought.

The crew already had three pallets on the trailer, and while the forklifts went to get more, the three men on the ground were now crawling over the trailer, ensuring all the strapping was in place and secure.

Mark did an extensive circle check to make sure his truck was in good shape and that they were doing a proper job, but it was obvious to him just watching them work that they were as safety conscious as everyone else up here. Every generator part on a pallet was tied down and secured to the pallet with two heavy duty straps, and each pallet was likewise secured to the trailer with two more straps. Each time a pallet was secured, one of the workers would try pulling it one way, then the other. Only when he was satisfied it wasn't moving and wouldn't move on the trip south, he would move onto the next one.

Mark wished he could get this kind of service with his loads down south. Sure, he was ultimately responsible for his load up here just as he was anywhere else, but if he lost his load on the ice road, then the entire operation would suffer and no one wanted to be a part of that.

As the crew secured the last of the six pallets — an assortment of generator parts ranging from gear wheels and drive shafts to machine casings — a man emerged from one of the power plants with an envelope in his hand.

The man handed Mark the envelope.

“Are you the shipper?” Mark asked.

He shook his head. “No. I run the day shift in Powerplant One.” He gestured to the envelope. “That’s a list of the parts on your load. You’ll need to stop in at the checkpoint where the mine stops and the ice road starts. That’s where you’ll get the paperwork you’ll need to get paid.”

“I’ll be sure to stop in there.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take you there.”

Mark looked up and saw that the crew had gone, probably onto some other urgent task.

“You my escort too?”

The man nodded.

“Then let’s go.”

They climbed into *Mother Load*, and Mark was guided to an outer road that circled back to the entrance to the mine. In just a few minutes he was stopped at the checkpoint, waiting his turn. There were three trucks in front of him empty and two trucks incoming, one with a load of cement, the other a B-train tanker.

Still dressed for the outside, Mark walked over to the checkpoint and went inside. When he presented the envelope to the man behind the counter, the man looked at him a moment with narrowed eyes.

“You new?” he asked.

Mark nodded. “Just delivered my first load today.”

He moved his head to the side and peered past Mark out the window at *Mother Load*. “And you got a load going back already? Who’d you have to kill for that?”

“Actually, I saved a man’s life.”

Another moment passed where the man was studying Mark, then, “So you’re the guy.”

News travels fast, Mark thought. “Yep, that’s me.”

He opened the envelope, looked at the papers, then asked, “Name?”

“Mark Dalton.”

“Mark who?”

What is it with these guys? Mark thought. “Mark. Mark Dalton.”

Again, a moment of silence. “You’re Mark Dalton?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I say that because there was a guy in here looking for you.”

How many guys are there looking for me? he wondered.

“Yeah, I heard that,” Mark said.

“He a friend of yours?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Well, for your sake, pal, I hope he’s your friend.”

“Why? What’s he look like?”

“First of all, he was all dressed in black. Where you find winter clothes that are all black, I don’t know, but he had them. There was a scar on his face like he’d been in a fight with a lumberjack, and when he opened his mouth I swear there couldn’t have been more than two teeth inside his whole head.”

“Are you serious?”

“Pretty much, except for the teeth. He had a bunch, and maybe was missing one or two, but he looked like a pretty tough customer.”

“And he knows me?”

A shrug. “He didn’t say that. He just said he was looking for you.”

“What was he driving?”

“Freightliner.”

“Don’t tell me. All black?” Mark asked.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Just guessing,” Mark said, picking his paperwork up off the counter. “Anyway, thanks for the warning. I’ll keep my eyes out for this guy.”

“Okay, but the way he’s looking for you, he’ll probably find you before you find him.”

Mark nodded, turned and left.

As he walked out to *Mother Load*, snow crunching beneath his feet, he wondered who in the world would be looking for him out here on the ice road?

And that’s when the realization hit him like a blast of icy winter wind.

How could he have forgotten?

The only people who know he’s up on the ice road are Bud and the police . . . and whoever has been hired to kill him.

Suddenly, Mark was hot inside his clothes, and he could feel the sweat beginning to pool between his skin and the layer upon layer of clothing he had protecting himself from the cold.

Obviously he had to get back to Yellowknife and go directly to the RCMP offices there. In the meantime, he could place a call to Bud and

let him know what was going on. Bud could call the RCMP for him and maybe someone could meet him out on the ice road, or at least look into this guy . . . whoever he was.

In a way Mark was lucky he was on the ice road. Everything was so regulated and scheduled that once he was on the road, there was little chance that anyone behind him could make up any ground. If the guy was a few hours behind Mark now, he'd still be a few hours behind when he got to Yellowknife. And if that were the case, the RCMP could be waiting to intercept him on the Ingraham Trail before he even reached town.

Even better, he could call the police himself so they would know what was going on while he was still on the ice road.

Mark took out his phone to call Bud, but his phone was “searching” for a connection.

“Dammit,” he said under his breath.

It had probably been doing that for the past 12 hours or more, and would continue searching for many hours to come until he got closer to civilization some 350 km away.

Inside *Mother Load*, Mark began undressing, taking off as many layers of clothing as he could, but to no avail. He was still uncomfortably hot, sweaty — and not ashamed to admit it — afraid.

Someone was out to kill him.

That person knew where he was, and was in pursuit.

The only thing Mark could do was run . . .

At a top speed of 35 km/hr.

CHAPTER 17



The driving was easy. Although Mark was driving a load southbound, it wasn't the same as the load he'd driven north. The load of generator parts was less than 3500 kilograms, allowing him to be classified as "empty" and enabling him to drive a top speed of 35 km/hr on the ice road and a whopping 60 km/hr on the southbound express lanes.

Although Mark could have driven southbound by himself, he wasn't confident enough to go it alone, so he joined up with three other NWT drivers — none of which, he made sure, were driving a black Freightliner — to form a convoy of LTL trucks. Being in a group with three other drivers would be safer, and there would be someone close by — at least 500 metres — if something went wrong.

Because of his level of experience, Mark was made the fourth driver in the convoy. The driver in the lead had been driving the ice roads for 12 years and gave them all a briefing on the trip south.

"There's a storm coming," he said. "So if you're at all tired you should stay back and rest." He was looking right at Mark when he said this, but Mark didn't waver.

"I'm good." Mark had enough hours left to get to Lockhart Lake. He'd rest when he got there, then join up with another convoy for the rest of the trip south, or even go it alone.

"You have any questions?" Again, he was looking directly at Mark.

Mark shook his head. "I'm ready."

Minutes later, he was heading south from Lac de Gras as the tail-end trucker on an LTL convoy, driving the long, wide, straight ice road across MacKay Lake.

There were plenty of trucks still headed north, and he waved at each one as they passed on the thicker, built-up, loaded northbound lanes. As he kept his speed constant, paying attention to the spacing calls from the trucks in front of him, he could also gauge how well the oncoming trucks were spaced based on how long it took for him to pass the next one in line. Usually the first three trucks were spaced within a second of each other with the fourth truck in the convoy sometimes lagging a couple seconds behind.

Mark also kept an eye open for traffic behind him. Even though they were traveling at the maximum speed allowed on the southbound routes, and convoys were spaced well apart — with sometimes up to 20 minutes in between — there was still the possibility he could be passed by another truck. If that were the case, he'd be required to slow down to 10 km/hr until the pursuing truck had passed. But that would be an event, something out of the ordinary, and so for now, Mark was happy for the northbound traffic since it made the drive slightly less monotonous.

He hadn't realized how much he'd enjoyed Jimmy's company until he was without it. With no one to talk to, or kid around with, the drive got that much more boring, and Mark was forced to play little games to keep his mind occupied. For example, he began keeping track of the different makes of truck that were being used on the ice roads and then tried to predict what make and model would be next to pass. After he tired of that, Mark popped in an audio book into the CD player and listened to an post-apocalypse action-adventure where all manner of mutants were trying to take over the planet while a rugged band of adventurers tried to survive and find a better way of life. The gunfire and fight scenes wore on him after a while, but Mark found it a decent way to keep his mind occupied for a few hours.

That was the trick about driving the ice road, Mark concluded. It was easy driving but boring. Like with most things, as long as you followed the rules, there was little that could go wrong. But as soon as you began to cut corners, either with your truck, load, spacing or speed, things could get exciting in a hurry. Mark wondered if he could do this kind of driving for a complete season. Sure, he was safety conscious and everything, but he was also an adventurer, and no matter how determined he'd be to drive safe and slow, something would happen — something always did — that would pique his interest or put himself in a dangerous position.

Like today for example.

All he had to do was drive carefully 10 or so hours at 35 km/hr — 60 km/hr once they hit the express lanes — on some of the smoothest roads he'd ever been on, and he'd be able to collect a handsome fee for his work. Instead, he had to do that and worry that someone was out to kill him. It kind of took all fun out of being on the ice road.

Mark wondered whether or not, when he reached Yellowknife, he should keep on driving south, then east to Toronto and then take a long vacation. Surely there was somewhere nice in the world where Bruno Scorcese or his minions wouldn't be able to find him.

Remote and barren hadn't worked out so well, so perhaps somewhere warm and civilized like Miami or Jamaica or . . . Mark didn't finish the thought. With his connections, Bruno Scorcese probably knew people in every country on earth, especially those with an organized underground network devoted to crime.

Mark realized, he was on the run and would have to remain on the run until the case against Scorcese ran its course.

He checked his speedometer and realized the convoy was actually traveling between 32 and 33 km/hr. He pressed down on the accelerator slightly to bring his speed back up to 35 km/hr, but found he began encroaching on the truck in front of him.

He eased off and slowed to 33.

And that's when he saw another truck appear in his side mirrors. At distances of a few hundred metres or more, it was hard to discern the color of oncoming trucks. But for some reason Mark had no trouble figuring out that the truck behind him now was black.

All black.

He couldn't be sure of the make and model, but the color of it was unmistakable.

Mark checked his speed, saw that he had dropped to 33 km/hr and corrected it, speeding up until he was at doing 35 again.

But the truck behind him was gaining ice on him.

Of course he's gaining, thought Mark. He's got no one in front of him and is going 35, you're doing 33. The math was simple and Mark knew that this truck would be catching him in the next few kilometres.

He wanted to stomp down on the accelerator and push it to 50 or more, but that would be 15 km/hr over the limit and would surely result in some pretty harsh penalties. Just driving over the limit by 2 or 3 km/hr would earn him a written warning. If he did it again he would get a five-day suspension. And a third infraction brought with it banishment from the ice road. And even if he didn't get caught for speeding, he'd still be putting himself closer to the truck in front of him and that would be like committing two mortal sins at once.

No. Mark had to drive at 35 km/hr and let the driver of the truck behind him be the one to break the rules.

In a word, Mark was doomed.

He checked his mirror again.

The black truck was closer now, less than 200 metres, and looking blacker with each passing second.

Mark wondered how the man would do it?

A gun would be easy, but not on the road. Firing a long gun was impossible while driving, and while a handgun would let you keep one hand on the wheel, it was still tricky to shoot and almost impossible to hit a target.

Guns were technically prohibited on the ice road, like alcohol and drugs, but if this guy managed to stop Mark somewhere, perhaps by blocking a portage with his truck, then walking up to *Mother Load*, sticking a gun into the cab and pulling the trigger would be a simple and efficient way of killing him.

Mark decided his best chance of survival was to not let this truck pass him.

He upped his speed slightly, to just over 35.

Still the black truck in his side mirrors continued to grow larger.

Mark kept his speed up, continuing at just over the recommended maximum for this road. The truck and the ice road seemed to handle the added speed easily, but the truck ahead of him in the convoy must have noticed him getting closer, because a voice suddenly crackled over the radio.

"Might want to check your spacing Green Peterbilt," the driver said.

Mark looked down at his speedometer and saw he was doing almost 40.

Too fast, Mark thought. But the guy behind me — the guy that wants to kill me — is still gaining on me.

At this rate he'd be overtaken in moments.

“Sorry,” Mark said over the radio. “Had a little speed creep. There's a truck behind me now and that got me distracted.”

“You worry about your spacing. If he gets too close to you, he'll be the one to pay for it.”

That much was true. The way pressure waves in the ice worked, it was usually the truck trailing that paid the price. That's because a pressure waves built up in front of trucks as they rolled along, and whenever a truck reached land at a portage, that pressure wave bounced off the shore and back out onto the ice. Now traveling against the flow, the pressure wave collided with the pressure wave being created by the following truck, resulting in a blowout at the point where the two pressure waves came together.

The theory was well-known on the ice roads, but try explaining that to a man who was already committed to the cause of death and destruction, namely Mark's.

But even if Mark increased his speed further, he would only be keeping pace.

There was really no escape.

Mark eased off on the accelerator and decided to let fate take its course.

His speed slowed and he watched as the speedometer counted down, 40, 39, 38 . . .

The black truck in his mirrors still grew larger.

The countdown continued.

37, 36, 35 . . .

And the black truck was on top of him, looming large in his mirrors and sending a thin plume of black smoke into the air every so often as he adjusted his speed.

Mark thought of Bud and Jimmy and all the things he'd done in his life, good and bad.

He looked around the cab and made sure he knew the location of the mallet that he used to check his tire pressure just in case he was forced to stop on the ice, and there was a close quarters fight. A mallet wouldn't be much help against a gun, but at least he'd go down swinging.

Mark slowed *Mother Load* to the 33 km/hr of the rest of the convoy.

The black truck was almost upon him now, directly behind and looking to pass.

Mark took a few deep breaths, gripping the wheel with two white-knuckled hands and ready for anything.

The black truck pulled to the side, seemingly looking to pass.

Mark kept *Mother Load* straight and steady.

The black truck filled his mirrors . . .

And he realized it wasn't a Freightliner at all, but a Kenworth with a blacked-out grill, black sun visor and black powder-coated exhaust pipes.

And it was bobtailing.

Mark released his grip on the steering wheel slightly and exhaled.

"Black Kenworth," he called over the radio. "You want to back off a bit."

"My bad," said the driver behind him. "I should've called you on the radio sooner. I'm a hotshot."

"You sure are," Mark said.

"No, a hotshot. I've got permission from the Joint Venture."

Mark recalled the term from his orientation and remembered that in certain circumstances, light trucks or bobtails could be designated hotshots and allowed to drive freely on the ice road, just like a private vehicle.

"Would appreciate you slowing down to let me through though."

"10-4," Mark said. He slowed to 10 km/hr to let the bobtailing

Kenworth past. Then he called over the radio, “Check your mirrors, one hotshot coming through.”

The black Kenworth zoomed past Mark and passed the other trucks in the convoy in quick succession.

“A lot of worry over nothing,” Mark said aloud. He passed a hand over his head, neck and chest and realized his body was damp with sweat. He unbuttoned his shirt, felt the cool air bite into his skin and figured he could probably do with a shower and a clean change of clothes. It was just a couple of hours to the Lockhart Lake Maintenance Camp and Rest Stop. Hopefully he’d get there without incident, perceived or otherwise.

Just as he thought that, the snow they had been predicting began to fall in earnest.

When he reached Lockhart Lake, Mark made a large circle in the parking lot til he found a spot with a slight downgrade between two B-trains parked at the edge of the lot facing the lodge. Mark wanted his truck to be as close to the lodge as possible in the hopes of discouraging anyone from sneaking around the outside of it in the dark. While there weren’t overhead lights in the lot, plenty of drivers had left their rig lights on overnight, and if he was close enough to the lodge, drivers entering or exiting the lodge might notice someone peeking into windows or doing something unusual outside his truck in -30° weather.

After coming to a stop, Mark rocked his truck back and forth several times to flatten out the snow beneath his wheels and ensure he wouldn’t be stuck when he wanted to get underway in the morning.

He left his running lights and headlights on, and kept his engine idling as he exited *Mother Load* with an overnight bag. Then he locked the cab and did a quick circle check of his entire rig so he would have a baseline that he could reference upon his return to ensure nothing had been tampered with.

Satisfied everything was in order, he crossed over the roadway and headed toward the lodge. Each step was made more difficult by the push of a strong westerly wind. It was blowing harder now, and snow was falling in sheets, the first of several centimetres predicted overnight. Mark had wondered how bad the weather could get up here – perhaps now he’d be able to find out.

After checking in, Mark tried his cell phone.

Still “searching.”

He asked about using a phone at the camp, and was told that there was a satellite phone available, but it was kept for emergency use only.

“This is an emergency.”

“Maybe you should talk to someone in the security office.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mark said. “Where is it?”

He was given directions to the camp security office and was knocking on its door a few minutes later.

“Help you?”

“I need to use a phone.”

“Is it an emergency?”

Mark wondered. There was a contract out on his life, and there was someone looking for him on the ice road. It was certainly an emergency, but it wasn’t exactly something you could explain to someone who knew nothing about Mark and the things he’d done in his life.

Still, he needed to try.

“Okay, I’ll try to explain,” Mark said. He took a deep breath and began. “There’s a guy following behind me on the ice road who’s trying to kill me, and I want to call the RCMP and let them know about it.”

“Really? How do you know someone’s trying to kill you?”

“The guy’s been asking about me up and down the ice road.”

“Like he’s a friend of yours?”

“Yeah, just like that.”

“So how do you know he’s trying to kill you?”

“Because I’m going to be testifying against an organized crime boss named Bruno Scorsese, and he’s put out a hit on me so I won’t show up in court.”

“Organized crime boss . . . you mean like in *The Godfather*.”

“Yes, just like that.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to call a doctor.”

Mark knew his story had to sound crazy, but he glared at the security man just the same. “I need to call the RCMP in Yellowknife. There’s an officer there who knows all about my situation.”

The security man stared at Mark for a while, then nodded. “Okay,” he said, turning the phone around on his desk so it faced Mark. “I’ll make the call for you, what’s the number?”

Mark was about to protest, but realized having the security officer dial the number for him was better than him saying, “No.” Besides, he’d probably had all sorts of drivers come in with a story about an emergency only to have them call their wives to tell them they love them.

Mark gave the man the number and he dialed.

“Yeah, this is Security Officer Robert Lussier calling from the Lockhart Lake Maintenance Camp.”

A pause.

“Yeah, on the ice road.”

He looked over at Mark and nodded. “Well, there’s a driver here that would like to speak to a Constable Graham.”

Another pause.

“I see.” He pulled the phone away from his ear. “Is there another officer?” He asked Mark.

“I was supposed to talk to Graham.”

“He’s on vacation for the week.”

“Can I talk to them?”

He handed the phone to Mark.

“Hello,” Mark said. Then he explained the situation, but it was clear that the female officer on the phone had no idea what he was talking about. In the end, Mark simply said, “Thanks for your time,” and hung up.

He passed the phone back to the security officer.

“He’s on vacation,” Mark said.

“Sure he is.”

“No, he really is. He’s my contact, but he’s not there.”

“I know, she told me.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“I believe you think there’s someone out there trying to kill you.”

“There is.”

“Are you out of hours in your log book?”

Mark realized where this was going and decided to put a stop to it.
“Yeah, I need a rest. Thanks for your time.”

“Get some sleep buddy. I’ll tell my relief to check with you in the morning.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Mark said, already out of the office and down the hallway.

That was a bust, he thought. Then realized, I’m on my own on this.

Mark decided to make himself comfortable. He had a long, hot shower and got into a fresh change of clothes. He had a light meal in the cafeteria, skipping coffee as it might interfere with his sleep, then headed back to *Mother Load* for the night.

Mark would have preferred to keep on driving, but his log book wouldn’t allow him the hours. If Jimmy had still been with him it would have been a simple matter of continuing through the night to the end of the ice road and the NWT yard in Yellowknife. That would have made it almost impossible for whoever was looking for Mark to catch him, but he didn’t have that option. Of course he could have fudged his book somehow and continued on anyway, but that would have put him behind the wheel without a proper amount of rest, making him a danger to himself and others on the road. On top of that, there was the storm, and that would not only make driving without the proper amount of rest dangerous, it would make it downright suicidal. By staying in his truck, he would be vulnerable, but at least he would be the only one in danger.

He had considered spending the night in the camp’s dormitory. Sure, a bed would be warmer and more comfortable than the sleeper in *Mother Load*, but this way he could keep tabs on his truck and ensure

no one tampered with it. Mark had no idea how this man would try to assassinate him, but at least the killer wouldn't be able to force him to break down on the ice road, offer him a ride, then have Mark at his mercy for more than 100 km of frozen, desolate terrain.

Mark changed into the green flannel sweat suit he used to sleep in, then set the interior light in the cab on low. He fired up the auxiliary power unit and adjusted the truck's in-cab heating. Between the two heating systems, and an extra blanket or two, he might just be warm enough to get some sleep.

Then, with nothing more to do than start racking up rest hours in his log book, Mark tucked himself in and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later, he heard a sound outside his truck.

His eyes opened wide and he strained to hear the sound again.

Nothing . . .

Except for the wind and the constant thrum of dozens of diesel engines as they idled faithfully through the night.

Mark lay awake for a while longer, staring at the ceiling of his sleeper and waiting to hear another sound.

But there was none.

Eventually, the slow steady drone of big rigs all around overtook him and even though the howl of wind seemed to grow stronger by the minute, he drifted off into a deep, deep sleep.

Mark awoke suddenly.

There'd been a sound from outside, something out of the ordinary. Mark lay awake in his bunk listening intently for it again.

Nothing.

He turned on his side and closed his eyes, still listening for a sound over the chorus of diesel engines rumbling through the night.

Another sound, like a truck door opening a few trucks away, followed by a door closing.

Mark lifted his head off the pillow so he could use both ears to hear what was going on.

A second door opened, closed, then voices . . . getting louder, then fading away.

Obviously a couple of drivers had just got in and were heading into the rest stop. That had been happening all night since there was a storm coming and Lockhart Lake, with a parking lot with space for more than 100 rigs, was a marshalling point whenever the road was shut down for storms. The road hadn't been officially closed yet, but it could happen at any time.

Mark tried to relax, but couldn't really. He'd slept well enough for a few hours, but now that he was awake he was finding it almost impossible to get back to sleep.

The sound of all the truck engines was a constant and provided just the right amount of white noise to help him doze off. But every once in a while there would be another sound — people, trucks, machinery — that would keep Mark awake for hours.

Surely the man who was trying to kill him was heading south. And now that he'd stopped, that man would easily be able to close the gap between them. He probably knew the make, model and name of Mark's truck, so it wasn't a game of cat and mouse anymore, but rather one of search and destroy.

Just then Mark heard another sound, this one different from anything he'd heard before. It was a sort of tink coming from the outside of his truck — just outside — as if someone was tampering with his vehicle.

Mark got out of the sleeper and checked the mirrors. There wasn't anything obvious in them, but they didn't give a view of the truck all the way to the ground. It was possible that someone was under his truck at that very moment, planting a bomb or cutting a brake line.

Tink.

Mark was fully awake now, every muscle in his body taut with tension.

Quietly, he slipped on his shoes, then grabbed his jacket off the passenger seat. He took the small flashlight he had in one of his jacket pockets in one hand and his axe in the other and crawled into the driver's seat.

Tink.

The best way to catch him, Mark figured, was to spring out of the truck, flash the light beneath it, then clobber the guy as he was trying to crawl out from under the truck.

Mark took a few deep breaths, paused a moment, then opened the door wide and jumped.

He landed with both feet firmly planted in the snow. Then, in one fluid motion he dropped down onto all fours, flashed the light under the truck with his left hand and cocked his right arm for a backhand swing of the axe that would bury the axe head into whatever it came into contact with.

But there was no one there.

Mark swept the light left and right, then down the length of the trailer.

Nothing.

He got up slowly, feeling the cold bite into his hands and knees for the first time since he'd exited his truck.

There had to have been somebody fooling around beneath his truck, he was sure of it.

But as he did a slow walk around his rig, it was obvious that there had been no one there. The storm had picked up and the falling snow had left a fresh blanket all the way round. If there had been someone messing around his truck there would have been footprints or some kind of tracks in the snow.

Mark sighed, already chilled and wanting to return to the sleeper.

He circled back around the rig and climbed up the side of the tractor. He reached up and tried the door . . .

But it was locked.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said. His words were grabbed by the wind and carried away almost before he could hear them.

He tried to remember if the spare key he'd hidden in the engine bay was still there, taped to a wire. The last time he'd used it, three weeks ago, it had been there, but he'd never taped it back in place, and now it was sitting in a dish on the console next to the shifter . . . inside the cab!

“Of all the times,” he muttered, wondering why he’d even bothered to lock his door.

The answer was that locked doors were safer, only not so much when you’re on the wrong side of them.

What to do? Mark wondered.

The only thing he could do was head into the rest stop and see if there was a mechanic on duty — or see when one was available — and wait until they could come and open his door for him.

He checked the door one last time, still locked, then started walking toward the rest stop to get some help.

CHAPTER 18



Mark was lucky to find a mechanic on duty who really knew his way around Peterbilts. He had a good chuckle when Mark told him what happened, but he said it wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last.

"We had one truck last year that we couldn't get to for a few hours, and when we did we had all kinds of trouble getting a door open. Ended up having to fill the tanks to keep the engine running until we were able to get inside."

Fortunately, *Mother Load* co-operated with the mechanic and allowed him to get the passenger side door open after just a few minutes of work.

"Haven't lost my touch," he said with a smile.

"You make it sound criminal," Mark said.

"Let's just say I knew how to get into locked trucks long before I became a mechanic."

"All right, then," Mark said. "We'll leave it at that."

"You know, you really should have a spare key. Especially up here when your keys are always in the ignition during the winter months."

"I know, I know, I have one I just —"

"Used it and didn't put it back where you got it?"

Mark hesitated. "Yes."

"Bet you won't do that again."

"No."

"Have a safe trip," the mechanic said with a wave and headed back toward the rest stop.

“I will,” Mark said, more to himself than anyone else.

But he looked all around him and noticed the falling snow caught in the beams of the headlights of the trucks parked in the lot.

“Or maybe not,” he mused.

The storm was here and looked like it was going to get worse before it got better. Mark didn’t know if the road was closed yet or not, but he knew he didn’t like driving in snowstorms at the best of times, and he absolutely did not want to drive the ice road in a storm if he didn’t have to.

So instead of hopping into *Mother Load* and heading south, Mark checked that the doors to the cab were unlocked, then retrieved the spare key from inside the cab. He looked for a place to hide the key and decided to tuck it away in the same compartment he kept his chains. When he was satisfied the key was well hidden, he made sure to leave the compartment door unlocked as well.

Satisfied he’d never be locked out of *Mother Load* again, he headed back to the rest stop to wait out the storm.

The coffee in the cafeteria was fresh, and the room was full of drivers who, like him, had been forced off the road by the winter storm. Mark wondered how the storm affected driving on the ice, so he asked the driver in the coffee line in front of him.

“Well, first of all, you won’t be going anywhere,” said the man, an old-timer with a weather-worn “Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road” ball cap on his head. Judging by the look of the hat, it was the man’s full-time cap and was probably worn while he was in his truck, maybe even while he slept.

“The storm’s that bad?”

“Not really. There’s been plenty worse, but it doesn’t take much falling and blowing snow to blind you. You think you’re driving straight and all of a sudden you’re into a snowbank, or straight in the path of an oncoming truck.”

“So the road’s closed?”

The old-timer looked around the cafeteria. “Not yet, but it will be.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Snow storms up here are barren lands blizzards. The snow falls, but it also blows around at the same time because there’s nothing to stop it, so you get snow coming at you from every direction making it almost impossible to see a white road through all that white snow.”

“That makes sense,” Mark nodded.

“The way they are about safety, it doesn’t take much of a storm to close down the road, especially if it’s just for a few hours.”

“How do they close it down?”

“It’ll get posted here in the camp, and they’ll come over the radio with it. Then dispatch won’t let anyone onto the road. Once those things happens, word gets around pretty fast. Even if it didn’t, most drivers know enough on their own not to go out in something like this.”

Mark nodded.

“It’s one thing to get caught in a storm, but it’s just plain stupid to head out onto the road during a snowstorm.”

“How long they expect this one to last?”

“I don’t think too long. Doesn’t seem angry enough. You’ll probably have enough time to get a bite to eat and catch a few more hours sleep. That’s sometimes the best thing about snowstorms, the extra sack time. Near the end of the season, you really need it.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Mark said.

Just then, almost on cue, someone came into the cafeteria and pinned a notice onto the bulletin board.

Mark, along with a dozen other drivers, read it.

As of 22:30 hours, the winter road has been closed due to high winds and poor visibility south of Lockhart Lake. Southbound trucks will be held until the road reopens. Northbound trucks from Lockhart Lake are not affected.”

Thanks for your co-operation.

Nuna Yellowknife Dispatch.

He sipped his coffee and took a seat in the cafeteria to consider his predicament. The ice road would shut down for a few hours while this storm passed through. Normally he’d be thankful for the extra rest, but he wasn’t in a normal position. There was a man somewhere behind

him that was out to kill him. Up til now that man had always been hours behind him, asking for Mark in places where Mark had been just a few hours before. But with the storm, Mark would have to sit and wait, giving his pursuer the chance to make up time and catch him.

The storm had trapped him, and there was nothing he could do about it other than ready himself for the moment the ice road reopened.

Mark grabbed a couple of pieces of fruit and a sandwich to go along with his coffee and headed out to *Mother Load*.

It was a short walk from the rest stop to his truck, but the journey seemed to take forever. Mark could see the headlights of the truck in the first row and recognized one set of lights as his own. But as he neared the line of trucks, it was obvious that he'd targeted the wrong truck. *Mother Load* was four trucks over to the left.

Mark just shook his head.

He'd heard stories of people living in the north rigging ropes from the front door of their cabin to the woodpile so they'd be able to get firewood in a snowstorm. At the time he'd thought it a bit extreme, but now he saw that it was an absolute necessity. If he couldn't find *Mother Load* in a snowstorm, how was he going to be able to follow a road made of ice?

He reached his truck, thankful to have found her.

The driver door opened up with ease and he climbed up inside the warm cab and took a seat behind the wheel.

Then with a hot coffee in one hand, a cold sandwich in the other, he watched an endless blanket of snow dip, fly and swirl across his windshield.

It was almost pretty.

Mark rested for a while as the snow continued to fall. After a few hours, with the sun beginning to break over the eastern horizon, it looked as if the worst of it had passed. Guessing the road would be opening within the next hour, he grabbed his log book and headed back to the lodge to see if he could be one of the first trucks out after the storm.

“What’s your hurry?” the dispatcher asked after Mark made his request.

He considered telling the truth, but knew that being honest wasn’t going to help him at all.

It was so much easier to lie.

“I’ve been working for weeks without a break. My girlfriend came in last night and is waiting for me in a hotel room in Yellowknife.”

“Nice,” said the dispatcher with a nod.

“She said she maxed out her charge card at Victoria’s Secret in Edmonton on the way up here. She’s really anxious to see me . . . if you know what I mean.”

“I hear you buddy,” the man said. “Sure. I’ll put you first in line after the plows.”

“Thanks,” Mark said.

“Wouldn’t want your lady friend waiting any longer than she has to.”

“That’s great.”

The dispatcher waved him off. “You can thank me later . . . on your next trip north.”

Mark understood and would make sure he didn’t make his next trip north empty-handed.

“Pull your truck up to the edge of the lot, and I’ll make sure you’re underway as soon as possible.”

Mark expressed his thanks once more, then headed back to *Mother Load* confident he’d be able to get to Yellowknife without incident. Even if the killer was in the lot, there was no way he’d be able to overtake a half-dozen trucks to get to Mark. The schedule and strict attention to safety would ensure Mark would make his first round trip on the ice road in one piece.

Whether there would be a second trip remained to be seen, but for now, finishing his first one alive was all he cared about.

The door to the dispatch office opened and a black-clad figure entered.

“How’s it going?” the dispatcher said, as he did with anyone who stepped in his office.

“I’ve been looking for a friend of mine,” the man said. “I heard he was driving the ice road, but I haven’t been able to meet up with him.”

“This guy got a name?”

“Yeah. It’s Mark, Mark Dalton.”

“Mark who?”

“Dalton. Mark Dalton.”

“Hey, that guy was in here a while ago.” He pointed outside through the window. “That’s his truck there, all ready to go as soon as the storm passes and the road opens up again.”

“Is there any way you can get me in behind him?”

The dispatcher took a moment to think. “I dunno. I don’t think he’d be too interested in hooking up with any of his old buddies. He’s got a girl waiting for him in Yellowknife.”

“I see,” the man said. “Well, I owe him a thousand bucks for a favour he did for me a while back.” He patted a hand against a bulge in his jacket pocket. “I’ve got it here for him . . . cash, and it sounds like he could use it. Make for a nice surprise for him when he gets into town.”

“Right. Okay. How about you pull your rig up to the road. I’ve got two other drivers lined up already, but I’ll put them third and fourth so you can follow your friend all the way into Yellowknife.”

“That’d be great. I really appreciate that, and I know Mark will too.”

“I bet,” the dispatcher said. “It sounds as if this is this guy’s lucky day.”

The road opened at precisely 06:00, 20 minutes after the plows.

Mark heard his number called over the radio and had *Mother Load* in gear before he even responded. He had roughly 60 km to travel before reaching the secondary winter road. His cell phone would

probably kick in 20 or 30 km from the city, and when it did, he would call Bud and ask him to contact the RCMP. Hopefully, by the time he reached Yellowknife, the police would be there to meet him, and then it would be a simple matter of waiting for the hired killer to show up on the secondary road or the Ingraham Trail.

But first he'd have to get there.

It was great to be the first truck out the gate, as it ensured that there was nothing but open ice in front of him. However, it was the road behind him that really concerned him. There was a mass of trucks backed up at Lockhart Lake, and one of them belonged to the man hired to kill him.

Of course, if Mark drove the 35 km/hr maximum on the road south and did 60 km/hr in the express lanes, there was no way anyone could catch him. Somehow that brought little comfort to Mark as he knew that if anyone was crazy enough to try and kill him somewhere as remote and barren as the ice road, he wouldn't care much about getting caught or breaking the rules. As a result, Mark checked his mirrors every few seconds, certain there would be a truck appearing in them before too long.

And he was right.

It began as a speck in his mirrors, little more than a tiny black dot in the center of the ribbon of white. But over time it grew into a spot, then a square with a wisp of smoke trailing behind it. Mark couldn't be sure if this was the truck or just another hotshot, so he maintained his speed until he knew for sure.

And for a while the truck disappeared from sight.

Mark reached the exit for the Secondary Winter Road nearly 100 km from Lockhart Lake without incident and began wondering if all his worry had been for nothing.

After all, the road ahead and behind him was clear.

The sun was shining and the driving was easy.

It was all so perfect, what could possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER 19



Something appeared in his mirrors again.

Unlike the truck before it, this one appeared fully formed and belching smoke. It was being driven fast and with purpose.

“Black Freightliner,” Mark said over the radio. “You looking to pass?”

No answer.

Mark checked his mirrors, and the truck was closer now. If he had his radio on, there was no way the driver wouldn’t know Mark was talking to him. Obviously the man was ignoring Mark, just like he’d been ignoring most of the rules of the road.

“Black Freightliner. Are you a hotshot? Do you want to get by?”

Again, no answer.

Ahead, Mark saw a portage and instinctively slowed *Mother Load* down to make the transition between ice and frozen ground. Just before the portage, the ice road curved 90 degrees to allow the pressure wave in front of his truck to flow out over the ice instead up against the shore.

But slowing down to get onto the portage had given the chance for the truck behind him to gain more ice on him.

Mark quickly ran up through the gears until he was at 30 km/hr, the maximum allowed on portages.

In his mirrors, he saw the black Freightliner take the portage at speed, the entire truck rocking and bouncing as its wheels found the shoreline.

“This guy’s not slowing down for anything,” Mark said under his breath.

He kept his speed constant at 30 and soon came upon the end of the portage. Again he slowed to make the transition back onto the ice but was only able to get down to 20 before hitting the ice road, a full 10 km/hr over the limit for getting on or off portages.

Despite the speed, *Mother Load* smoothed out and seemed to be traveling well over the ice, but Mark knew that he could only ignore the speed limits and rules for so long before something bad happened to himself, the truck behind him, or both.

Mark checked his speed, then got on the radio again. “If you want to pass, do it now.”

He waited for an answer. For a while it seemed as if there would be none, but then his Cobra crackled and a thick, sinister voice came over the radio.

“Bruno Scorcese wants me to get close to you!”

No doubt about it now. Mark was driving for his life.

The Freightliner belched smoke from its dual stacks and cut the distance between the two trucks by half.

Mark increased his own speed, knowing it was wrong, but not wanting to let this man take him out without a fight.

The Freightliner pulled to the left as if trying to pass, but Mark pulled left as well, cutting the black truck off and sending it snaking back and forth across the ice road.

Up ahead, a minivan was parked on the roadside and four Japanese tourists were standing out on the ice taking pictures, not only of themselves, but of the two oncoming trucks.

They waved at Mark as he passed, but their faces turned to masks of horror as the black Freightliner behind him sideswiped their van and sent them all diving into the snowbank at the side of the road.

It’s bad enough the man’s was trying to kill me, Mark thought, but doesn’t seem to care who he kills along the way.

Obviously it wasn’t enough just to escape this madman, Mark had to end this somehow.

“Slow down you two,” said a voice on the radio. “You’re going way too fast.”

Mark looked ahead and saw a red Volvo approaching. The driver had seen the near miss with the tourists and had gone over the radio with a warning. Everyone on the ice road was on the LADD-1 channel and it wouldn’t be long before Deton’Cho Security was aware of what was going on, not to mention the Northwest Territories Department of Transportation, the Joint Venture and the RCMP.

This was going to end badly no matter what, and Mark figured the only thing he could do was end it sooner rather than later.

Mark kept on going, increasing his speed to 50, 55, 60 km/hr.

The black Freightliner not only kept pace but was getting closer.

Mark took stock of the situation. In the orientation he’d had just a few days before, the trainers had talked about Job Hazard Assessments. Basically a JHA required that a person take the time to consider all of the possible problems that could arise before performing a task.

Right now, Mark was speeding across frozen water. He might be able to do it for a short while, but sooner or later the pressure wave beneath him would cause the ice beneath his truck, or surrounding his truck, to crack and fail.

So, if he didn’t want to go through the ice, he’d have to slow down.

Furthermore, the span of ice they were on was only a couple of kilometres long before ending with another portage. Mark was already speeding across the ice. A portage required that he slow to just 10 km/hr. If he took the portage at his current speed, who knew what might happen.

Mark knew.

He recalled all that he’d learned about ice road trucking and remembered something about pressure waves and the way they reacted when they met the shoreline. Everyone had said that it wasn’t the truck creating the wave that was at risk, but the truck behind it. That meant that if he took the portage at speed, the

pressure wave in front of his truck would flow back and collide with the pressure wave being created by the truck behind him.

At these speeds, the two waves colliding together would surely create quite an impact.

The radio was alive now with all sorts of chatter.

“Slow down.”

“You’re both facing a suspension.”

“What’s going on out there?”

Mark ignored it all, set his foot on the accelerator and began shifting up through the gears.

As he hoped, the Freightliner matched his speed.

In minutes he could see the portage up ahead. Like the others, it was at the end of a curve in the road, which was designed to keep the pressure wave from reaching the shore.

Mark hoped he was going fast enough to cause that safety feature to fail.

He was almost at the portage.

Just before he hit it, Mark took his foot off the accelerator, shifted into neutral and braced himself for impact. But instead of a hard hit, he made a seamless transition.

The portage was straight and smooth. Mark put *Mother Load* back into gear and applied the brakes.

As he slowed, he checked his side mirrors.

The Freightliner couldn’t have been more than 20 metres from shore when it happened.

The ice in front of it exploded upward in a burst of whiteness. Ice chunks erupted from the roadway and snow and ice crystals filled the air, obscuring the Freightliner in a blinding miniature blizzard as the particles in the air captured and reflected the dazzling morning sunlight.

Mark had slowed to the point where he could pull *Mother Load* onto an area of the portage that was wide enough to accommodate his truck and still let others pass by.

Again he looked in his mirrors.

The snow had finally settled, leaving the nose of the Freightliner windshield deep in the ice and the back end bent and twisted as if the truck's back had been broken.

Mark grabbed the radio, took a deep breath and said, "There's been a blow out on the Secondary Winter Road, 50 km south of the Winter Road exit."

There was silence over the radio for what seemed like an eternity before someone came on and asked. "Is anyone injured?"

Mark clicked up his mike and said, "I sure hope so."

Even though everyone was aware that something had happened on the secondary road, Mark knew that it would be awhile before security and emergency crews arrived on site.

Since he'd stopped, he hadn't lost sight of the Freightliner and was certain the driver was still inside the truck. Even so, he had to be sure.

Mark left *Mother Load* idling on the portage, grabbed his axe and headed back toward the ice. He took a wide arc to get to the stricken truck, making sure he approached it from the side and slightly behind.

To the truck manufacturer's credit, the Freightliner's diesel engine was still running smoothly, even though it was submerged halfway through the ice.

"You in there?" Mark shouted as he came up the side of the cab.

No answer.

Mark grabbed hold of the driver's door and pulled himself up so that he could just peer in though the window.

The driver was there, slumped forward in his seat as if he were ready to drive the truck straight down into the water. There was a gash across the man's forehead and blood was flowing down the left side of his face. There was also a gash on his bottom lip, and two teeth jutting out at odd angle from his mouth.

He was breathing.

Mark opened the door and watched as the driver fell out of the truck onto the ice.

“This ain’t over,” the man said, spraying specks of blood onto the ice road.

“Oh, yes it is,” Mark said. “But I’ll be sure to say hello to Bruno Scorcese the next time I see him . . . in court.”

The man’s eyelids fluttered halfway open. “I’m going to kill you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Right,” Mark said, punching the man in the side of the head, knocking him as cold as the ice beneath him.

“Get your hands up!” said a voice.

Mark looked over his shoulder and saw an RCMP officer standing there on the ice with his gun drawn.

Mark raised his hands over his head and turned to face the officer.

There was a Northwest Territories Department of Transport officer standing there as well. The officer looked at Mark, the half-submerged Freightliner and the blowout in the ice and said, “You’re in a lot of trouble, mister.”

“I know,” Mark said. “But at least I’m still alive.”

CHAPTER 20



The NWTT offices were a hub of activity with phones ringing and people buzzing around the office as if their world had been turned upside down.

Which, of course, it had.

A blow-out just before a portage put that part of the ice road out of commission, causing everyone in the industry to scramble to find alternate ways of getting loads to the mines before the season ended.

But all that turmoil was happening on the other side of the door. In the room Mark was seated in, everyone was solemn and silent. There were several people in the room, including the manager of ice road operations Don Farr, the NWT Department of Transportation officer who'd been at the blow-out site, two RCMP officers, one guy in a uniform from the security company, and a couple of other people Mark hadn't been introduced to but whom he was sure were bigwigs, either with NWTT, the ice road Joint Venture or the mining companies themselves.

Don Farr, the manager of ice road operations was the first to speak.

"I just want to confirm that you were given a full orientation to ice road operations," he said.

"That's right," Mark answered. "It was just a couple of days ago in a room down the hall."

"And you were made familiar with all the rules of the road?"

"Yes."

“And you understood them all?”

“Of course. They’re good rules.”

“Yes they are,” Farr said. “They’re very good rules. It took us 30 years to come up with them, and you managed to trash them in just a couple of days.”

Mark eyes swept the floor, then looked up at the man towering over him. “Sorry,” he said. It seemed like the right thing to say at the moment.

“Sorry. You’re sorry.” He shook his head and let out a little laugh. “Because of your recklessness, we are going to lose at least two days of southbound traffic on the secondary winter road.”

“Just two days?” To Mark it didn’t seem like all that much, especially on a secondary road.

Apparently, Mr. Farr didn’t see things that way.

“That road is open for just six weeks out of the year. Take away 10 days or so for snowstorms and maintenance, and you’ve got a very tight schedule. When some yahoo newbie from down south closes part of the road for two whole days, it’s a catastrophe.”

“Two days?”

“That’s right. One to pull that truck out of the ice, and another to reroute the ice road around the blowout, if that’s even possible. It better be because at this point in the season, we might not even be able to repair the hole in the ice.”

“I see,” Mark nodded. What else could he say, but, “I’m sorry.”

Farr leaned in close. “Do you have any idea how much money you’re costing us?”

Mark had no idea. Even if he guessed, he’d probably be off by millions. So instead, he said, “That guy was hired to kill me.”

“That’s beside the point. the Rules of the Road are for your safety and the safety of everyone on the road.”

“I was being hunted down by a hit man who, according to you guys,” Mark gestured to the police in the room, “is in this country illegally with false papers and not even allowed to work. What’s

worse, a speeding truck and two days lost, or a murder on your ice road committed by someone who wasn't even supposed to be there?"

Farr stood up and let out a long breath through his nose, but didn't say a word.

What could the man say? Mark didn't know everything about the ice road, but he did know that a death on the ice road — a death of any kind — would be bad publicity and bad for business. At least this way the ice road's safety record of just two deaths, one shop accident in 1994 and another a maintenance worker early in the 2000 season, was still intact.

One of the RCMP officers, the one who hadn't been at the scene of the accident, got up from his chair and moved to the same end of the room where Mark was. "There were a lot of things you could have done differently besides speed on the ice road."

"Like what? Call the police? I did that, but the guy who knows all about me is on vacation, and apparently forgot to tell anyone else someone was out to kill me."

"You could have mentioned it to security."

"Who do you think put the call in for me? I told him the situation, and he asked me if my log book was in order. Seemed my only problem was that I needed more rest."

The RCMP officer looked over at the man from Deton'Cho with an expression on his face that said, "Well?"

The security man just shrugged.

Farr stepped forward again. "Look, Dalton. We don't appreciate you bringing your squabbles onto our roads. I think it would have been better if you'd stayed down south and never come up here in the first place. I made some calls about you to my trucking friends, and it seems you've got quite a reputation."

"Really?" Mark said, feeling a tinge of pride.

"Yeah, you're a maverick, and too reckless to be allowed onto our roads. You might be a fine driver — and no one ever said otherwise — but you are a grade A trouble magnet, and we don't need your kind on our ice road."

“That’s fine with me,” Mark said, “because to tell you the truth, despite the fact that I nearly got killed driving the ice road, this kind of driving is boring.”

“So you don’t want to drive on our road anymore, then?”

“That’s right.”

“Good, because you’re banned from driving on the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road for life. And believe me, you’re getting off easy. There are a couple of agencies that want you fined, or charged, but we just want you gone. I don’t ever want to see you up here again, not even in a minivan to see the Northern Lights.”

“Suits me,” Mark said. “I’ll be leaving as soon as I get paid.”

Farr shot Mark an incredulous look.

“Hey, I delivered my loads safely. It was the guy behind me who crashed. So,” an extended pause, “if you would kindly cut me a cheque, I’ll be gone.”

The ice road manager glared at Mark knowing full well that since Mark had already been banished from the ice road, there was really nothing more the Joint Venture could do to him.

“You don’t get paid by the Joint Venture, thank God. You get paid by the company, and from what I understand, they’re as keen on getting rid of you as we are, so a cheque is on its way. You’ll probably have it within the hour.”

“Fine, then I’ll be leaving as soon as I hook up with Jimmy, my co-driver.”

“No,” Farr said. “He’s staying.”

“What?”

“We need safe drivers like him up here, not hot dogs like you. He’s already got another load north and seems to have a good head on his shoulders . . . unlike you.”

Mark was disappointed Jimmy wouldn’t be joining him, but he also couldn’t be more proud.

“So, that’s it then.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

The walk from the NWTT office to *Mother Load* seemed like one of the longest he'd ever made. He wasn't upset that he wouldn't be finishing out the season on the ice road, but the way it happened left him feeling sour. Mark Dalton had never been fired, banned or kicked out of anything in his life. When he left something, it was on his own terms and being banished from the ice road made him feel as if he'd failed.

Nevertheless, he had driven the ice road, and no one could ever take that away from him. If the subject ever came up, which of course it would, considering the popularity of the "Ice Road Truckers" television show, he could always just shrug and say, "Been there, done that!"

But as long as the walk out to his truck was, the drive south would be just as long.

And lonely too.

It was one thing to lose Jimmy to the ice road, it was another thing entirely to drive across country without a companion.

As he neared *Mother Load*, Mark looked up and noticed a figure standing there next to his truck.

Jimmy.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Mark said, extending an arm. "Don't tell me you're coming with me."

Jimmy smiled, but shook his head. "No. I've got a load north and a regular drive for the rest of the season. When it's over, I should have enough for a down payment on a truck. I'll be driving back to New Brunswick in style."

"Good for you," Mark said.

"Thanks for teaching me to drive," Jimmy said.

"You know, when your uncle asked me to coach you, I didn't want to do it. I never thought I'd enjoy it, but I did."

"You taught me a lot," Jimmy said. "And gave me the confidence to go out on my own."

"Well, I hate to admit it, but you taught me a lot of things too."

"Really?"

“Yeah, really.” Mark paused a moment, then continued. “I thought I knew it all, or at least everything there was to know, about trucking. But you showed me that new ideas aren’t necessarily bad ones.”

Jimmy smiled.

“All the fuel-efficiency stuff was stuff I kind of knew already, but you put it all together for me so I got it. I know I’ve been going farther on a tank of fuel, so even though you’re going off on your own, the stuff I learned from you is going to pay off for a long, long time.”

“That’s nice of you to say, Mark.”

“So every time I fill up or pay a fuel bill, I’ll probably think of you.”

“And I guess every time the police want to talk to me or someone wants to kill me, I’ll think of you.”

Mark chuckled at that. “If those things happen, don’t just think of me . . . call me!”

“I will,” Jimmy said, extending his hand.

“It was a pleasure,” Mark said. “It really was.”

They stood there shaking hands, then Jimmy said, “I’m going to miss you.”

Mark smiled. “I wish I could say the same.”

A silent moment, then they both laughed and came together in a hug.

“See ya.”

“Yeah,” Mark said, patting Jimmy’s back.

When they parted, Jimmy turned and Mark stood there watching Jimmy walk away until a bit of blowing snow obscured him from view.

Then he was gone.

Mark had left Jimmy behind, but there was still a part of the young man that had remained. Jimmy had been so adamant about fuel efficiency during their previous trips across Canada and down into the United States that Mark had changed his driving habits enough for it to show up on his bottom line.

Before he'd left Yellowknife, Mark had deposited his NWTT cheque into his bank account and when he did, the balance in the account had surprised him.

It wasn't huge and Mark wasn't suddenly rich, but the amount of money he had in the account for the day-to-day operation of his business had been growing steadily since he'd met Jimmy.

And it hadn't been that hard.

He'd reduced his idling time, planned his routes well and paid close attention to his speed, using cruise control and his top gear as often as he could. He'd also started doing things that Jimmy had never mentioned, but Mark knew were important tools to reduce fuel consumption, like using the truck's momentum as much as possible to carry his rig over short grades and then letting gravity help pull the truck back up to cruising speed. He'd also been coasting a lot more, letting the truck slow down on its own rather than using up his brakes to make hard stops.

Then there were his gears. Not too long ago Mark would run up and down them like a set of stairs, but now he lingered in gears maximizing the engine's full operating range before downshifting and progressive-shifting up through the gears to make sure the engine was doing the lowest amount of revs possible.

Sure, there wasn't a lot of opportunity for fuel efficiency in the far north, but even regular ice road truckers drove on regular roads and highways 10 months out of the year, and fuel savings over that amount of time could add up to a tidy sum, and that's what Mark had found in his bank statement.

Maybe enough for a vacation, Mark thought.

Free time.

He liked the sound of that.

Mark was two days from Yellowknife driving east through Southern Alberta.

Something on the road ahead didn't look right.

“What the hell?”

He took his foot off the accelerator and slowed down to check it out . . .

THE END

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Thinking it over

Mark and Jimmy's travels northward on the ice roads taught them many things about the strict rules to follow, the special driving conditions and the need to be prepared physically and mentally. Are you a SmartDriver? How many of Mark and Jimmy's tips do you remember from reading about their adventure?

Think about some of the things you read about in the novel. What would you do if you were faced with some of the challenges of winter driving in the north? How many of those challenges apply to winter driving in general? Reflect on their experiences as you consider the following questions from each chapter of the novel.

Do you have answers for all the questions?

(You can find the answers by looking back through the novel.)

What do you think?

Chapter 1

What professional driving techniques will ensure proper cool down of the engine when you stop after a lengthy period of highway driving?

Chapter 2

How much fuel can be saved by reducing your speed to 10 km/hr below the speed limit?

Why are ice roads among the safest highways even though extreme weather and driving conditions create special challenges and hazards?

Chapter 3

What is the effect of extremely cold temperatures (-40°C to -70°C) on mechanical equipment and steel parts?

Chapter 4

Extremely cold weather demands that drivers prepare their trucks and themselves to handle the conditions:

- What extra equipment should you carry in the truck?
- What personal items will help keep you comfortable?

Chapter 5

Diesel fuel can gel when the temperature falls below 0°C. What must you do to prevent this?

Chapter 6

Shutting down the engine saves fuel, yet most truckers leave their engines idling overnight when they are on the ice roads: Why?

Chapter 7

WA depression bowl is created when a truck drives on ice. What is a depression bowl?

Pressure waves in the ice may cause the ice to crack. To minimize this risk, what distance must be maintained between trucks travelling on an ice road?

Chapter 8

What is a good way to find the best places to eat when you rest in a new town?

Chapter 9

When *Mother Load's* engine would not start, Mark was surprised by how quickly the mechanic arrived to fix the truck. Why do northern companies make sure repairs and maintenance are carried out as swiftly as possible?

Chapter 10

Why must every truck on the ice roads be equipped with a VHF radio even though most drivers already have a cell phone?

How can a driver minimize fatigue and boredom while driving for long periods at 25 km/hr on white roads on a white landscape with little visual relief?

Chapter 11

“Safety first. Keep to the limit and get plenty of rest.”

Are these rules just for the ice roads or are they the regular practices of a professional driver?

Chapter 12

Rule: No stopping on lake ice.

What can you do to reduce your need to stop between official rest stops?

“Rocking” the truck before you park on ice is the best way to avoid the truck settling into a multiwheeled ice rut.

What is this technique?

Why are the penalties for littering on the ice roads as stiff as those for speeding?

Chapter 13

What are some of the advantages of balancing the economy of an overnight rest in a sleeper cab with the more expensive option of using facilities at a full-service rest stop?

Chapter 14

After a stop where the truck has been idling all night in cold weather, why would it be a good idea to look inside the cowl around the motor before moving the truck again?

What are some of the changes that can affect the condition of the ice roads?

Why do you need to make sure all the truck wheels are moving freely when you leave a parking spot?

Chapter 15

The mark of a professional driver on the ice roads is one who “*never speeds, never gets cold and never gets hungry.*”

What are some practical things you can do to live up to this standard?

Chapter 16

Mark was impressed that everything was regulated and scheduled on the ice roads – from the loading and strapping of his trailer to the checkpoints along the way and the strict driving rules to be followed at all times. How have these practices contributed to the remarkable safety record of the ice roads?

Chapter 17

Mark found out the hard way why he should have a spare key cached somewhere outside his cab. Do you know where your spare key is?

Chapter 18

In Canada, most truck drivers are used to driving in snow. However, the ice roads are routinely closed during a snowstorm. Why?

Chapter 19

Safety rules are for the benefit of everyone on the ice roads and breaking them can lead to catastrophe. What are the penalties for breaking the rules?

Chapter 20

Why is a blowout on an ice road a major problem for all ice road users?