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Mark Dalton — SmartDriver 1 Highway Trucking



A FleetSmart Novel by Edo van Belkom

Fuel Efficiency Program
for Highway Trucking

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Fuel Efficiency Program for Highway Trucking

Natural Resources Canada – through the Office of Energy Efficiency’s Fleet Vehicle Initiative (FleetSmart) – helps commercial and municipal fleets reduce fuel consumption and emissions through improved energy-efficient practices. This contributes to the reduction of greenhouse gases and helps Canada meet the challenges of climate change.

Natural Resources Canada’s Office of Energy Efficiency
Leading Canadians to Energy Efficiency at Home, at Work and on the Road

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CHAPTER

1

Mark Dalton was running out of country.

Two weeks ago he'd mentioned to his dispatcher—an overweight, overbearing block of a man named Bud—that he hadn't seen very much of Canada's East Coast. Sure, he'd been out west to Vancouver plenty of times, but for some reason the eastern part of the country had been like, well, a whole “other” country. So he'd asked Bud for some loads out east, and after a few days he was heading along the Trans-Canada, leaving Quebec for New Brunswick or Nouveau-Brunswick, as a few of the signs had read.

That had been two days ago. Now he was bobtailing through Newfoundland, on the Rock and south of St. John's, still heading east but without much of the country left in front of him. In fact, the bright blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean were beginning to loom large across his windshield. And while his truck, Mother Load, sometimes seemed blessed, he doubted very much that it could drive on water.

Bud had been sketchy on the details of the load, other than to say it would be a reefer of fresh fish heading to Montreal. As for directions, he had simply said to follow this road all the way to its end, and that there was no way he could miss the loading dock. Well, he was following Bud's directions, but his destination was nowhere in sight.

Just then the road crested a slight hill and Mark slammed on the brakes. The road had fallen away, sending him rushing down a steep incline toward the ocean. Mark pressed harder on the pedal, and the brakes gave a momentary squeal before the ABS kicked in. For a moment it felt as if momentum and the weight of Mother Load's big diesel engine would throw the tractor end over end, but then she stopped dead in her tracks.

"That was a close one, eh?" somebody shouted over the sound of his now-idling engine.

"What?" Mark took a deep breath, his nostrils filled with the smell of fresh fish.

"I said you nearly flipped it." A pause. "Wouldn't be the first."

Mark ran a hand over his sweat-dampened face and then looked out his window. There was a middle-aged man standing by the side of the road, his plaid shirt rolled neatly over his elbows and his dark pants tucked into his green rubber boots.

"You picking up the load?" he asked.

Mark wondered how small the place was if its shipments were thought of in terms of the load. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Then you'd best go down backwards," he said, flashing a crooked smile. "Not much room down there to turn around."

Mark looked down the hill and marvelled at how well Newfoundlanders had learned to use every inch of available space. There were three buildings nestled up against the cliff face: the larger one built in the centre of a level patch of rock, two smaller ones built half on the rocks, half over the water. The big building had a single loading dock and a reefer parked out front. There was a thin strip of asphalt on either side of the trailer, and even the cars parked at the side of the building looked as if they'd been backed down the hill.

"Great," Mark mumbled under his breath. He shifted Mother Load into reverse and stuck his head out the window. "Can you make sure no one's coming up behind me?"

"Don't worry," the man said with a wave. "There's nothing else coming down that road today."

Mark sighed, checked his mirrors, then slowly backed up over the hill. But even when he was back on level ground, he still had to back up nearly half a kilometre before he had enough room to turn Mother Load around. Then it was backwards again, over the hill and down the steep incline towards the water's edge. It took just over three minutes to make the descent. When he was safely at the bottom and parked in front of the trailer, Mark looked up to the top of the rock face and wondered how on earth he'd done it.

Then he wondered how he was going to climb back up, pulling a fully loaded trailer behind him.

Suddenly there was a man at Mark's window. "Get yourself hooked up," he said. "They're just gettin' the tractor ready."

"Tractor?" Mark asked. "What tractor?"

"To pull you out."

So that's how I'm going to get out, Mark thought as he climbed out of the cab to connect the gladhands and pigtail to the trailer. It sort of made sense since Mother Load was spec'd for long-haul highway driving, and this little adventure required the sort of gear ratios they had on dump trucks. Without help it was quite possible that Mark would blow his engine just trying to get back up to the road at the top of the rock face.

A moment later a loud roar came from somewhere behind him. A tractor—more like a bulldozer, really—began chugging out the open door of one of the smaller buildings. The dozer was an old squat machine coloured here and there with alternating patches of rust and orange paint.

As Mark watched the machine rumble into position in front of Mother Load, the shipper came out to meet him, carrying a clipboard and a big yellow envelope.

"Twenty-six thousand pounds of fresh fish, that is," he said with a nod in the direction of the reefer. He handed the envelope to Mark. "People here are depending on it getting to Montreal on time."

"It'll get there, my friend," Mark said, glancing up toward the top of the cliff. "As long as I can get it up that hill."

The man laughed and flashed a smile that was missing several teeth. "Don't you worry, none. Phyllis hasn't lost one yet, eh."

Mark looked at the dozer, wondering if it was named Phyllis, but then he realized that there was a woman behind the wheel—a woman, no doubt, named Phyllis. He climbed into his truck, backed it into position until the king pin was locked in the jaws of the fifth wheel, and stepped out to wind up the landing gear. He did a quick check of the trailer, and when he was satisfied, he got back into Mother Load and gave Phyllis the "thumbs up."

The dozer eased forward, and the chain connecting it to Mother Load pulled taut. Mark shifted into first gear and slowly let out the clutch. But before he was even in gear, the big orange machine was pulling him along at a slow and steady clip. Mark left Mother Load in first, but kept a light touch on the throttle lest he put any slack in the chain. Things went smoothly at first, but a quarter of the way up the incline the dozer's right track began to slip. Mark stepped on the accelerator to help ease the machine's burden and the dozer immediately straightened out with both tracks digging into the roadway. Mark let out a sigh of relief but didn't take his eye off the chain, or his hands off the wheel, until both the dozer and Mother Load had crested the top of the cliff.

"Piece of cake," Mark said as the sweat on his face and down his back began to cool.

"You kiddin'?" she said, unhooking the chain from Mother Load. "I never slipped like that before. Thought we were both gonna be sleepin' with the fishes tonight."

"Really," Mark said under his breath, a chill running the length of his spine. He'd never been happier to be on level ground in his life.

“Well, it’s been fun pulling your chain,” she said with a laugh, turning the dozer around so it was pointed back down the slope.

Mark smiled, suddenly unsure whether they’d actually been in danger or if she’d just been having some fun with him. The question would have to go unanswered as Phyllis gave him one last wave, and was gone. Mark turned and looked out his windshield, amazed that the entire country of Canada—save for the narrow strip of rock behind him—lay before him, waiting to be travelled.

He put Mother Load in gear, let out the clutch and started heading west.

CHAPTER

2

The fish in Mark's reefer were fresh, so he had to get them to Montreal as quickly as he could. The trip would likely take a couple of days, which left little time for sightseeing or mistakes. The former wasn't a problem since Mark had seen enough of the Atlantic provinces on the way east. As for mistakes, well, he'd have to be careful since moose were a problem out here and Mother Load didn't have a roo bar to protect her in a collision. He'd also have to be cautious because he didn't know the roads out here all that well, and one wrong turn could cost him hours of drive time, not to mention fuel, which was already priced at a premium out on the Rock.

For example, it was roughly a 13-hour drive across Newfoundland to the ferry at Port aux Basques, then another five or so hours on the boat before it docked in North Sydney, Nova Scotia. It was also possible to get the ferry at Argentia, which was a much shorter drive, but the ferry ride to North Sydney took all of 14 hours. That would save him some money on fuel, but those savings would largely be cancelled out by the higher fare for the ferry. So it was almost an even call, except Mark didn't like having his rig and his load in someone else's hands for such a long period of time.

Another thing to consider was that the ferry out of Argentia was only in service part of the year, and he couldn't be sure if it was running at the moment or not. If he drove down to Argentia and the ferry wasn't running, he'd be out time and money, neither of which he was willing to gamble—especially with such a time-sensitive load. Sure, he could look up the ferry schedule easily enough before venturing south, but he knew the route to Port aux Basques and was content to make his decision based on the information at hand.

Besides, in addition to all the hard facts, boat rides made Mark queasy and the less time he spent on the water the better.

When the ferry was well out of port and finally steaming through the waters of Cabot Strait, Mark decided to give Bud a call. There was still plenty of time before he'd need another load, but he wanted to tell his dispatcher that the next time he sent Mark east for fresh fish, he'd be expecting some kind of danger-pay premium for the pickup alone.

"Hi Bud, it's Mark."

"Hey Mark, how are you?"

Mark was taken aback by Bud's response. Every time he called Bud, the man always asked, "Mark who?" This time he seemed pleasant, and had actually answered the phone the way normal, civil people did. It was unnatural and Mark immediately suspected Bud was up to something.

"I'm fine," Mark said after a pause.

"Great, what's up?"

"I'm calling to say this is one stinky load you gave me on the coast."

"Yeah, fish can be like that sometimes." A pause. "Hey, you're not running late are you?"

"No, it's not the fish that stink, it was the pickup."

"What about it?"

Mark shook his head, knowing Bud was suddenly playing dumb to avoid lying to Mark. "Why didn't you warn me I'd need a helicopter to pick up the load?"

"You did? I didn't know that."

"Nice try, Bud," Mark said, cutting the man off. "But you've had better lies in the sand traps at Glen Abbey."

Bud was silent a moment, and Mark took the opportunity to breathe in a lungful of fresh North Atlantic air. Finally Bud said, "I didn't tell you because, if I had, you wouldn't have taken the load."

"Damn right I wouldn't."

"...Or you would've asked for more money."

"I'm still gonna."

Silence again. "Okay, how much do you want?"

"What?" It was unlike Bud to settle any disagreement by paying his drivers more money. And if he did eventually agree to pay extra, getting the money from him would be like pulling teeth out of the mouth of a shark.

"How much would make it right?"

Mark thought about it. If he asked for too much, Bud might get angry with him. Too little and he'd be selling himself short, but he eventually blurted out the first fee that came to mind.

"Sure. Okay."

Bud had agreed so quickly, Mark immediately felt he should have asked for more. But of course it was too late now.

"Well, all right."

"Now that we've got that cleared," Bud said, "I want to ask you a favour."

All of a sudden, Mark knew he'd been had. Bud had agreed to Mark's demand because there was something he needed from Mark. And now that he'd agreed to take Bud's money, it would be that much harder to tell him no. "What is it?"

"C'mon now, you say that like it's going to be a bad thing."

"I know you, Bud. It is going to be a bad thing."

"No. Not that bad. I want you to coach my nephew, Jimmy."

"What, is he on a hockey team or something?"

"No. He wants to be a driver and I want you to take him cross-country with you, you know, so he can get some experience driving long-haul."

Mark just laughed. "No way."

"Don't say no so fast. Hear me out... He's a good kid and he wants to drive. And he's like you in a lot of ways."

"Oh, yeah." Mark didn't know if that was supposed to be a compliment or not.

"And I told my sister I'd help him out, and now I'm asking you."

"Bud, I already said 'no.'"

"I know you did." A pause. "But I said no to the extra money for the pickup at first, then I came around, didn't I?"

There it was. A helping of guilt bigger than any grandmother could dish out. "Let me think about it."

"You can't," said Bud. "My nephew's ready to go now and you'll be in the area in the next day or so."

"Why, where is he?"

"New Brunswick."

"And just how long has your nephew known he'd be riding with me?"

"A couple of weeks, I guess."

"A couple of weeks? So why am I hearing about this now?"

"Well, it's sort of like the pickup you just made. If I'd told you about it beforehand, you would have said no."

Mark shook his head and smiled in reluctant admiration of Bud's cunning. No wonder the man was such a good dispatcher.

"If I take him," Mark said, "and I'm not saying I'm going to... But if I did take him, I'd want to know what's in it for me."

"Well, you'd have a second driver... you'd be doing me a favour, and I'd be forever in your debt."

"Yeah, and?"

"And... I'll give you nothing but sweet loads all the way to the West Coast." A pause. "I've got a new computer to help me plan routes. It should make everything easier, more efficient and profitable."

Mark held the phone away from his ear. "There's something wrong with my phone, Bud," he said. "None of what you said sounded like you'd be paying me extra money for this."

"Okay, you can bill me as a team, but you won't have to pay him for his time. He's strictly there to learn."

Mark was suspicious. "I can bill you as a team, and you will be paying me the entire team rate?"

Bud hesitated a moment. Obviously Mark knew Bud better than Bud realized.

"Well?" Mark prodded.

"Sure, okay."

Mark did the calculations in his mind and knew this was a great chance to make some serious coin. But money wasn't everything and there were still things to be considered before they had an agreement. "One more thing," said Mark. "If it doesn't work between me and your nephew, and I have to drop him off somewhere, you'll be on the hook for paying his way back home."

Bud sighed loudly in Mark's ear, then agreed.

"Okay. So, who has your nephew driven for?"

A lengthy pause, then, "Nobody, really."

"Does he have any experience?"

"He's young and he's willing to learn."

"Experience, Bud. Has he been on the road at all?"

"No." Another sigh. "He's got his A-Z, and he's taken a few courses."

"Courses?" This was sounding better by the minute.

"What kind of courses?"

"A bunch of college courses, and he did that government SmartDriver program."

Great, thought Mark. I'm going to be driving with some punk with no miles under his seat, who thinks he knows it all already.

"And what do you want me to teach him?"

"Just give him some experience, a bit of time on the road."

"You want him to learn on my truck, on Mother Load? Do

you have any idea how much it costs to replace a clutch? Rebuild a transmission?"

He could almost hear Bud seething at the other end of the line. Mark had the man on the ropes and he wasn't about to let him off without making him sweat.

"I'll give you nothing but sweet loads all the way to the west coast," Bud said again, then paused, waiting for Mark to comment. Mark remained silent, however, enjoying Bud's discomfort.

"And?"

"And what?"

Mark was flattered that Bud had asked him for this favour since there were dozens of drivers for him to choose from. But Mark wanted more; he wanted Bud to explain himself, maybe even to give Mark a compliment. That alone would make this whole thing worthwhile. And so he asked, "How come, with all the drivers you've got working for you, you asked me to do this for you?"

Bud was silent.

"Well?"

"Because I wanted him to learn from..."

"Yeah."

"...to learn from..."

"C'mon, Bud. You can say it."

"...from the best."

"Ha!" Mark laughed.

"There, I said it. Don't ask me to repeat it, because I won't. And if you tell anyone else, I'll deny I ever said it."

"But you did say it."

Bud was silent for the longest time, then he said, "Making a living as a truck driver's not an easy thing. I figured the best I could do for him is to have him taught by someone who's a good driver and knows the other side of the business... the part nobody will ever teach him in school."

Mark had never heard Bud speak so candidly before. He was humbled, and at a loss for words.

“So where can you pick him up?” Bud asked, a bit of the old gruffness back in his voice.

“He’s in New Brunswick, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be at the Salisbury Big Stop tomorrow night. If the boy’s there, then he can hitch a ride with me. If not...”

“He’ll be there,” Bud said.

Mark hung up the phone and looked out over the water surrounding the ferry. Since the scenery wouldn’t be changing any in the next few hours, he decided to go back to Mother Load and get some sleep. Judging by what lay ahead of him, he was probably going to need it.

CHAPTER**3**

The Salisbury Big Stop was situated on Highway 2 just west of Moncton, and was one of the most recognized truck stops in Atlantic Canada, if not the entire country. Not surprisingly, it had good facilities for long-haul drivers and was the perfect place to stop, freshen up, and pick up a passenger named Jimmy.

As Mark eased past the large fox standing guard over the front of the truck stop, advertising the Silver Fox Restaurant, he had expected Jimmy to come running out to meet him. That way he'd be able to pick up the boy and they'd be on their way. But no one came running up to his rig and Mark was forced to find a spot to park, climb out, and head inside.

Inside the restaurant, Mark quickly became irritated since he didn't even know what this kid Jimmy was supposed to look like. He imagined he'd be a young kid, looking wet behind the ears, carrying a knapsack and looking for someone—just like Mark would be. But as he walked through the Silver Fox, no one seemed to fit the bill. He checked out the convenience store, TV room, and laundry, but no Jimmy, or at least no one who looked like they might be a “Jimmy.” Mark hesitated checking the showers, but walked through the shower room calling out “Jimmy!” as he went. Nobody answered. He moved on to the theatre, which was luckily between shows, and the chapel, but there was no Jimmy anywhere. Finally he checked the arcade.

There, playing one of the pinball machines, was a young man. A kid, really. Tall and skinny with dirty blonde hair, wide-set eyes, and a single red pimple on the right side of his face. He was wearing running shoes, a pair of jeans, an oversized beige jacket, and a red baseball cap with the letters "UNB" across the front. Thankfully the ball cap was on the right way and the kid's jeans fit him properly around the waist. Still, what the hell was he doing in here when he was supposed to be waiting for Mark outside?

"You Bud's nephew?"

The kid looked at Mark as if he'd just been caught stealing candy. "Yeah. I mean, yes."

"What the hell you doin' in here?" Mark asked, mad enough to wring the boy's neck.

He seemed speechless at first, but eventually words began to slip out of his mouth. "My uncle told me you wouldn't be here 'til five, so I thought I'd play a few games to pass the time. I was gonna go out and wait for you soon, but I never thought you'd be two hours early."

Mark just looked at him. He was finding it hard to be mad at the boy when Bud had been the one to miscalculate his drive time.

"I swear," Jimmy said. "This was gonna be my last game."

Mark said nothing for a moment, then gestured to the bags at Jimmy's feet. "Those yours?"

Jimmy nodded.

There were two bags, one of them the sort of suitcase people take with them on overseas flights. "You going on vacation or something?"

"No, sir."

Sir. Mark was touched by the boy's show of respect, but he wasn't about to get too friendly. Not right away at least.

"You don't have to call me 'sir'. Mr. Dalton' will be fine."

"Okay... Mr. Dalton."

Mark checked his watch and let out a sigh. Even though he was early by Bud's estimation, he'd already wasted more than 30 minutes in the truck stop. "Pick up your bags," he said, then turned and headed back to Mother Load.

"I'm sorry, I really am... My uncle said you—"

"Forget it."

"But I really hate to be—"

"I said forget it, all right."

"Okay," Jimmy said reluctantly.

They walked toward Mother Load in silence, Jimmy struggling to keep up with Mark's pace because of the two heavy bags weighing him down.

"My name's Jimmy, by the way," the boy said, running a bit to bring himself even with Mark. "I haven't driven much, but I really do want to learn and my uncle said I couldn't do any better than learning the business from you."

Mark stopped in front of Mother Load, standing close enough to it to feel the heat coming off the cowling. "He said that?"

"Yes, he did. He also said that if he had more drivers like you he'd probably be out of business."

Mark wasn't quite sure what to make of that last comment, but decided to take it as a compliment. "Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Jimmy."

They shook hands.

"Likewise, Mr. Dalton."

Somehow Mr. Dalton didn't sound right anymore. The only Mr. Dalton Mark knew was his father. "I think you'd better call me Mark from now on."

"Sure thing... Mark."

Mark opened an outside storage compartment. "You can put your bags in here for now. And hurry it up; we've got to get moving."

Jimmy stowed his bags, and watching him, Mark began to feel that this thing just might work out all right after all.

Mark waited for Jimmy to get into the truck, but he seemed to be taking his time stowing his bags. Then, just as he was about to start up Mother Load, Mark noticed Jimmy strolling around the rig. Mark leaned out the window and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Circle check," Jimmy answered without looking up.

"What?" Mark said under his breath. Then he got out of the truck and joined Jimmy at the end of the trailer. "I already did one today."

"I'm sure you did, but I have to make a note in my logbook that I did a circle check before we can get going."

Mark placed his hands on his hips and just looked at the boy as he kicked the trailer tires. "Everything's good," Mark said. "Take my word for it."

"Oh, I'm sure it is," Jimmy said, like he was out for a walk on a Sunday in July. "But you see, my logbook has my name on it, so I want to make sure everything's good... you know, for myself."

"Fine," Mark said through clenched teeth. "I'll be waiting in the truck." He climbed back up inside Mother Load and slammed the door as hard as he dared, just so the idiot kid might get the message. But the boy just continued on with his circle check, systematically moving from one point to the next, like he had a checklist in his hand that required each point being examined thoroughly before he moved on to the next. Mark resigned himself to a 10-minute delay, but when the guy popped the latches on each side of the engine compartment and tilted the hood forward, Mark had had enough. "What the hell do you think you're doing now?" he asked after a couple of minutes.

"You sure you did a circle check today?"

Mark was caught a little off guard by Jimmy's response to his question. "Yeah, why?"

"Looks like you're short a couple litres of oil."

“That’s impossible,” Mark fumed, climbing down from the cab. He stomped around to where Jimmy stood and took the dipstick from him. Then he dipped it, pulled it back, and checked it.

Jimmy smiled. “See.”

Mark suddenly felt like a jackass and wondered if his face was as red as it felt. “I don’t understand,” he said, all of the thunder gone from his voice. He was glad that he wouldn’t be running Mother Load short of engine oil, but he hated that this kid—Bud’s nephew of all people—had to be the one to point it out to him. After all, Mark was the coach driver here, not the other way around. He shook his head in disbelief, “I checked it this morning and it was fine.”

“Probably was,” Jimmy said. “But it never hurts to check the oil. It’s probably one of the most important things in the engine...”

Mark let Jimmy drone on while he went to get a jug of oil out of one of Mother Load’s storage compartments.

“...especially during start-up. If you’re low on oil you could be doing damage to your engine without even knowing it...”

“Duh,” Mark said, under his breath as he topped up Mother Load. He knew it was an immature response, but he was well aware of how important oil was, thank you very much.

“...that’s especially important for the resale value of your truck. If you take good care of it now, you’ll get a lot more for it later—”

“Are you done?” Mark said, capping the jug of oil.

Jimmy looked at Mark for a second before his eyes moved to the ground and he nodded.

“Good. Now get in the truck.”

CHAPTER**4**

At last they were rolling. Since Mother Load's engine was still warm, Mark didn't idle very long before heading out onto the road. After shifting up through the gears, he joined the traffic flow at a speed and gear that got the most out of the engine's RPMs. Once he was satisfied he was getting the best fuel economy possible considering the traffic, road conditions, and his load, Mark switched on the cruise control and relaxed a bit behind the wheel.

Jimmy said nothing for the longest time, which suited Mark just fine. After their exchange back at the rest station, the less he heard from the boy the better—at least for a little while.

Mark leaned forward to turn on the radio, maybe play a CD or two, but before he could make a selection, Jimmy spoke up.

"So what are we hauling?"

"Fresh fish."

"To where?"

"Montreal."

Jimmy gave an exaggerated nod, then opened up the map he'd found in the cab. "What route are we going to take to get there?"

A fair enough question, thought Mark. "We're going to take Highway 2 up into Quebec, then go down along the south shore of the St. Lawrence River into Montreal."

Jimmy looked at the map for several minutes, his nose and cheeks making funny movements... as if he didn't approve of Mark's route selection. When the boy let out a "tsk" like he was sucking air through his teeth, Mark couldn't let it slide any longer.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just—"

"Just what?"

"Why don't we go through Maine? The route is straighter, and it would be a lot shorter."

Mark just looked at him for a while, then he cracked a smile. "Go straight through Maine."

"Yeah, it would probably save you a couple of hours' drive time."

Mark took a deep breath. "Well, believe it or not, Jimmy, the government of the good state of Maine didn't think it was worth their while to build a major highway through their state that connected the two Canadian provinces on either side of it. So while there is a road that goes east-west, it isn't very good." He paused, savouring the moment where he'd show the know-it-all kid a thing or two. "But even if the road was good, going through Maine would entail two border crossings, for which I don't have the right paperwork. And even if I did have the papers, it could take me hours just to get into the U.S. and more hours to get out again..." He turned to look at Jimmy. "What's the matter with you? You don't like Canada or something?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Sorry, I thought it might be a good way to save some time."

"Don't tell me," said Mark. "In this course you took they told you it's always best to plan the most direct route possible."

"Not exactly. They said to study the latest maps to make sure the route you take is right for the size of your vehicle, and that the goods you carry are allowed on that route."

Mark couldn't disagree with that. "Right."

"And that sometimes, 'as the crow flies' isn't always the best route."

“Exactly.”

Jimmy nodded. “It’s hard to tell what route to take just by looking at a map.”

“Didn’t they cover border crossings in this SmartDriver course of yours?”

“Not really. I don’t think there’s a fuel efficient way to cross the border.”

Mark laughed. “No, I guess there isn’t.”

Jimmy began folding up the map.

“Let me tell you,” Mark began, “crossing the border is always an adventure. Sometimes you go straight through, and sometimes you’re stuck there for half a day while they search your rig just because you smoked a joint 20 years ago, or hesitated for a split second when they asked where you’re headed.”

“That happen to you?” Jimmy asked.

“The latter did.”

“How long ago?”

“About a year.”

“And you’re still bitter.”

Mark realized Jimmy was having some fun, but he was too wound up to care. “Look kid, in this business, fuel is money, absolutely. But time is money too, and I’d rather drive an extra hundred miles than sit at the border somewhere for four hours while my load goes bad.”

Jimmy was about to say something, but wisely decided to keep his mouth shut.

The two men barely said a word to each other the rest of the day.

By the time they reached Quebec City, Mark was in need of some sleep. It was possible for them to keep going since Jimmy was a licensed driver, but Mark was unsure about giving the boy any drive time. Sure, Mark was supposed to get some rest, but there was no way he’d be able to sleep knowing a kid with no experience was behind the wheel.

“You drive a rig like this before?”

“Sure I have.”

“For who?”

“The school that trained me.”

Mark nodded. So basically he had no experience at all, and there was no way he was going to let him drive Mother Load for the first time, by himself, at night. Mark slowed down and ran the engine with a slack throttle, allowing the engine to cool down on the move. When he was satisfied the engine was sufficiently cooled down, he pulled to a stop by the side of the road, just behind an abutment of a large bridge.

“Am I going to drive?” Jimmy asked hopefully.

“What do you think?”

“Guess not.” There was disappointment in Jimmy’s voice, but not too much.

“I need a few hours’ down time,” Mark said, shutting off the engine and climbing into the sleeper compartment behind him.

“Where do I sleep?”

Mark tossed him a blanket. “Make yourself comfortable,” he said.

Jimmy’s mouth dropped open, but he said nothing in response.

Mark felt bad about making the boy sleep in his seat, but the kid had to know he was going to have to rough it at the beginning. Besides, Mark was too tired to bother making other arrangements. He needed his rest and if he didn’t get enough of it, he’d be a danger to himself, to Jimmy, and to everyone else on the road. “Good night,” Mark said.

“Night,” said Jimmy.

Mark listened to Jimmy shift and twist in his seat for a while, but eventually they both settled down for a few hours’ sleep.

CHAPTER**5**

Mark awoke at around four in the morning. The inside of the sleeper was chilly, but Mark had a sleeping bag that could handle temperatures as low as minus 5° Celsius, and had been as warm as a rat in a sock all night long.

Jimmy hadn't been so lucky. He was curled up in a ball with the blanket and his coat wrapped tightly around him. He might have been shivering. Mark couldn't be sure.

"Good morning," said Mark, climbing into the driver's seat.

"Morning."

"Sleep well?"

"No."

"I did."

After the fish were unloaded in Montreal, Mark took the opportunity to call Bud for the details on his next load. Once he got the particulars, Mark turned to Jimmy and said, "Go out and wind down the landing gear and unlock the fifth wheel, will ya?"

Jimmy hesitated a moment, then nodded, obviously eager to get some hands-on experience.

Mark waited until Jimmy was outside, then he began.

"What are you trying to do to me, Bud?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. This nephew of yours is a know-it-all. He's taken a couple of courses and acts like he invented the whole damn trucking industry."

"What can I say, he's a smart kid. He knows his stuff."

"He's a smart ass is what he is—"

"Okay, so he's still got a lot to learn." A pause. "But you weren't exactly a seasoned pro when I hired you on, you know."

Mark shook his head, amazed that Bud would use that against him so quickly. Obviously the man knew exactly how irritating his nephew could be. "At least I'd done some driving when I started with you."

"You made your share of mistakes."

Mark couldn't argue with that. Even now, years later, he was still making mistakes. In fact, he was learning something new every day, even from wet-behind-the-ear kids like Jimmy.

"All right, all right, you made your point."

Mark could hear Bud breathe a sigh of relief. "He's not so bad once you get to know him. Just be a bit more patient, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Mark hung up the phone.

Just then Jimmy climbed back into the truck. "All done," he said.

Mark wondered if he should get out and check that Jimmy had done everything properly, or just trust that the kid knew what he was doing. "They teach you about hooking up and dropping trailers at that school of yours?"

"Yes, they did."

"And you did everything right?"

"Yes. I. Did." Jimmy was obviously becoming irritated by Mark's lack of faith.

Okay, thought Mark. I've got to start trusting him at some point, and now's as good a time as any. He shifted Mother Load into first and slowly released the clutch. The truck jerked forward, hesitated, then was free. Behind them, the trailer barely moved and set down on the ground as if it had been lowered onto a bed of feathers.

“Nice,” Mark said.

Jimmy was beaming.

Mark noticed the boy’s expression and said, “Did you see how smoothly I pulled away? Now jump out and unhook the pigtail and gladhands.”

Jimmy’s smile was replaced by a scowl. Mark kept his lips pressed tightly together, and had a little laugh, on the inside.

They picked up a 40-foot standard chassis and an empty container in a yard near the port area of Montreal. The container was almost new, but the highway chassis it was sitting on had seen better days. Still, two circle checks of the chassis—one by Mark and another by Jimmy—showed everything to be in good working order, and all of its inspection tags were up to date too, so there was no reason to think the unit hadn’t been well maintained over the course of its working life.

“There’s no seal on the container,” said Jimmy.

“What’s inside?”

“Nothing,” answered Mark. “It’s empty.”

“That doesn’t sound very efficient, hauling empty containers. The drag created by the container is the same no matter what the load is, so I would think it would be best to run with a full load whenever possible.”

“For the shipper maybe, but it’s great for me. See, when I move containers, I get the same rate whether they’re full or empty. So if I have a choice, I’ll take empty. You always get better mileage pulling a container full of air.”

Jimmy looked up. “Speaking of air, you don’t have a deflector on your tractor.”

Mark strolled up beside Mother Load and glanced skyward.

“Man! Nothing gets by you, does it?”

“A fully loaded tractor-trailer needs about 170 horsepower just to push through the air at 90 kilometres per hour on a smooth asphalt road. It wouldn’t be much less running empty,

and an air deflector would make the truck more aerodynamic—save you a lot of fuel over the long term.”

“Is that right?”

Jimmy nodded.

“And what if I drive a flatbed?”

“Then you’d have to arrange the load so air flows smoothly over it, or maybe cover it with a tarp, reducing drag.”

Mark just looked at the boy, shaking his head. “You’ve got an answer for everything, don’t you?” He paused a moment, then resumed speaking before Jimmy could say another word. “But if I drive a lot of flatbed loads then I’d be driving around with a big 10-foot air deflector up top, pushing air out of the way for nothing. How much fuel would that use up?”

“Uh, I don’t know.”

“I don’t either, but I can tell you it would be a lot. So it’s six of one, half-dozen of the other, and I’ve chosen not to have a deflector because of that.”

“But there are adjustable deflectors on the market for trucks that haul flatbed and lowboy trailers.”

Damn! thought Mark. The kid really did have an answer for everything. “Yeah, well, I’ve been meaning to get one of those.”

They stopped to refuel and get a bite to eat just outside Montreal. Without giving it much thought, Mark began climbing out of Mother Load while the engine was still running.

“You’re not going to leave it idling while we eat, are you?”

“We’re just going in and out,” he said. “Then we’ll eat on the road.”

“But leaving the truck idling while we go inside wastes fuel.”

Mark shrugged. “Half an hour isn’t going to hurt.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Every little bit helps. In addition to the fuel you’re burning up, each hour of idling time is equal to seven miles of wear and tear on your engine.”

“So I’m wasting a dollar or two of fuel and putting a few miles on the engine. No big deal.”

“No big deal today, but if you cut down on just an hour of idling time a day, you’d save about \$500 in a year, not to mention about 2600 miles of wear on your engine.”

Mark let out a sigh. Doesn’t this kid ever let up? “Okay, I give,” he said, climbing back into the cab and turning the key. The big diesel engine slowed, then sputtered to a halt. “Happy now?”

“You’re the one who’s saving money.”

The kid did have a point there, but Mark wasn’t about to concede it. “I know another way to save money,” he said.

“Yeah, how?”

“Lunch is on you.”

When they returned with the food, Mark started up Mother Load and opened up his sandwich. But instead of doing the same, Jimmy placed his food on the dashboard and went back outside.

“What are you doing?”

“En-route inspection,” he said cheerfully. “Won’t take long.”

“Knock yourself out,” Mark said. He had to wait a few minutes to let the engine warm up anyway, so it wasn’t like the kid was wasting any of his time. And Mark knew that he was supposed to be conducting en route inspections, looking for things like wheel hubs that were too hot, leaks of coolant, oil or fuel, or any signs of a shifting load. Mark didn’t do that as often as he should, so it was just as well the kid did it for him.

Jimmy climbed into the truck a few minutes later.

“Any problems?” Mark asked.

“No. You’re good to go, but...”

“But what?”

“Well, I was wondering why you started up the truck while I was outside.”

“To warm it up.”

“But it was already warm. We weren’t inside long enough for it to cool down all that much.”

Mark glanced at his temperature gauge and saw it was giving the same reading as when he first started the engine. “Just making sure,” he said through partially clenched teeth, “okay?”

Jimmy pulled back as if he’d just crossed paths with a snake. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “No problem.”

“Good! Let’s go, then.”

CHAPTER

6

It was well after midnight when they hit Toronto, but Highway 401 was still teeming with traffic in both directions.

“Are we going to be stopping any time soon?” Jimmy asked. Mark shook his head. “Nope. This is the best time to be driving through the city. There’s still some traffic, but everything’s moving at the speed limit. What you don’t want to do is get caught coming through Toronto during rush hour. This place gets to be like a 30-mile parking lot and you end up burning fuel and wasting your time stopping and going all the way across the city. Even if you come through at the other times of the day, you never know when you’ll come up against an accident, or even worse, road construction and repair.”

Jimmy glanced at his watch. “But it’s two o’clock in the morning.”

“No problem. The yard we’re going to is open 24 hours a day.”

The yard they were delivering to was actually in Mississauga, just north of the airport. After dropping the trailer, they both searched the yard for their next load, a container full of snow tires heading for a warehouse in Sudbury.

They found the container sitting on a chassis in one corner of the yard. All the numbers matched the paperwork Mark had for

the load, so he backed up Mother Load until the fifth wheel made contact with the nose of the trailer. Now all that was left was to connect the gladhands and pigtail and a quick inspection of the chassis.

“Why don’t you check out the trailer?” Mark said.

“Just me?”

“You need the practice, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I know you don’t trust me,” Mark said, “but I trust you.” Besides that, Mark wanted to save his strength for the drive ahead. Jimmy was younger and fresher and would probably do a better job at inspecting the rig than Mark would under the circumstances.

Jimmy’s smile was ear to ear. “Okay, sure.” He was outside the truck a moment later, hooking up the gladhands that connected the trailer brakes to Mother Load’s air supply. After that was done, he was standing beside the truck, knocking on Mark’s door. “You have a flashlight..”

Mark reached down to the floor on his right and picked up the flashlight he kept there for just this sort of thing.

“...and something to thump the tires with?”

He handed Jimmy the flashlight, then got the Louisville Slugger he kept under his seat for checking tire inflation. It was hardly as accurate as a tire gauge, but the baseball bat produced a good sound and made it easy to tell if a tire was flat or not. It also came in handy for other things like, well, playing baseball.

Mark looked into his mirrors, watching Jimmy’s light flash and flicker its way around the trailer. Then he heard the thump-thump, thump-thump of the bat as it bounced off the tires; they all sounded like they had air in them.

Moments later, Jimmy should have been climbing into the truck, but instead the light remained partially hidden on the passenger side of the trailer. Finally there was another round of thump-thump, thump-thump, and a few seconds passed before

the door opened and Jimmy hopped in.

“Something wrong?”

“Hard to tell in the dark, but I think one of the tires is a bit worn. How far are we going?”

“We’re headed for Sudbury, but I just want to get north of the city, then we’ll shut it down for the night.”

“Should be alright, then,” Jimmy said. “I’ll check it again in the morning when I can see better.”

Mark nodded, knowing that if Jimmy—the kid who seemed to know it all—felt the tires would probably be all right, any other driver in the country would have given the tires a great big thumbs up.

No doubt they were good to go.

Mark shifted Mother Load into gear.

Minutes later they were out of the yard and heading north.

Mark didn’t stop until he’d passed Barrie. There were plenty of places he could have stopped for the night, but he decided on an empty stretch of highway with wide shoulders. “I’m beat,” said Mark, engaging the parking brake and letting the truck idle.

“Uh, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Yeah?”

“Well...” Jimmy looked around. “I don’t see one nearby.”

“What do you mean? There’s a huge one all around us.”

“Out there? In the dark?”

“Best time to do it. Lotsa privacy.” Mark struggled to keep a smile from creeping onto his face.

“No, I can’t do that.”

“Hmm, so you’re forcing me to make a choice between me having to waste fuel driving to a truck stop, or making you take a few steps off the side of the road so you can do your business there.”

Jimmy looked at Mark for a few seconds, then left the truck without another word.

Mark waited until Jimmy was outside, before laughing out loud. He knew he was giving the kid a hard time, but the kid deserved it, the way he acted like he knew it all just because he'd taken some damn courses.

When Jimmy returned, Mother Load was still idling.

"You planning on idling this truck all night while we sleep, just to keep warm?" Jimmy said.

Mark rolled his eyes, thinking here we go again. "And what if I am?"

"In-cab auxiliary air heaters use only five percent of the fuel that an idling engine would need to heat the sleeper."

"You don't say," Mark said, readying himself for bed.

"Yeah, so you could run an in-cab heater for 20 hours on the fuel you would need to idle your engine for just one hour."

"Wow!"

"And in summer, idling your engine just to run the air conditioner uses four to six percent more fuel than idling without the AC."

"That's good to know," Mark said. He turned off the engine and the cab was silent for several moments. Then the silence was replaced by a faint humming sound, as if a small motor was running somewhere on the truck.

"What's that?" Jimmy asked.

"That's my in-cab air heater," Mark said.

"You have one?"

"Course I do. I've also got an oil pan heater, a fuel heater, shutters, and winter fronts for cold weather running—everything that might save me a bit of fuel during the winter months."

"They must have cost you a bit of money."

"Sure, a bit up front, but all that stuff pays for itself over time. Besides, the Feds offer 20 percent off the purchase price of in-cab heaters up to \$350, and up to \$1,400 for an auxiliary power unit."

"I didn't know that."

Mark was caught by surprise. “You mean I know something you don’t?”

“I didn’t know about this program, is all.”

“They advertise about it all the time. And I figure, when the government is offering you money for something you were going to buy anyway, then it’s time to make the purchase.”

Jimmy said nothing and had a look on his face as if he’d just been spanked. That look—sorry and dejected—made it hard for Mark to enjoy his little victory. In fact, Mark felt a little sorry for Jimmy. Because the boy was trying so hard to impress him, it made it all the more easy to trip him up and put him in his place.

Mark watched Jimmy make himself comfortable in the passenger seat, then said, “Why don’t you take the upper bunk tonight, instead of sleeping in your seat?”

“What?”

“The upper bunk,” Mark said, pointing to the second bunk above him. “My trucks always have ‘em. Never know when you’ll have a passenger along, and it makes it easier to sell the truck when I’m done with it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it before?”

Mark shrugged. “Never came up.”

“I slept here last night when I could’ve—”

“You want it or not?”

“I’ll take it,” Jimmy said, climbing up into the bunk.

Mark nodded, pulled the covers over his shoulders and said, “Good night.”

The truck was silent for a moment, then Jimmy muttered, “Thanks.”

They were both asleep in minutes.

CHAPTER

7

After a smooth start, a circle check and three minutes of idling time to let the engine oil warm up, Mark and Jimmy returned to the road early the next morning, sliding onto Highway 69 just after seven. The tire Jimmy had been unsure of looked better in the light of day, and Mark was satisfied the trailer he was hauling would make it to its destination without a problem.

After the nuts and bolts of the morning were out of the way, it wasn't long before their conversation moved to the important matter of breakfast. Jimmy was in the mood for a full breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee, but Mark didn't want to spend the time waiting for, then eating, a meal like that in some mom and pop shop along the highway. He'd rather just get a coffee and danish and stop later in the day for a full lunch. The trainee's face dropped, but he said he was fine with whatever Mark wanted.

They drove on for a few minutes in silence, looking for a coffee shop.

"Would you look at that," Jimmy said.

"What?"

Jimmy pointed off to the right where someone—it looked like a woman—appeared to be running across an open field toward a rig parked by the side of the highway.

“Maybe she needed to go to the bathroom,” Mark quipped.

“Then why’s she running back to the truck?”

Mark slowed slightly so they’d have more time to watch her actions. When she reached the truck, she immediately climbed inside. Then, no more than a few seconds later, smoke billowed from the tractor’s twin exhaust stacks and the rig was pulling back onto the highway.

“Must be in a hurry,” said Mark.

“Starting off like that’s not good for fuel efficiency.”

Mark laughed under his breath. The kid just never lets up.

But then he spotted a sign of movement on the right side of the highway. A man had stood up in the middle of the field and was staggering left and right as he tried to make his way toward the road.

Jimmy turned to Mark. “What do you think happened to him?”

Mark didn’t answer. Instead he began downshifting and slowing Mother Load so he could pull over onto the shoulder. “Whatever it is, it can’t be good.”

Mother Load came to a stop. Mark shifted into neutral, set the parking brake, and both he and Jimmy jumped out of the truck. They ran toward the man as he stumbled in their direction. As they got closer to him it became obvious that he’d been hurt. There was blood on his face and arms, and his clothes had been ripped on the left arm and right leg.

“You okay, mister?” Jimmy asked as they neared.

The man shook his head and then fell forward, barely getting his hands out in front of him to break his fall.

Mark and Jimmy rushed to his aid.

The man was lying on his back, a dark wet spot covering his right shoulder. He was older than Mark, 50 maybe 55 with a thin build. He had thick grey hair cut short on the sides, and left a bit longer on top.

“What happened to you?”

“She shot me!”

“What?” Mark had trouble believing what he was hearing. He’d thought that, at worst, the man and woman had gotten into an argument over something—sex and money came to mind—and the man had received the worst of it. But clearly this was a lot more serious than that.

“That woman... she shot me.”

“There’s a first aid kit in the cab,” Mark said.

“I’ve seen it.”

“Go get it.”

Jimmy ran back to the truck for the kit, and while he was there he shut off the engine, knowing like Mark did that it would be a while before they were back out on the road.

Mark used his cell phone to call 911, and by the time he was off the phone, Jimmy was back with the first aid kit.

Mark undid the man’s shirt and got a good look at the wound. There was a small-calibre bullet hole just below the right shoulder.

“You think he’ll live?” Jimmy asked.

Mark shrugged. “Doesn’t look too bad.”

“I think you’re right,” Jimmy said. He’d obviously had some training in emergency first aid because he seemed to know what he was doing when dressing the man’s wound.

While Jimmy worked, Mark tried to make the man as comfortable as possible, taking off his jacket and balling it up into a pillow to put behind his head.

“Why’d she shoot you?” he asked.

“I figured out what they were doing.”

“Which was?”

“Smuggling car parts.”

The man didn’t seem to have any difficulty talking, even with Jimmy working on him, so Mark decided to get the whole story. “We’ve got some time before the police and ambulance arrive. Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

The man took a deep breath, winced slightly at the pain in his shoulder, then began talking.

“I was contracted to deliver a container of car parts to the West Coast for shipment to Hong Kong,” he began. “I thought it a little strange, you know, to drive a container clear across the country, and take a passenger with you the whole way. But the money they were offering me was too good to pass up, and they said they’d pay me in cash. How can you say no to that?”

Mark didn’t answer.

“At first all I was thinking about was the money, but the more I thought about the other things—like the car following us the whole way—the more nothing seemed right. So I started asking questions... Big mistake!”

Jimmy put some pressure on the dressing he’d made and the man let out a yelp of pain.

“Easy Jimmy, let him talk.”

The man took a deep breath and continued. “Eventually I figured out that the parts I was carrying still happened to be attached to cars...stolen cars! I was helping a car theft and smuggling ring ship stolen cars to Asia. Well, once the woman riding with me realized I’d figured it out, she pulled a gun on me and told me to pull over to the side of the road.” He tried to laugh then, but the pain of it put a grimace on his face. “I thought the worst she’d do was steal my truck and leave me out here in the middle of nowhere, but she was a lot tougher than that.” He shook his head in disbelief. “She tried to kill me. Shot me once, here in the shoulder. And then she put the gun to my head, even pulled the trigger, but her gun jammed. It was only a .22 with a deep gouge along the gun barrel, but I swear, close up like that, it was the biggest damn gun I’d ever seen.”

Mark put a hand on the man’s shoulder to calm him down.

“After her gun jammed, she hit me with the butt of it, then pulled out a knife from I don’t know where... She would have killed me if you guys didn’t come along when you did.”

Just then, flashing lights began to appear in the distance. A moment later, the sound of wailing sirens cut through the crisp morning air.

The emergency medical services people took control of the situation shortly after their arrival, and Mark and Jimmy were ushered back and away from the injured man. He seemed pretty groggy, and he'd lost a fair bit of blood, but the feeling all around was that he was probably going to pull through.

But before they had the man on a stretcher, an Ontario Provincial Police constable caught up with Mark and Jimmy and asked them what they'd seen. Mark told the officer about the woman who had run across the field, while Jimmy added that she'd left in an awful hurry, burning a lot of unnecessary fuel.

To Mark's surprise, the cop made a note of it.

Then Mark related what the man had said, how he'd gotten caught up in some auto smuggling operation and started asking too many questions for his own good. Jimmy talked about how he gave the man first aid and went over the extent of his injuries. And on and on it went for two solid hours with the cop asking a question, then Mark, then Jimmy giving him an answer—and not always the same one.

For example, toward the end of the interview the cop asked them if the man's trailer had any significant writing on the side of it that they could see.

"I caught a glimpse of the right side when she pulled away," said Jimmy. "I think there was the word 'Wolfe' on the side of it. W-O-L-F-E."

Mark was in agreement for the most part on that one, except... "There was no 'E' in 'Wolf,' he said. "I saw the left side as she pulled onto the highway. Wolf, W-O-L-F. No 'E.'"

"Fair enough," the cop said. "You remember what colour the trailer was."

Jimmy nodded. "Green with yellow letters."

Mark looked at him as if he were crazy. "Are you kidding? It was blue and white."

"Green and yellow."

"Blue and white."

“Green and—”

“Guys, guys,” said the cop. “Relax. I’ve got both descriptions written down. And when the guy comes to in the hospital I’ll ask him to clarify both the spelling and the colour. Don’t worry, we’ll get it right.”

Mark nodded.

Jimmy said, “Okay.”

The officer snapped his notebook closed and said, “Thanks.”

“Is that it?” asked Mark.

“I’ve got your cell number if I need to talk to you again, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’re free to go.”

“Thanks,” said Jimmy.

“No, thank you two. You probably saved this guy’s life.”

Mark looked at Jimmy and smiled. “Yeah, we did, didn’t we?”

“I guess so.”

“This calls for a celebration.”

“What? A sit-down dinner in a restaurant?”

“Nope, non-stop to Sudbury to make up for lost time.”

Mark started jogging back to Mother Load.

Jimmy fell in behind him.

But when they arrived at the truck, Mark got in and started up the engine while Jimmy did another circle check to make sure everything was still in good working order. Mark wasn’t crazy about Jimmy’s fastidiousness, but he knew that proper driving procedures included the continual monitoring of the vehicle’s condition, which should be carried out every few hours during the trip. So, as much as it bothered Mark to wait a few extra minutes, he really couldn’t be too upset by it. After all, as the owner-operator of Mother Load, Mark was the one who was benefiting.

At last they were on the road. Things were pretty quiet between them for a good half-hour before something bothered Mark too much to remain silent any longer. “That trailer was blue with white letters,” he stated.

Jimmy shook his head, smiling. "No, it was green with yellow letters. I even remember some of the scratches on the letter 'W'... the yellow letter 'W'.

"You remember what you want, but I know it was blue and white. And I'll be proven to you when we find that truck again."

Jimmy turned to look at Mark. "Find it? We're not going to be looking for it, are we?"

"Not looking for it, no. But we are going in the same direction it's going, so it won't hurt to keep an eye out for it along the way."

"I'm sure the police will find it in the next hour or so. I mean how many places can a truck with green and yellow..."

Mark shot him a wary look.

"Sorry, a truck with such colourful lettering, hide?"

"Maybe they find it, maybe they don't."

"And even if they don't find it, there are thousands of kilometres between here and the West Coast. Finding a single truck along the way, well... it's got to be almost impossible."

Mark shook his head. "There's only one real road that leads to the Pacific Ocean. We're going to be on it, and they'll be on it. I think we'll be seeing that truck again."

Jimmy just laughed.

"What so funny?"

"My uncle said you were crazy, but I had no idea he was right. That truck's gone and that's that."

Mark sighed. "Maybe it is, but once you get some time on the road you'll realize that anything, and I mean anything, can happen. Logic be damned."

"Like finding a needle in a haystack?" Jimmy said.

"Exactly."

CHAPTER**8**

They made their delivery of snow tires to the warehouse in Sudbury, then slept overnight in the warehouse lot.

In the morning, Mark called Bud for the next load and learned they'd be heading to Winnipeg. Bud had made good on his promise of sweet loads all the way to Vancouver, and Mark decided it was time to start honouring his part of the bargain. He wasn't about to go any easier on Jimmy, but he was going to start teaching him a bit about driving long-haul.

As they ate breakfast that morning, Mark put a map of the province on the table between them and said, "We're going to Winnipeg. What route do you think we should take to get there, Highway 11 or Highway 17?"

Jimmy smiled—as if he enjoyed a good challenge—and unfolded the map onto the table. He studied the two routes for a long time while he ate, measuring distances and running along the routes with his finger to gauge how many twists and turns there were on each highway.

Mark took the last sip of his coffee and said, "Well?"

Jimmy let out a sigh. "The only thing I don't know is how hilly each route is, and that's something I can really only learn from experience."

Mark nodded.

“But just by looking at the map, it would seem that while Highway 17 has a lot of twists to it and Highway 11 is straighter, Highway 17 is the shorter of the two, so that’s the one we should take to save time and fuel.”

Mark nodded again, but didn’t say anything for the longest time. The kid was basically right, except there were a couple of things to consider—one was the weather. The forecast was for snow, and Highway 17 was a tricky route at the best of times. Add some snow and wind into the mix and it could prove treacherous. And then there was the clincher...

“Did you see today’s paper?”

“No, why?”

Mark dropped a copy of that day’s *Sudbury Star* onto the table. The top headline screamed out in big, bold letters:

“WHITE-OUT, WASH-OUT! ”

“A snowstorm late yesterday caused a huge pile-up on 17 last night. No one was hurt, thank God, but the tangle of cars is going to take ‘til this afternoon to clean up.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jimmy said apologetically. “I didn’t see the paper this morning.”

“I know,” said Mark, giving Jimmy a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I kept the paper away from you until I asked the question. You were right, I just wanted to teach you that you’ve got to be aware of driving conditions when you plan your route. You can’t always be sure of the weather, but if you get stuck when there are warnings like this in the paper or on the radio, then it’s nobody’s fault but your own.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“But I’ll tell you this, all things being equal, I probably would have taken 11 anyway.”

“How come?”

“It’s long, straight, and boring. The perfect place for me to get some rest and you to get some hours behind the wheel.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“Nope, it’s probably time you started driving.”

“Great.”

“And with two of us driving, and the pile-up on 17, I think we can really make up some ground on that hijacked truck.”

“You still think we’ll come across it?” Jimmy asked, a hint of incredulity in his voice.

“Of course we will,” said Mark.

Jimmy looked as if he were going to laugh, but thought better of it.

Mark ignored Jimmy’s reaction. He could laugh all he wanted. It would just make it all the more satisfying later on when Mark would be able to say, “I told you so.”

CHAPTER**9**

They drove to a small town outside of Sudbury called Copper Cliff, where they picked up the load bound for Manitoba. As they pulled into the yard, Mark spotted the flatbed off to one side with three snow-grooming tractors secured onto the back of it. “That must be it,” he said.

“What?” asked Jimmy.

“Those tractors, or plows, or whatever you want to call them. That’s our load.”

The three tractors looked pretty heavy, with big steel plows up front and wide tracks on each side, like you’d find on bulldozers or tanks. Each of them was low to the ground, but they were three different shapes, one of them put on the flatbed sideways to save space. And since they were strictly designed for low-speed operation, they weren’t exactly shaped like bullets. There were attachments and fairings sticking out at odd angles everywhere you looked, some of them even looking like scoops designed to catch some air.

Jimmy didn’t look pleased.

“What’s the matter?”

Jimmy took a deep breath and said, “Those tractors,” he said, “they should be covered with a tarp. There’s all kinds of things sticking out the sides of them. The wind is going to be whipping

up and over and around them the whole trip. That's going to be a lot of drag slowing us down, using up a lot of extra fuel."

Mark just looked at Jimmy knowing that the seeds of another one of his lessons were beginning to percolate inside his head.

"A lot of drag, you say?"

"A fully loaded tractor trailer needs about 170 horsepower just to overcome air resistance at 90 kilometres per hour on a smooth asphalt road."

Mark nodded. "Yeah, I think you mentioned that before."

"So if we could reduce the drag those things create by just 10 percent, then our fuel efficiency would increase up to 5 percent."

Five percent, 10 percent, 170 horsepower, 90 kilometres per hour... How the hell did the kid keep all these numbers straight inside his head? Just listening to the guy was giving Mark a headache. And that was one of the reasons he didn't feel bad about what he was going to do.

"What do you think we should do about it?" Mark asked, trying to make himself sound as genuine as possible.

"We could cover the load with a tarp."

Mark snapped his fingers. "That's a great idea. While I hook up the trailer, why don't you go inside and ask the shipper if he's got a tarp."

"Yeah, okay," Jimmy said, climbing out of the truck.

Mark held off his grin until Jimmy was gone, and then he set about hooking up the truck, whistling a tune while he worked.

Jimmy returned about 10 minutes later, just after Mark had finished making his connections and had everything ready to go. There was a strange look on Jimmy's face, and he was quiet, very quiet.

"You look terrible," Mark said. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Well," Jimmy began slowly. "It took me a while to find the shipper and by the time I did about three guys had told him I'd

been looking for him, so he wasn't in all that good a mood to start with."

"Yeah, and?"

"I told him about the problem with the load, about drag and fuel efficiency and everything, and then I asked him if he had a tarp."

Mark pressed his lips together to hold back a laugh. "And what'd he say?"

"He said, 'A tarp!' Just like that, short and sharp, like I was asking him for a nail so I could poke him in the eye."

Mark couldn't hold back any longer. The smile had broke over his face and he was a few seconds away from bursting out laughing.

Jimmy finally noticed Mark's expression and asked, "What's so funny?"

"Did he say anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, he did. He told me to get lost."

"He said that?"

"No, he said, 'Just deliver the load, smartass.'"

Mark finally laughed out loud.

"I don't understand. What's so funny?"

Jimmy really didn't get it, and Mark suddenly felt bad for putting the boy in an awkward situation. It had been a little unfair to do that to a kid whose heart was in the right place. Still, Mark wished he'd been there to see the shipper's face.

"What is it?" Jimmy's voice was louder this time and some of his frustration was beginning to show.

"Okay," Mark said, taking a deep breath. "If I want to cover the load it's up to me, the owner-operator, to cover it. The customer is paying for the load, for the kilometres we'll be travelling, and since his cost is set he doesn't give a rat's ass how much fuel we have to burn to make the delivery."

Jimmy was silent, but there was a stunned look of recognition on his face.

“It’s up to me what I do with the load. Sure, a tarp would be great, but I’m not a dedicated flatbed driver so I don’t have a tarp for this situation. I could get one, but buying one to use every blue moon isn’t very cost efficient, and neither is carrying one around with you when you’re not going to be using it. Those things are heavy, you know.”

Jimmy just sat there, staring out the windshield.

“Besides, sometimes you put a tarp over a load and some of the edges start flapping around in the wind. By the time you make the delivery the tarp’s worn the paint right off the product. That’s not good, either.”

“You knew he was going to react like that, and you sent me in there anyway?”

Mark was smiling again. “Sorry, but I couldn’t resist.”

A pause. “You said you wanted to learn.”

Jimmy was silent for several moments, then he said, “It would be better to have a tarp.” There was a tone of affirmation in his voice, as if he wasn’t about to concede that he was at least technically right.

“Yes, it would,” Mark agreed.

Jimmy nodded and looked out the side window.

“Don’t you want to check the trailer?” Mark asked.

“Didn’t you do it already?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then let’s go.” Jimmy said, the disappointment clear in his voice.

Mark put Mother Load into gear and pulled out of the yard, wondering if what he’d done hadn’t been a little mean-spirited, but knowing that there was one mistake Jimmy would never make again.

Half an hour later they were on the Trans-Canada headed north on Highway 11 towards Timmins. They hadn’t said anything to each other for the longest time and Mark had begun trying to think of something he could say that would break the ice.

That thing was up ahead on the highway.

“Well, look at that!” he said.

“What?”

“That trailer. It’s blue and green and it’s got the word ‘Wolf’ on the back of it.”

Jimmy squinted, as if he were having trouble reading the word printed across the back of the trailer. “I don’t think that says ‘Wolf.’

“Sure it does,” Mark said, increasing his speed to catch up to the truck.

As they neared it became obvious that Jimmy had been right. It didn’t say ‘Wolf’, but ‘world’, as in ‘World Van Lines’, which went a long way to explaining the truck’s blue and green colour scheme. “Told you it didn’t say ‘Wolf,’ Jimmy smirked.

Mark wasn’t about to give up so easily. If he’d learned one thing from his earlier career as a private investigator, it was that no one’s description was ever to be taken as face value. Jimmy had said green and yellow, Mark blue and white. It was entirely possible that both of them had been partially right. And as far as the Wolf/World thing went, well, maybe they were both dyslexic, too.

“I’m not convinced,” Mark said, accelerating again, this time pulling out to overtake the World Van Lines truck in front of them. “Take a good look at the driver. If it’s a woman, this might be the truck.”

Mark pulled out to pass. It took a few seconds, but slowly they began to slide up alongside the truck. Mark kept pressing and Jimmy looked as if he were eager to get a good look at the driver.

One, two, three more seconds and the driver became visible.

But instead of a woman, it was an old, bald, fat guy wearing a World Van Lines baseball cap.

Jimmy waved at the oldtimer and the man smiled back, giving them a good view of the three good teeth he still had left in his head.

“Well,” Mark said, slowing down and pulling back in behind the World Van Lines trailer. “I guess that’s not the truck.”

“You sure?” Jimmy said, enjoying the moment. “Maybe we just caught him without his make-up on.”

Mark looked at Jimmy sternly for a moment.

Then they both broke out with laughter.

CHAPTER**10**

North of Timmins it began to snow, lightly at first, but within a half hour Mark found himself driving through near-blizzard conditions. Mark put off any plans of letting Jimmy get behind the wheel for the time being. To his credit, the kid understood and hardly complained at all.

They made it to Kapuskasing without a problem, but just west of that town they came upon a snow plow. It was a big yellow monster cruising along at a snail-like 50 kilometres per hour – roughly half as fast as Mark had been driving up to that point. There was no one coming in the eastbound lane and Mark had plenty of chances to get by, but instead of pulling left and passing, he downshifted, pulled in behind it and began crawling along at 50 kilometres per hour, just like the plow.

Mark looked over at Jimmy in the passenger seat to gauge his reaction, but Jimmy's face was a blank. He just sat there staring out the front windshield and watching the snow fly off the plow's blade like water from a fountain.

Ten minutes later Mark glanced over again, but Jimmy's expression remained unchanged. He was still staring out the window like he was in some kind of trance.

Mark couldn't take it any longer. "Aren't you gonna say something?" he said.

“About what?”

“About how I’m driving so slow.”

Jimmy shook his head. “I know what you’re doing.”

“You do?”

“Sure,” Jimmy said, gesturing to the plow in front of them.

“We follow the plow for a while and it puts an extra hour or two on our travel time. So what? Behind the plow the highway’s clean. If we passed the thing, we’d be driving through a half-foot of snow and slush and the engine would have to work that much harder to keep us moving—that’s called rolling resistance. And when the engine works harder, you use more fuel. Driving on snow-covered roads can increase fuel consumption up to 20 percent. Even heavy rain can increase fuel consumption by as much as 10 percent. If we follow the plow, he’s using that extra fuel instead of us, so it’s like we’re using his fuel to pull our load.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” Mark said.

“Then there’s the driving conditions to consider. You drive over that much snow, it’s a lot more work for a driver, since the truck’s going to slide and drift and be a lot more difficult to handle. When you think about driving slow for a while, or risking putting your truck into a ditch, what’s to think about? There’s really no choice.”

Mark nodded.

“Finally, there’s the fact that if you’re driving slow behind a snow plow, or just driving slow during bad weather, you don’t have to worry about getting a speeding ticket, which is something else that can really put a hole in your annual bottom line—especially since, in addition to a fine, you also risk losing your licence, which is basically your ability to work and make a living.”

“I can’t disagree with you on any of that,” said Mark.

Jimmy slowly turned his head to face Mark.

“What?”

“Don’t tell me that you and I are both on the same page on this?”

Mark tilted his head to one side and smiled. “Hey, I guess we are.”

They drove on, following the plow all the way to Hearst where they finally stopped for a coffee.

CHAPTER

11

The weather cleared up a little later in the day and the rest of the drive into Manitoba was uneventful, perhaps even a little boring.

Mark passed the time and stayed alert by running through his repertoire of trucking jokes. He'd told the jokes—and had heard them being told—a million times before, but Jimmy was a new driver, so every one of them was fresh to him, which made them all the more fun to tell.

“Okay, here’s another one,” Mark said. “How many trucking company bigwigs does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

Jimmy thought about it for a while, then said, “I don’t know.”

“Three,” Mark answered. “One to screw in the light bulb, and two to hold down the owner-operator.” Mark looked over at Jimmy with an expectant smile, but the kid was just sitting there with a blank expression on his face. “I don’t get it.”

Mark sighed. “See, two guys hold down the owner-operator while the other one screws in the light bulb.”

“You mean, putting it to the owner-operator.”

“Exactly.”

Jimmy still wasn’t laughing.

“Wait ‘til you’ve been driving a few years,” Mark said with a wave of his hand. “You won’t have any problem understanding then.”

As they neared Selkirk, Mark craned his neck to get a good look at the surrounding countryside. The entire province seemed so flat, there wasn't anything resembling a ski hill for as far as the eye could see.

"You see any mountains around here?" Mark asked.

"No," answered Jimmy.

"Pretty tough to ski without one, don't you think?"

Jimmy looked over at Mark. "Is it important that you know what the things you're hauling are used for?"

Mark had to think about that for a while. He was always asking shippers what their loads were. Most of them gave him an answer, but every once in a while someone would shrug their shoulders and say, "How the hell should I know?" There wasn't any real reason he had to know, but it sometimes made carrying the load a bit more interesting. "No, I suppose it isn't. I just like to know, that's all."

"We'll find out when we get there."

"I suppose," said Mark.

They pushed on through the night and reached the Selkirk Lodge early in the morning, a full day ahead of schedule. But even though they'd found their destination, there still wasn't a mountain in sight, or even a decent sized hill for that matter.

"You guys are early," said the lodge's receiver, a man who, it turned out, also happened to be the owner of the place.

Mark nodded, then dispensed with the usual pleasantries and asked, "What kind of skiing do you do here?"

"Cross-country mostly," he said. "We've got a little hill that's good for the kids to slide on with toboggans and saucers, but the land is too flat in these parts for anything else."

"You need snow groomers for that?" Mark asked.

"Not really, but since we've got so much flat land, we're thinking of racing snowmobiles. Those groomers are just what we need to make the track fast."

The riddle solved, Mark nodded.

"Listen," said the lodge owner. "I appreciate that you're a day early, so feel free to spend the day skiing if you want, on me."

"Can we?" Jimmy said, his eyes alight like some kid in a candy store.

Mark wasn't much of a skier, and he wasn't exactly keen on spending the day skiing when they'd made such good progress toward the West Coast. It seemed crazy to think they'd still run into the hijacked rig, but Mark had a feeling in his gut that they'd be crossing paths with the Wolf any day now. Still, he wasn't about to deny the kid some fun, especially when it came at no charge. Besides, he might be able to catch a few winks while Jimmy was out on the snow. He could use some rest after the pace they'd been running at. "Not for me, thanks," Mark said, then turning to Jimmy added: "But, you go ahead if you want."

"Well, whatever you decide, come and see me in the lodge. I'll set you up with whatever you need."

Mark gave him a wave. "Thanks."

"Aren't you gonna give it a try?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Cross-country skiing sounds like a lot of work."

"Not work, exercise." Jimmy leaned forward in his seat and turned to face Mark. "When was the last time you went for a run?"

Mark hadn't been jogging for months, but he wasn't about to tell Jimmy that. "Just last week."

"Once a week's not enough. You should have a regular exercise routine to keep yourself in shape, especially if you're driving long haul and spending a lot of time sitting behind the wheel."

Mark was beginning to feel uncomfortable, but he wasn't about to admit to anything. "I exercise when I can."

"That's good, because your physical state is an important part of your ability to drive safely and efficiently. Physical and

emotional fitness are just as important as fatigue, attitude, and your emotional state when it comes to your ability to drive.”

The boy was starting to get on Mark’s nerves again. “I know that,” he snapped.

“Then why don’t you come skiing? It’ll be good for you, especially a guy your age.”

Mark just glared at him.

“Or don’t,” Jimmy said, his voice softer now, as if he realized he’d just pushed it a bit too far and was trying to backtrack.

Mark let out a sigh. He knew what Jimmy was saying was true, and if he were honest with himself, he could do with a bit more exercise. It was just that he wasn’t too keen on going out into the cold and running himself ragged skiing in circles all day long—especially when the kid would be skiing circles around him. Maybe if it were downhill skiing, or an exercise that could be done in the warm... Still, he couldn’t admit that to Jimmy.

“Look, I’ve got some paperwork to do, and I haven’t got the next load from your uncle yet, so why don’t you go have your fun, and check back with me in a few hours.”

Jimmy’s shoulders sagged noticeably. “Okay,” he said.

“I’ll go with you next time,” Mark said, knowing full well that these precise set of circumstances would never happen again.

“Alright, then. See you later.”

“Have fun and take your time, just don’t break your leg or anything. I’m not going to waste any fuel driving you to a hospital.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Jimmy said. “Break my leg, that is.”

Mark watched Jimmy head toward the lodge. Then he reclined his seat and closed his eyes for a little snooze.

He was asleep in seconds.

“Hey Bud, it’s Mark.”

“How’s my nephew doing?”

“What? Not even a hello?”

"Hello. How's my nephew doing?"

"Better."

Silence for several moments. "Don't tell me you're starting to like him?"

"I didn't say that. He's a pain in the ass who thinks he knows everything about saving fuel."

"I know."

"Too bad his mouth doesn't run on diesel. That might be one way to get him to keep it shut."

To Mark's surprise, Bud laughed at the joke.

"You got a load for me?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Nothing today?"

"Don't you need to sleep?"

Mark glanced at his logbook on the console to his right.

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"Leave them your flatbed today," said Bud, "and they'll have the load on it and ready to go first thing in the morning."

"Where's it heading?"

Bud gave Mark the details.

Jimmy had checked in with Mark around one in the afternoon, but without a load until the next morning, Mark sent him back out onto the snow. Jimmy came back around five, his cheeks a rosy red, his clothes damp with sweat, and a half-inch icicle hanging off the tip of his nose.

"Did you have fun?" Mark asked, as Jimmy climbed into the truck.

"Sure did... Best part was gliding down the hill and getting a chance to rest. All the other stuff was hard work, though."

He leaned his body against the window. "I'm beat."

"Then you're in luck."

"Why, what's up?"

"Our next load's out of Winnipeg, but it won't be ready until tomorrow morning."

“Meaning?”

Mark wondered about what to say. The truth was that Bud had been right about him needing some rest. The pace he'd been on since leaving Newfoundland had been pretty hectic and he could really use a chance to freshen up, eat a nice meal, get a good night's sleep—maybe do his laundry—even if it meant the hijacked Wolf trailer might get away from them. Jimmy had been right about the need for exercise, but Mark knew that physical fitness was just a small part of a driver's physical and emotional state. Too many drivers Mark knew ate too much fast food on the go, and got tired too quickly and too easily because of it. Then to compensate, they would drink gallons of coffee, thinking they were okay to drive as long as they were awake. Not true. They were halfway across the country and a relaxing one-night layover would be just the thing to put them in the right frame of mind to drive safely and efficiently to the coast. But even if those were the reasons for Mark's decision, he wasn't going to admit as much to Jimmy.

“Well, after the day you had, you're going to need a good night's sleep in a hotel room...” He sniffed at the air. “Not to mention a shower.”

“I don't smell that bad.” Jimmy pulled open his jacket and sniffed under his arms. “Do I?”

Mark put Mother Load in gear. “Oh yeah.”

CHAPTER**12**

They had dropped off the flatbed trailer the night before, in the parking lot of a shop that made new pallets and refurbished old ones. Mark had been unsure about using a flatbed to haul such a load, but the overnight crew had done an excellent job stacking the pallets and strapping them down tight with every strap the flatbed had to offer.

“We’re hauling skids?” was Jimmy’s only comment.

“Sure, why not,” Mark answered. “Reduce, reuse, recycle.”

“Not very aerodynamic... all that empty space for the wind to whip through.”

While it was true that there were lots of open spaces, they’d done a good job of making everything tight so there were no really big gaps to catch the wind. “Should be all right.”

Mark backed Mother Load into place in front of the trailer and left Jimmy to hook it up while he went looking for the shipper and paperwork for the load. By the time Mark returned five minutes later, the truck was hooked up but there was a sullen look on Jimmy’s face.

“All ready to go?” Mark said.

“Nope.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Truck’s got a flat.”

“You sure?” Mark said.

“Yes.”

They'd already wasted a night waiting for the load. The last thing Mark needed was another lost hour waiting for some tire guy to show up. "Let me see."

Jimmy led Mark to the back of the passenger side of Mother Load and pointed to the inside right-rear tire. There were nails on the ground all over the place, and one of them was jutting out from between the tire tread as if it were waiting for a picture to be hung on its head.

Mark kicked at the tire and nodded. It was pretty much flat, but it was an inside tire and the load wasn't that heavy. As long as the nail stayed where it was, there would be some air in the tire. "We'll get started and arrange for a tire guy to meet us up the road when we stop for lunch."

Jimmy looked at Mark a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think so."

"But it's still got some pressure in it," said Mark.

Jimmy continued shaking his head.

"It's only flat on the bottom," Mark said, realizing he was slowly losing the argument. "The rest of the tire is still good."

Jimmy was still shaking his head. "No."

"What do you mean, 'No'?"

"You're not going anywhere with that tire the way it is."

Mark was taken aback by Jimmy's conviction. "I'm confused. Is this my truck or yours?"

"It's your truck, and it'll be your funeral."

Mark glared at the boy.

But Jimmy wouldn't be swayed. "So you save a half-hour getting the tire changed at a stop. Great. But what if the tire comes off the rim along the way? You know what a flying alligator can do to a minivan? Or maybe you'll end up driving with the tire flapping around on the rim like a flag. What do you tell the police officer when he pulls you over?"

Mark didn't have an answer.

"And I hesitate to mention this one because you probably already think I don't know when to shut up, but you use up a lot

of extra fuel pulling a trailer that has a wheel that doesn't roll right, not to mention the damage you might do to your own truck by hauling a load when everything isn't in proper working order—

“Okay, all right, enough,” Mark said. “You made your point.”

Jimmy nodded, a look of smug satisfaction on his face.

“Well, what do you want to do?”

Mark sighed. “Go see the shipper and ask him to call their tire guy.”

“Right,” Jimmy said, scampering away.

“Damn,” Mark muttered under his breath. “Of all the rotten luck.”

The man from Wright Tire arrived half an hour later. He was dressed in a grimy pair of overalls, torn and stained beige jacket, and a pair of boots that had both toes worn down to the steel cap protecting the toe.

“You guys change tires on the left side, too?” Mark asked, making a joke about the company's name, Wright Tire.

The tire man just looked at Mark with a sneer, exposing two rows of smoke-stained teeth. “Like I've never heard that one before, eh?”

Mark ignored the man's comment. “How long do you think it's going to take?” he asked, still with the faint hope that they might be able to catch up to the hijacked truck out on the highway.

“Thirty minutes. Maybe 40. Takes a bit longer to change the inside tire, you know, cause it's like, inside.”

“Better get to it, then.”

While Mark and the man were talking, Jimmy went walking around the back of the man's truck, seemingly interested in the tires the man was carrying. He didn't look pleased.

“What's wrong now?” Mark asked.

The tire man, on his knees, looked up at Jimmy.

“The rib tires you have there, are they radials?”

“Nope, used the last one on a Freightliner last night.” A shrug. “Not to worry—got plenty of lug radials and bias rib tires in the truck. The lugs are just as good. And bias ply is cheaper, so, take your pick.”

Mark turned from the tire man to Jimmy.

“But all of the other tires on the truck are rib radials.”

Another shrug. “Hey man, they all go ‘round.”

“If they’re all the same, then you’ll be replacing that tire with a rib radial.”

“Might not need to be replaced. Might be able to patch the hole on the flat.”

Jimmy was suddenly at a loss for words. He’d been all worked up and ready for a fight, and now the wind was gone from his sails. “Oh,” he said.

But the fight Jimmy had been expecting hadn’t been called off, just postponed until the tire man was able to get a better look at the damaged tire.

“Point of the nail went through the sidewall. Can’t fix that. Can’t even recap it.”

“You sure you can’t fix it?” Mark asked, realizing that the cost between repair and replacement was significant.

“Sure I could fix it, but if you blow out a tire a day or two from now it’s going to come back to me. C.Y.A., you know what I mean?”

“What’s C.Y.A. mean?” Jimmy asked.

“Cover Your Ass.” Mark said.

“Exactly.”

“So, you’ve gotta change the tire.”

The tire man nodded.

“With a rib radial, right?” Jimmy piped up.

“I can get one,” the tire man said. “Take another hour, maybe less if someone’s got one on their truck they can bring on by.”

Mark looked over at Jimmy. “We’ve got to get going.”

“No, you don’t. You might be saving a half an hour by settling for the wrong tire, but the decision will end up costing you for years.”

With a sigh, Mark said, “And I suppose there are numbers to back this up?”

“Radial tires are more expensive than bias tires, but they have better traction and last up to three times longer.”

Mark glanced over at the tire man. The tire man just nodded.

“And generally speaking, using all rib tires offers better fuel economy than combinations of lug and rib.” No one said anything, so Jimmy continued. “For example, there have been studies that have shown that even when you use lug tires on only the drive wheels, fuel economy suffers by between two and four percent. The savings can even get as high as 14 percent for an all-rib set-up compared to deep lug tires on the drive wheels.”

The tire man nodded. “Sounds about right.”

Jimmy’s smile was from ear-to-ear, as if he’d just won some important victory.

Mark didn’t think the difference would be more than a couple of bucks, but he was glad the kid had been adamant about making the right tire choice. It could save him hundreds of dollars over the life of the tire. Still, Mark wasn’t about to admit defeat—especially when there was such a silly grin on Jimmy’s face. Mark sighed loudly, then threw up his hands, as if he were being robbed. “Okay then, we’ll wait for the right tire.”

“I’ll make the call.”

Jimmy was still smiling.

“I’ll be in the truck,” said Mark.

The tire was replaced and ready to go by 10. Mark paid the tire man with a credit card, and hurried up into Mother Load, more anxious than ever to return to the road.

He started the engine and sat idling, waiting for the engine temperature to reach a satisfactory operating level. Mark resisted

the temptation to rev the engine to help it heat up faster. While it might heat faster, revving would also cause premature engine wear because there would still be parts of the engine that hadn't been coated with oil. Ordinarily Mark would have started up the truck long ago, letting it idle while he was completing his transaction with the tire man, but with Jimmy along for the ride he was a lot more aware of how much fuel he was using during idle times, and didn't want to give Jimmy another reason to tell him he was wasting fuel.

And so Mark had no other option than to sit and wait until the engine was good and ready.

They'd been sitting there in the lot for three minutes when Jimmy said, "Let's go."

Mark turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "I'm waiting for the engine to warm up. Don't want to damage the engine by revving it when the oil hasn't gotten around to all the little bits yet."

"You don't have to wait."

"What?"

"You don't have to sit here waiting for the engine to warm up completely."

"What about engine wear, resale value, and all that?"

"It only takes three to five minutes for the engine oil to warm up. If the temperature outside is below zero Celsius, then it takes a bit longer: 7 to 10 minutes. After that, you can warm up the engine under load, providing you don't try to get too much speed out of the engine by pushing harder on the throttle."

Mark was past the point of annoyance with Jimmy. The kid had an answer for everything and it was so much easier humoring him than arguing with him. "Okay, then," Mark said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get her going without using any throttle."

Mark put Mother Load into first gear and slowly let out the clutch without any additional throttle. The truck moved forward slowly with barely a shudder.

“See,” said Jimmy, as if he’d just taught Mark to ride a bike or fly a kite. “The engine will warm up faster while we’re moving, saving time and fuel.”

Mark shrugged. He’d done this sort of thing before because, after all, most of it was just common sense, but it didn’t hurt to know the rationale behind it all.

“This also allows the transmission to warm up and shift more easily since you’re giving it, and the rear end, the chance to warm up slowly and lubricate properly.”

Mark gently shifted into second as they exited the yard. He still hadn’t touched the throttle.

“The tires get warmed up properly this way, too. And since you won’t be asking the engine to work hard to pull tires that are cold and hard, there’s less rolling resistance and more fuel savings.”

“All right, I get the point.”

But Jimmy was on a roll.

“If you see smoke coming from the exhaust, it’s a good indicator that the engine’s still not properly warmed up. Of course, blue or grey smoke can mean that an engine’s not working right, but if you see black smoke after start up, you need to back off the throttle. That’ll give you more power because you’re not pushing unburned fuel through the engine, which can damage valves, the turbocharger, and other components affected by heat and exhaust.”

Mark wanted to tell the kid to just shut the hell up, but he was starting to like him too much to hurt his feelings that way. Instead he reached into a pocket in the door next to him where he kept his snacks and pulled out a candy bar. “Hungry?” he said.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Mark gave Jimmy the bar.

The kid unwrapped the thing and started eating.

And Mark breathed a sigh of relief as Jimmy said nothing for the next 15 kilometres.

Despite nibbling on candy bars and snacks, Mark and Jimmy were still pretty hungry by mid-afternoon and they decided to stop at the next rest station they came across. The next one up turned out to be a mom and pop diner attached to an independent fuel station.

“Good enough for you?” Mark asked.

“Sure, why not.”

They both went into the restaurant to order since Mark couldn't be sure what was on the menu. He decided on a BLT sandwich rather than the usual hamburger and fries since a BLT had lettuce and tomato in it and, he hoped, a bit less grease than a burger.

It wasn't exactly a healthy lifestyle choice, but it was a start in the right direction. If nothing else, Jimmy had convinced Mark that he'd be a better—and more efficient—driver if he ate better and was in better shape.

Jimmy ordered the same thing, and they decided to fuel up and eat on the road rather than waste time eating in the truck stop.

Mark pulled up to the outside self-serve pump and got out.

Jimmy got out too, coming around to watch Mark fuel up.

Mark looked at the sign over the pump that read: “Now Serving Winter Diesel.”

That was good. Mark didn't know a lot about fuel, but he knew there was an important difference between “winter” and “summer” diesel when driving in Canada. Below-zero degrees Celsius wax crystals could form, or gelling could occur, which made start-ups and general operation 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. Of course, summer diesel was more efficient than winter diesel, by about three percent, but operating in Canada made the winter version of the fuel a necessity.

So much for winter and summer diesel, but what about regular and premium diesel? The pump Mark was standing in front of offered both, the premium slightly higher in price than the regular. Which one to choose, Mark wondered. Not a difficult decision under normal circumstances, but a tough call to make with Jimmy “Know-It-All” looking over your shoulder.

Mark looked from one pump to the other. The difference in price for a fill-up was going to be a few bucks, but not enough to sweat over. Mark glanced at Jimmy then chose premium.

But before he even had his hand on the pump, Jimmy said, “You sure you want to do that?”

“What now?”

“Just because it’s called ‘Premium’ doesn’t mean that it’s all that much better than regular diesel.”

“Then why would they call it premium?”

“Because there’s no universal standard in place for what constitutes a premium diesel fuel. By rights, premium fuel should help engines perform better, just like everything else to do with the engine, and it should meet the Engine Manufacturer’s Association standard classification number FQR-1. But beyond that it can sometimes be a case of *caveat emptor*.”

“Meaning what?”

“Buyer beware.”

“So I shouldn’t buy premium.”

“If this was a Big Stop, Husky, or Petro-Canada, I’d say go with premium if you can afford it, but here....” He gestured to the station sign, which just happened to have a few lights behind it burnt out. “The premium you’re paying for probably isn’t much better than the regular stuff. As long as the cetane number...”

“The what?”

“The cetane number. It measures the ignition quality of diesel fuel. The higher the number, the less time it takes to ignite with hot air in the cylinder. As long as the cetane number is between 40 and 60 you should be all right.”

“You learn all this stuff just by taking a course one time.”

“Not really. I didn’t do so well the first time so I ended up taking it again. The second time I spent a lot of time studying to make sure I knew my stuff.”

Mark took his hand off the premium and filled up with regular diesel. When he was done, Mark figured he’d saved close to \$20 on the fill-up. A savings like that could really add up over the course of a year.

It almost made Jimmy’s constant babbling worth listening to. Almost.

CHAPTER**13**

The sun was shining and the Trans-Canada was clear and dry, and the driving was easy across the western part of Manitoba. Mark kept his mind occupied and alert by playing music tapes and audio books, which served a second purpose rather nicely—keeping Jimmy quiet.

Although the kid was annoying as all hell, Mark couldn't stay mad at him for long. He was so eager to learn and was so full of enthusiasm that Mark finally realized that he wasn't lecturing Mark about fuel efficiency because he was showing off, but because he wanted to help Mark save money on fuel and limit wear and tear on his truck. Mark didn't know how well the kid could drive, but knew that he'd be a fitting codriver with a bit of experience. At the very least he could be sure that the kid wouldn't be burning up fuel doing the job. And who knew, with his knowledge, Jimmy might end up being an owner-operator himself someday, or maybe even the manager of some fleet, racking up record fuel savings for his boss.

Yeah, Mark could see all of that in the kid's future, and in some ways he was a bit envious of him. If Mark was just a bit more business-minded and a little less adventuresome, he'd be earning a lot more money than he'd been making these past few years. Would he be happy? Maybe, maybe not, but one thing was for

sure—it was a lot better to be miserable with money in the bank, than miserable without a dime to your name.

Mark glanced over at Jimmy. He seemed bored by Mark's choice of music but, true to form, he wasn't complaining. Maybe it was time they talked a little and got to know each other better.

Mark turned down the volume.

"You got a girlfriend, Jimmy?"

Jimmy sat up with a stark look on his face, like he'd just been hit between the eyes by a pea from a slingshot.

"Why? What do you mean? Why you asking?"

"Whoa, relax... just trying to make some conversation."

A pause. Then, when Jimmy was sitting back in his chair, Mark repeated the question.

"Well, do you?"

Jimmy hesitated, squirming a little inside his clothes.

"I've got to get my driving career going before I can think about stuff like that."

"I guess."

"Easy for you to say, but I'm a bit of a nerd. I can't really relate to people all that well and I don't always know when to keep my mouth shut."

All of that was true, but if he recognized these things about himself, then there was a chance he'd be able to overcome them someday.

"Women don't see me as any great catch, so if I have a job, or maybe if I owned my own truck, then at least I'd have that going for me."

Mark couldn't argue with that. Employment was definitely a plus when looking for romance. Mark was about to ask what sort of things he looked for in a girl when he spotted a familiar colour up ahead.

"Look at that!" Mark said.

"Look at what?" asked Jimmy.

"That!" Mark pointed to a blue trailer with big white lettering on the side. "Blue trailer, white lettering."

"You're kidding, right?" was all Jimmy had to say.

"No. That looks like the one."

Jimmy shook his head. "First of all the trailer was yellow and green, and second of all, it's probably halfway through Alberta by now."

But Mark wasn't listening. The blue trailer was less than a kilometre ahead of them and if he just gave Mother Load a bit more fuel, they'd be caught up to it in no time.

"We can catch her," he said.

"It's not her, and it's not worth it."

Mark gave Mother Load plenty of throttle. Her engine noise rose in pitch and the truck slowly began gaining speed. "It won't be long now," he said.

There were three vehicles between Mark and the blue trailer. Two of the vehicles were cars, the other was a black tractor-trailer. With a clear lane on the left, Mark pulled out and glided by the first vehicle, a lime green compact with two kids and a German Shepherd in the back seat.

The blue trailer grew larger in front of them.

Mark kept on the fuel, gaining on the red minivan in front of them and passing it in one smooth motion.

That left just the black tractor-trailer between Mark and the suspected hijacker, with plenty of other traffic on the roadway to make things interesting.

"Relax," said Jimmy. "We can keep an eye on the truck just as well from here. You don't have to go chasing after that truck like some, some maniac."

"I just want to see if that's the truck, that's all. Once I find out for sure, right or wrong, the race will be over."

Jimmy put a hand to his forehead. "It's not the truck!"

"We'll just see about that!"

And with that, Mark pulled out to pass the black tractor-trailer. If the roadway had been clear Mark would have had no trouble getting past, but there was plenty of oncoming traffic and the distance between Mother Load and the car heading toward it

didn't seem like enough for the speed they were travelling. To avoid a collision, Mark had to speed up considerably, the car coming toward them had to slow down, or the truck they were passing had to slam on its brakes.

Turned out to be the latter.

The big black tractor-trailer suddenly slowed. Smoke rose up from the locked wheels of the trailer and the whole rear end of it began to shudder. As they slipped past the tractor, Mark could clearly make out the driver, a rather large man with a shaved head, wearing wrap-around sunglasses and clearly possessing a mouth full of four-letter words.

The oncoming car swerved to avoid them, and in moments they were back in the westbound lane, the trailer load of pallets swinging behind them like an errant saloon door.

"We're almost there," Mark said, his foot still to the floor and the blue trailer growing ever larger through their windshield.

But then the right signal light on the trailer began to flash.

"He's turning off," Jimmy said.

And as the truck pulled off at the exit, they could see that while the trailer was indeed blue with white lettering, the letters spelled out "WORMWOOD".

"Well, there's no 'E,' Jimmy said. "But it doesn't say 'Wolf', either."

Mark eased off the throttle and Mother Load slowed. "Well," Mark said, clearing his throat. "Then at least we know that wasn't the truck we're looking for."

Jimmy glanced in the rearview mirror. "That's the least of your problems," he said.

"Why?" Mark asked.

"That guy behind us in the black trailer..."

"Yeah."

"The one you nearly ran off the road..."

"Yeah."

"The one who looks like he eats freightliners for breakfast,

and who you nearly killed in your rush to get a look at that blue and white trailer.”

“Yeah, what about him?”

“Well he’s coming up on us pretty fast, and from what I can see of his face, I think he’s a little sore at you.”

Mark glanced in his mirror and saw the black tractor-trailer filling it up. “Just a little sore?”

“Okay, I was being polite,” Jimmy said. “He looks like he wants to tear you apart.”

Mark looked again in his mirror. Jimmy’s description of the man was a good one. The guy looked like he was out to kill, and he was gaining on them.

Mark stepped on the throttle and Mother Load slowly began to speed up. But the increased speed only slowed the rate at which the black rig was approaching. The guy was either running light or empty, and either way it was obvious that Mark wouldn’t be able to outrun him.

“Maybe we should just pull over and let him by us,” Jimmy said.

“There’s no place to pull off,” Mark said, one eye on the road and another in his mirror. “Besides, do you think he just wants to get past?”

“No. I think if he catches us, he’ll do something stupid, like try to run us off the road.”

“Exactly,” Mark nodded. “This guy’s crazy.”

Jimmy slowly turned toward Mark. “You started it.”

“What?”

“You cut the guy off.”

Jimmy was right, of course, but Mark didn’t know what to say. In the end he settled for, “I didn’t mean to cut him off.”

“Of course not, but he doesn’t know that. To him, you were just driving crazy, cutting him off because, well, you’re a jerk of a driver who doesn’t care about anyone else on the road.”

“Hey, hey, hey... I was trying to catch a hijacker.”

“Right, and because of that you let all of your years of experience and good judgment fly out the window.”

Mark didn't answer.

“And now you're driving like a madman trying to stay away from a road rager, and all the while you're burning up fuel like there's no tomorrow.”

“But if I slow down, he'll catch up to me and run me off the road.”

“You don't know that.”

“It's what I would do if I were him.”

“Oh.”

“Let me put it to you this way,” Mark said. “If it comes down to saving a few dollars on fuel or preserving your rig and your life from some crazy-assed, road-raging nutbar of a trucker, which one would you choose?”

Jimmy was silent, thinking.

“You've got to think about it?”

“Saving fuel is important.”

“I don't believe you!” Mark screamed in frustration.

Jimmy looked at Mark for several moments, then burst out laughing. “What? I'm kidding.”

Mark nodded, but didn't give Jimmy the satisfaction of a laugh. “Well all right then.” He took another look in his mirror at the truck chasing him and noticed something on the air dam over its cab. “Can you read what it says on the deflector?”

Jimmy studied the truck in his mirror. “I think it says ‘Brandon’, ‘Brandon Transport.’”

“Well, let's hope that the company's named after the town, and not the driver's son.”

Jimmy held up his fingers. They were crossed on both hands.

Mark kept his foot down on the accelerator and the black truck loomed large in his mirror for several kilometres, but did not gain any more ground on them. A little while later, when the exit for Brandon came up, the driver of the black rig behind

them gave them a blast on his air horn and pulled off the highway.

Mark just acknowledged the toot with a wave, then eased up on the throttle. "So let that be a lesson to you," he said to Jimmy.

"Huh?"

"Defensive driving is driving to prevent accidents in spite of the conditions around you—and the actions of others around you."

"But you weren't defensive driving—"

"Never mind that," Mark said. "There's a lesson to be learned here."

"Really?" Jimmy sounded skeptical.

"Yes. By driving defensively, you can increase your fuel efficiency. You always have to be alert to the vehicles around you. For example, before you pass another vehicle you have to think—Is it necessary to pass? Is it legal? Is it safe?"

"The answer in your case is 'no' on all three counts."

"Then I'm a perfect example of what NOT to do. You see, I was so into catching up to that rig, my judgment became impaired."

"You got that right."

"I was trying to pass when I wasn't really going any faster than the truck in front of me. My following distance was too close and I didn't exactly check my blind spot when I pulled back into the lane."

Jimmy sat upright in his seat. "And you're an older guy with slower response times, so you have to be extra careful, especially at night when the ability to see is decreased noticeably for guys your age."

"I'm not that old."

"Over 40."

"All right, so I'm old."

"But that guy lost it, too."

"Hey, that's right!"

“You were just blinded by wanting to catch that truck. He was driving aggressively ‘cause he wanted to kill you. He was an accident just waiting to happen.”

“Precisely... I knew there had to be a reason why what he was doing was worse than what I was doing.”

“He wanted to take his frustrations out on you, but all he was doing was burning extra fuel.”

“Thank you,” Mark nodded.

“What he should have done was write down your licence number, or waited until he caught you at a truck stop and beat the crap out of you, man-to-man.”

“Okay! All right!” Mark shouted. “I get the point.”

There was silence between them for several kilometres. Jimmy had shrunk down in his seat and his shoulders were slumped over, like he was trying to hide his head between them like a turtle. If Mark wasn't mistaken, it looked as if Jimmy felt bad for calling Mark old and for pointing out that Mark had gotten just a little bit crazy. Well, it was fine if Jimmy thought that, but the truth of the matter was that Mark was angry at himself. He'd been driving for too long and had seen too many accidents that could have been avoided to drive like a crazy person. Sure, it would be nice to catch the hijacker, but at what cost? Catching the bad guy wasn't worth risking his rig, or his life, or Jimmy's life. But as much as Mark knew it was wrong to drive that way, he also knew it was in his nature to chase after bad guys with almost reckless abandon. He would try to err on the side of caution in the future, but the voice in the back of his head was still there adding a little caveat: Unless you're sure you can catch him without anyone getting hurt.

Mark smiled. It was a good compromise. He wouldn't risk anyone's life or property in the pursuit of justice, but he wouldn't forget about it altogether. It was in his blood, and no matter the risk, he'd always figure out a way to prevail, or at least to get even. Besides, even though Mark wasn't quite sure how it

happened every single time, things in his life had an uncanny way of turning out all right in the end. Of course, there was always a first time for everything, and eventually something might go horribly wrong, but Mark was willing to bet that this trip wouldn't be the one where everything fell apart. They were going to get lucky, somehow. Mark could feel it.

"Hungry?" Mark said, seeing a sign up ahead on the right for a place that served non-descript burgers and fries.

"You want to stop now?"

"Sure. Almost getting killed and then being run down like a dog sure works up an appetite."

"No, it's not that," Jimmy said. "It's your engine temperature."

"What about it?"

"It's probably too high right now to stop."

Mark checked his temperature gauge and discovered Jimmy was correct. After that race with the black truck, Mother Load was running hot and it would be a while before she cooled back down to her normal running temperature. If he shut the engine down now, the turbocharger would be too hot and he'd end up burning oil.

But there were ways around that. "We could leave her running while we get our food."

"Sure you could, but you'd have to idle the engine between three and five minutes for it to cool down, wasting a lot of fuel that you wouldn't have to burn if you'd planned your stop a little bit better."

"But I'm hungry."

"So am I, but if you're going to have the engine running you might as well be moving. If you just back off the throttle for a while and use our momentum, the engine will be cooled down by the time we reach the next diner. When you get there, you can shut it off as soon as we're parked."

And then, as if on cue, a sign for another diner three kilometres up the road appeared on the shoulder, this one

promising the country's best home-cooked meals. "See?" Jimmy said. "Good things come to those who plan ahead."

"Says you."

"And to prove it to you even further," Jimmy said, "I'll buy lunch."

CHAPTER**14**

The diner's special of the day was fusilli pasta in a red sauce with a tossed garden salad on the side. Mark was tempted to order a burger and fries, but Jimmy was paying for lunch and Mark didn't want to have to listen to a lecture about eating healthy foods. Instead, Mark decided on the special, just like Jimmy, but that didn't stop the boy from saying his piece.

"Good choice," he said.

Mark glanced around at the other tables where a few truckers were enjoying their plates of pasta as well. "It looks good."

"And it's good for you, too. The carbohydrates in the pasta will do a lot better job providing energy for you than a hamburger. The more energy you have, the better driver you'll be."

Just then the waitress came by. She was a middle-aged woman in a white long-sleeved shirt, jeans and sneakers. Her hair was black, cut short so it was easy to manage, and she had a knack for smiling that made it seem like she was happy all the time. The name over her left breast read Madge. "Hey fellas," she said. "What'll it be?"

They both gave her their orders.

"And how about to drink?"

"I'll have a coffee," Mark said.

Jimmy shook his head. "You have any juice?"

“Orange, apple, and vegetable cocktail.”

“I’ll have the cocktail,” Jimmy said.

“I don’t care if you are paying,” Mark said, “I’m not drinking that stuff.”

“Apple or orange, then?” asked the waitress.

“How about a cola?”

The waitress looked over at Jimmy.

Jimmy shook his head.

The waitress looked back at Mark.

“How about some water then?”

“Sure thing. Be back in a minute.”

Jimmy was staring across the table at Mark.

“Look, I know drivers should avoid rich, salty, and fatty food, caffeine and alcohol, but there’s no way I’m eating pasta with juice. Okay?”

Jimmy put up his hands as if he were backing off. “Sure, no problem. Water’s healthy too.”

They said nothing to each other while they waited for their food, and when it arrived they ate in silence. Mark was surprised at how good the meal was, and his body seemed to react well to something a little more nutritious for a change. As he finished the last of his salad, Mark smiled at Jimmy and said, “That was a nice meal. Thanks.”

The younger man seemed surprised by Mark’s words, but there was a smug look on his face by the time he said, “You’re welcome.”

When he paid the bill, Jimmy bought an apple for each of them, placing one in Mark’s hand as they left the restaurant. “Your bowels will thank me in the morning.”

But Mark’s attention had been caught by something out in the lot. He’d been staring off into the distance and hadn’t heard anything Jimmy had said. “Huh, what?”

“Your bowels,” he repeated, pointing to the apple. “They’ll thank me in the morning.”

“Oh yeah, thanks,” he said, taking a bite. Then with his mouth full, he mumbled, “You see that.”

Jimmy said nothing, but he made a sound like he was utterly amazed.

There, sitting in the lot was a tractor pulling a blue trailer, and on the side of it in big white letters were the words “LONE WOLF Trucking.”

“See,” said Mark. “I told you it was ‘Wolf’ without an ‘E’ on the end.”

“That says ‘Lone Wolf’, not ‘Wolf’.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s still blue and white and it says “Wolf”. I guess I just didn’t notice the other words.”

Jimmy stood there shaking his head. “Even if the hijacked rig wasn’t thousands of kilometres west of here by now, do you really think these criminals would be dumb enough to keep their load in the same trailer all the way to the coast?”

Mark thought about that for a moment. He’d run into plenty of criminals and criminal types over the years, and the one thing they all had in common was that they never thought about how they might get caught, only how they would get away with whatever they were doing. Sure it would occur to a reasonable person that it might be a good idea to switch trailers, but criminals didn’t think that way. Instead, they were already counting up how much money they were going to have when they were sitting poolside in Cuba on an extended permanent vacation.

“Yes, I do think they’d be dumb enough.”

“It’s not the same trailer.”

Mark studied the truck for a moment. It was parked and unattended. “One way to find out.”

“What? No.”

Mark ignored Jimmy’s pleading and began walking across the parking lot toward the trailer. There really was only one way to find out if that was the hijacked trailer or not, and that was by having a look inside.

“What are you gonna do?” Jimmy asked, hurrying to catch up to Mark, then struggling to match his purposeful strides.

“I’m just going to have a look inside, that’s all.”

“You could get into a lot trouble doing that. Hell, we could get into a lot of trouble.”

“Then go back to the truck and wait for me.”

Jimmy stopped and seemed to consider it for a moment, then he cursed and ran to catch up to Mark once more. “How are you going to look inside?”

Mark shrugged. “Don’t know. Maybe we’ll just have to open the barn doors and see.”

“You can’t do that. What if it’s sealed?”

“Cross that bridge when we come to it...” Mark’s voice trailed off. They were now close enough to see that there was no seal on the rear doors of the trailer.

“There, you see. It’s empty,” Jimmy said. “Now let’s go.”

“Wait,” Mark said.

He reached up and pulled on the latch on the right hand door. It protested at first, then began to move with a loud screech of metal against metal.

Jimmy looked around nervously, his body language suggesting he needed to go to the bathroom.

Finally the door was unlatched, and Mark began to pull. With another screech and a shriek, it began to swing. Mark pulled it open more than halfway to allow light to shine inside. But light or no light, it was obvious that this wasn’t the trailer they were looking for. Instead of stolen high-end automobiles, there were pallets loaded with boxes and boxes of children’s toys.

“Not it!” Mark said.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” The voice was big, loud, and madder than hell.

Mark looked over his shoulder.

Marching across the parking lot was a big man with a shaved head the size of a cannonball. He was wearing sunglasses, a little goatee, and there were tattoos all around his neck.

“You think it’s his truck?” Jimmy said.

But instead of answering, Mark grabbed Jimmy’s sleeve and pulled him away. “Let’s go.” And without another word the two men were running away from the scene of the crime like school kids who’d just broken a neighbour’s window.

Mark ran between two trucks and crouched low. Jimmy looked like he was about to say something, but Mark put a finger to his lips and said, “Shh!”

There were footsteps behind them, hard clicking footsteps of the sort made by big black biker boots. The footsteps were in front of them now, pausing as if someone was trying to listen to them breathe.

Mark felt a sneeze coming on.

A few steps, then more silence.

Tears began to well up in Mark’s eyes as he fought the urge to sneeze.

And then the footsteps began to fade.

Mark buried his face into his sleeve and sneezed.

Moments later they could hear the familiar metal screech of the trailer doors closing in the distance.

The two men breathed easier.

In minutes they could hear a truck idling, then pulling out of its parking spot, heading for the highway.

They were in the clear.

They stepped out from the two trucks they’d been hiding between, and there he was—the big tattooed man with the shaved head and sunglasses. He looked at them with a curious stare, even taking off his sunglasses for a better look.

Mark wanted to say something, anything, but the words weren’t coming to him.

“You looking for the guys that were messing with your trailer?” Jimmy said.

The big man hesitated a moment, then said, “Yeah, you seen them?”

Jimmy nodded. "They just ran around the back of the restaurant. And they were laughing about something."

Mark looked at Jimmy, then at the big man, and nodded.

"Thanks," he said, then headed off in the direction Jimmy was pointing.

Without another word, Mark and Jimmy ran to Mother Load.

Mark had her started and running in seconds.

Mark shifted the truck into gear, then looked at Jimmy.

"Now I know I'm supposed to let the engine idle for a bit before I start out, but it's still warm and I think under the circumstances it's best we get on the road as soon as we can."

"No argument here."

"Good." Mark let out the clutch and Mother Load lurched forward. He quickly worked his way up through the gears and a few minutes later they were up to cruising speed and headed west.

"That was great the way you sent that guy off on a wild goose chase around the back of the restaurant," Mark said.

"I had to do something," Jimmy answered. "He looked as if he wanted to kill somebody—namely, us."

Jimmy sounded humble, but Mark was impressed that the kid had said just the right thing to diffuse the situation. It was quick-witted and sly, something sharp and smart-assed like, well, like something Mark would have said. Only it wasn't Mark who had said it, but Jimmy.

And suddenly Mark understood what Bud had meant when he'd said that Jimmy was like Mark in a lot of ways. The kid was stubborn, arrogant, didn't know when to keep his mouth shut, and was probably a bit too clever for his own good.

"So you want to be a driver, eh?" Mark said.

"Huh?"

Mark didn't blame Jimmy for being confused. The question had come out of left field, but Mark was suddenly keen on learning a bit more about what Jimmy wanted to do with his life.

“What are your plans?”

So Jimmy told him, and they talked and talked long into the night, Mark liking the boy a little bit more with each kilometre they put behind them.

CHAPTER**15**

Mark had decided he liked Jimmy. They'd had some adventures together, Mark had put the kid in a few perilous situations and he hadn't even complained once. In fact, Mark was getting the impression that Jimmy liked an adventure every bit as much as Mark did, and that made Jimmy's constant know-it-all babbling a little easier to take. But even though Jimmy talked way too much, Mark had to admit that there was some good stuff in there that would end up saving him fuel, and ultimately money.

For example, Mark had known all about the need to reduce idling time to save fuel—that was common sense for the most part—but there was some stuff that was new to him, like the advantage of using the compression of the engine to slow down. Mark had always thought that the engine was using fuel as long as it was turning over, but Jimmy told him that when the driver's foot comes off the throttle, no fuel is supplied. And since there's no combustion, the RPMs fall and the engine acts like one big brake. Knowing that, especially when they'd be driving through the Rocky Mountains, would be a big help to Mark's bottom line. Using the engine to brake more often would mean using less fuel and saving wear and tear on his brakes, which weren't exactly cheap to have serviced. So as much as Mark wanted to wring

Jimmy's neck, the kid was making a difference, and it was about time Mark showed him a little appreciation.

"So," he said, "You think you're ready to drive?"

"What? I thought you'd forgotten all about that."

Mark shook his head. He hadn't forgotten. It was just that circumstances hadn't been right to put Jimmy behind the wheel. Now, however, everything was just as it should be. The road was straight and flat, traffic was light, and Mark could use a few hours' sleep. Having Jimmy drive—even for a little while—would be a great way to make up for lost time. "You have your licence, right?"

"Yeah, sure but—"

"And you got it because you eventually want to drive a truck."

"Yes."

"So why not now?"

Jimmy leaned forward until he was on the edge of his seat. His face seemed as bright as a new dollar coin. "Sure, okay."

Mark took his foot off the throttle and Mother Load began to slow. When he'd slowed sufficiently, he pulled over onto the shoulder and came to a stop.

"You need me to explain anything to you about the truck?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No, I've been watching you drive."

"Good." Mark engaged the parking brake and climbed out of the truck. He met Jimmy in front of the Peterbilt's big radiator and put a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Just take it easy. We don't have to get there fast, we just have to get there."

There was an ear-to-ear smile on Jimmy's face and he nodded eagerly at Mark's words. "Are you sure it's okay for me to drive your truck?"

"Jimmy," Mark said. "I have a feeling you're going to take better care of it than I do." He gave Jimmy a warm pat on the shoulder and they continued on around the truck.

Once inside, Mark made himself comfortable in the passenger seat. "Anytime you're ready."

Jimmy looked over at Mark, then slowly turned to face the steering wheel and the banks of gauges. He gripped the steering wheel with his left hand, and placed his right hand on the shifter. One last adjustment in the seat and his feet were on the pedals.

“Here goes,” he said, putting the truck into gear.

The truck shuddered and there was a grinding noise coming from somewhere inside the transmission.

Mark sat bolt upright in his chair.

“Sorry,” Jimmy said. “Forgot the clutch.”

“You don’t use the clutch?” Mark had heard that there were some drivers out there that didn’t use the clutch, but none of them could have been owners. Every time you shifted without the clutch, or missed a shift, you wore down the gear teeth in the transmission. The damage isn’t noticeable at first, but you could be sure there would be problems—expensive problems—down the road.

“No, I just... I’m so nervous, I forgot.”

“Well take a deep breath and get yourself un-nervous. I can’t afford to have a Nervous Nelly behind the wheel of my truck.”

Jimmy let out a laugh. “Nervous Nelly?”

“What would you call yourself right now?”

That stopped Jimmy laughing and he gripped the steering wheel tightly as a look of determination broke over his face.

“You can do it,” Mark said.

“I know,” was all Jimmy said.

He shifted Mother Load into first gear, signalled that he was going to be pulling back onto the highway, and slowly let out the clutch. The movement was so smooth, the truck hardly shuddered at all. They were simply stationary one moment, moving the next.

“Good,” Mark said.

Jimmy didn’t answer. His attention was too focused on the road ahead.

“Excellent,” Mark said, this time commenting on the new way he’d found to keep Jimmy from talking.

Mark watched Jimmy work his way up through the gears, noting that he never waited for the engine to get to its top RPM, but rather shifted well before the engine’s maximum RPM limit.

“What are you doing?”

“What?”

“You’re shifting early.”

“Oh, that. It’s called progressive shifting.”

“They teach you that on that course?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t had a chance to try it out before.”

“What’s it supposed to do?” Mark wasn’t being polite, he was actually curious about this since he could hear that his engine wasn’t working as hard as it usually did.

“You don’t have to bring the engine up to 1600 RPMs to get it into the next gear without lugging. Lugging is when the engine isn’t developing enough horsepower to operate efficiently, and that burns more fuel.”

“Uh, I know what lugging is.”

“Okay.” Jimmy paused as he shifted into the next gear. The movement was so smooth and the engine so quiet that it seemed like Jimmy was churning butter instead of driving a tractor-trailer. “Progressive shifting means you shift before you reach the engine’s maximum RPM. It reduces wear on equipment, cuts down on noise levels and, most importantly, saves fuel.”

Mark wanted to play devil’s advocate with Jimmy by telling him that it was a good theory, but not too practical when you had to merge with traffic in a hurry, but they didn’t seem to be accelerating any slower or faster than usual.

Jimmy shifted again, this time taking a little extra time between gears and seeming to go from one upstroke on the shifter to another.

“You missed a gear,” Mark said.

“I know,” Jimmy said. “That’s called skip shifting. If you have enough speed to pass over a gear, that saves fuel as well.”

"I've done that before, but I didn't know it had a name."

"You learn something new every day," Jimmy smiled like a know-it-all again.

As much as Mark appreciated the lesson on progressive shifting, he didn't care all that much for that smile on Jimmy's face. The kid knew a lot, but he didn't know everything.

Mark looked over at him sitting there in the driver's seat, one hand on the wheel, another resting on the shifter like he was driving some hot rod down main street on Saturday night.

"Take your hand off the shifter!"

"What? Why?"

"I know you probably think it looks cool to drive that way but constant pressure on the shift knob—even the slight pressure from the weight of your hand—reduces the life of the shift forks inside the transmission."

"It does?" Jimmy took his hand off the shifter as if his wrist had just been slapped by the teacher.

Now it was Mark's turn to smile. "Learn something new every day, don'tcha?"

Jimmy smiled at that.

Mark watched Jimmy drive for a while longer. He wanted to fall asleep and get some rest, but he was just a little nervous about Jimmy driving his rig. The kid was careful enough, was paying attention to the road and all, but this was Mark's truck—his livelihood—and seeing someone else behind the wheel took a little getting used to. But as much as he wanted to watch over Jimmy, Mark knew that at some point he'd have to let go. He had to trust Jimmy enough to let the boy drive while he got some rest. If he were able to sleep, even for a little while, they'd be able to alternate the rest of the way to the coast, just like a regular team. That would cut their travel time in half, save on fuel and everything else that goes along with doing the job efficiently.

If only he could get some sleep.

After another kilometre or so, Mark had an idea. Jimmy was driving a little slower than Mark usually did. Mark didn't mind that Jimmy was driving that way, but he knew that if the kid was doing it, there was a reason for it. And if there was a reason for it, then Jimmy had an explanation.

And if there was an explanation...

"Why are you driving so slow?"

"I'm not driving slow," he said. "I've just decreased our speed by 10 kilometres per hour."

Mark smiled, it was working.

He made himself comfortable in his seat.

"By reducing speed, I've also reduced the amount of horsepower needed to move the truck along the highway. The less an engine works, the more fuel it saves."

Jimmy paused a moment. Mark prodded him. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, see for every 10 kilometres an hour over 90 kilometres per hour, you use 10 percent more fuel. Over the course of a year, say 190 000 kilometres, you could save \$3,500 in fuel just by driving at 90 instead of 100 kilometres per hour."

It was working. Mark was beginning to feel drowsy.

"You don't say," he mumbled.

"Cruise control really helps keep your speed consistent," he continued. "It's the best way there is to save fuel on the highway..."

Jimmy rambled on.

And on...

And Mark was fast asleep in minutes.

CHAPTER**16**

After a few hours in the passenger seat, Mark felt twisted and cramped. He climbed back into the sleeper and got several hours of sleep before they needed to stop for fuel and food outside Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

“We’re here already?” Mark said for Jimmy’s benefit.

“Still some fuel left in the tanks, too.”

Mark gave Jimmy a pat on the back. “You did good, kid. Best night’s sleep I’ve had in a long time.”

They ate in the restaurant, freshened up the best they could in the restroom, and were fuelled up and back on the road in less than an hour. Mark decided to drive on through the night into Calgary, giving Jimmy the chance to get some sleep before they made their delivery in the morning.

“You sure?” he asked. “There might be some stuff you could show me.”

Mark was sure the kid was just being polite. “The road is long, flat and straight. What am I going to show you? How to hold it between the lines? Get some rest. You earned it.”

Jimmy nodded. “Okay, thanks.”

Mark got Mother Load back on the road, realizing he’d just figured out the best way to get along with Jimmy. If they drove opposite each other, then he’d only have to deal with him briefly

during the transitions. The rest of the time, Mark would either be asleep or driving on his own. It was a perfect set-up, and Mark was sorry he hadn't started doing it earlier, like out of Montreal. But to do that he would have had to trust Jimmy with his truck in and around Toronto.

While it was one thing to let him drive across the Prairies, it was a whole other thing to have him driving through a city.

No, Jimmy was learning at the right pace, and although Mark would never admit as much to Jimmy or his uncle Bud, he was actually enjoying having Jimmy along for the ride. As much as he couldn't stand Jimmy's lectures, he still got a kick out of them—and he was learning a thing or two along the way. And he liked putting the young guy in his place. Sure there was plenty to be said for classroom learning, but there was no replacing years of experience behind the wheel.

Jimmy had been driving for all of a few hours and talked like he knew it all. Mark, on the other hand, had been driving for years and knew the road still had plenty of surprises in store for him. It was one of the reasons he enjoyed driving so much. There was always something new to be learned every day, and having an open mind that was receptive to change and new ideas was an important part of being a good driver. The moment you thought you'd seen it all was the moment you were in for a big surprise. The sooner Jimmy learned that, the sooner he'd become a better, and more complete, driver.

"Good night, Mark," Jimmy said from the upper bunk of the sleeper behind him.

"Night Jimmy."

Mark drove on, appreciating the rattle and thrum of the engine and tires as they carried them west into the night. And while it was a night like any other, Mark had a feeling there were still quite a few surprises waiting on the road ahead of them.

Mark enjoyed the peace and quiet of driving at night without Jimmy to fill his ears with babble. He was a good kid and a decent driver, and if he could ever learn to keep his mouth shut he'd be just about perfect.

Driving without any distractions was also good for keeping an eye out for the hijacked rig. Mark wasn't sure why, but he had a gut feeling they'd be running into the hijacked rig again, and hearing Jimmy constantly talking about how they were never going to find the truck again was just too draining.

Better to have the boy sleep so Mark could ponder and imagine all the different scenarios that would put the truck on the highway in front of them, or better yet, parked in some rest stop along the way.

First of all, there'd been that big pile-up on Highway 17. Sure Mark and Jimmy had had some delays on their journey, but if the hijacker had gone on 17 and had been stuck for half a day or more, there was no reason why they both wouldn't be on the same schedule to the coast. And even if the hijacker hadn't been stopped by the pile-up on 17, Mark and Jimmy were now driving as a team, and that would close the gap at a rate of two to one. If they weren't caught up to the hijacked rig by now, they surely would be in another day or two.

In a way Mark knew Jimmy was right about the rig. Logically speaking, finding a single truck along the Trans-Canada highway was a long shot at best. Sure there were all kinds of law enforcement agencies along the route that would be looking for the rig, but the hijacker could have easily switched rigs—or even just the trailer—to avoid being caught, so any reasonable person would be right to think that looking for the truck was a monumental waste of time.

But not Mark.

He knew that strange things happened to truckers from time to time, and the strangest things seemed to happen to him all the time. He wasn't sure why, but he had a very strong feeling that

he would be running into the hijacker before long, and part of the fun in that was going to be in telling Jimmy, "I told you so."

Just then a rig came into view. The colours on the trailer were impossible to discern at this distance, and the best he could make out were areas of light and dark. But there were words on the rear doors that had a familiar shape to them, a shape that reminded him of the Wolf he'd seen on the stolen truck.

Mark pressed down on the throttle and the whine of Mother Load's engine rose in pitch. It was a good thing Jimmy was sleeping, because if he'd been awake he'd be complaining about fuel consumption and efficiency. Of course it burned up extra fuel to chase after stolen rigs, phantom or otherwise, but such things were in Mark's nature, in his blood, and no amount of fuel efficiency training was going to curb his appetite for adventure. There were bad people out there taking advantage of truckers, and if he could do something to stop them he was going to do it—an extra few litres of fuel or not.

In five minutes, Mark had closed the gap between himself and the truck he was chasing. The words on the trailer were no clearer, but the colours were coming into sharper focus. They were definitely not green and yellow, and while he couldn't be sure they were blue and white, they were definitely white and a dark colour of some kind. A few more minutes and he'd be sure.

Closer, closer...

He could almost make out the word.

Mark gave Mother Load a little more throttle.

At last he could read what it said.

WOLF.

WOLF LOGISTICS.

Furthermore, the trailer was blue, the lettering white, and there was no "E" in "Wolf", just as he'd said.

"Jimmy!" he called out. "Jimmy!"

"What?" came the groggy voice from the sleeper.

"It's the truck," he said. "The truck we've been looking for, it says 'Wolf' on it, blue with white lettering, and no 'E.'"

Jimmy wasn't moving.

Mark looked back into the sleeper. "Get up and see this!"

The kid finally poked his head out from under his pillow.

"Are you still playing this game?"

"No game," said Mark, turning around to take another look at the truck.

But it wasn't there. The highway in front of him was empty and the truck was gone. Somehow in the few seconds he'd taken his eye off the truck, the damn thing had vanished into the night.

Mark checked his rearview mirrors thinking he might have somehow overtaken the truck, but there wasn't anything behind him for miles.

"Where is it?" Jimmy said excitedly as he climbed into the passenger seat.

Mark didn't answer at first. How could he? Jimmy was already convinced that they'd never find the truck, now he'd be convinced that Mark was either obsessed with the thought of catching the hijackers or plain old crazy, or both.

"It's not there anymore."

"Not there?"

"That's what I said."

"Seventy-five-foot tractor-trailers don't just disappear."

"Well it did. It was there in front of us one second, gone the next."

"Are you sure you saw it?"

Here it comes, thought Mark. Jimmy was going to be all over this like dirt on a mud flap.

"Yes, I saw it," he said. "Blue with white letters, and no 'E.'"

"You know," Jimmy said, pausing a moment as if in thought.

"Night vision is the first thing to go with age."

Mark ground his teeth together, resisting the urge to tell the boy what he could do with all his classroom-taught experience. He also wanted to wring the kid's neck, but he'd have to let go of the steering wheel to do that, so he seethed in silence instead,

until all of the urges passed. "I'm only going to say this one more time, and then I don't want to hear any more smart comments from you." A pause. "I saw the truck. I know it was the truck we've been... I've been looking for. It's gone now, but we'll find it again. And when we do, I'll expect you to eat some serious crow."

Jimmy seemed at a loss for words, which was a first. Obviously he'd never dealt with an angry Mark and realized that one false word might put him on the shoulder with little more than his thumb to get him where he was going.

At last he shrugged and said, "Whatever."

Mark didn't like the comment since it was what Jimmy's generation called a "diss," but Mark figured he had something coming to him for rousing the boy out of bed for some phantom truck. As long as Jimmy could leave it at that and keep his mouth shut about it, they'd be fine.

Unfortunately, that was one big "if" and Mark doubted Jimmy was up to it.

CHAPTER**17**

By the time they reached Calgary, it was daylight.

“You want me to take over for a while?” Jimmy asked.

“No, that’s alright,” Mark answered. “We’ll stop for some food and fuel and I should be all right to get us to our destination.”

Jimmy sighed and put his head back down on his pillow.

“Here’s a place,” Mark said.

“You sure?” Jimmy asked. “What’s the engine temperature like?”

Mark glanced at the temperature gauge on the dashboard in front of him. With all the hard driving he’d done to catch up to rigs in front of him, and a couple of slight hills along the way, the engine temperature was a bit too hot to shut down at the moment. A few more kilometres with reduced throttle would have the engine cool enough to shut down without any idle time. “Maybe there’s another place up the road,” he muttered.

Jimmy made a sound like he was proud of himself.

That rubbed Mark the wrong way. Mark had been driving for more than 10 years and he’d turned a profit, hell, better than that, he’d made a living during all that time. And here was a kid barely out of high school with some government course under his belt telling Mark about procedure while he’s riding along in a truck that Mark owned outright. Still, Mark thought, the kid was

right, and a rolling cool down would save fuel, and the only real way to consistently save fuel over time was to get into a routine. And, Mark supposed, there was no time to establish a routine like the present.

Mark let out a sigh, lifted off the throttle and watched the engine temperature slowly begin to fall.

On Jimmy's insistence, breakfast that morning consisted of eggs, waffles and juice, and the morning paper.

Mark would have preferred having an order of bacon or sausages for breakfast, but Jimmy was adamant. "Those kinds of fatty foods will just make you lethargic and drowsy. The only thing that's worse for someone driving a tractor-trailer is alcohol, and I don't think I need to explain how drinking and driving don't mix."

Mark just shook his head, of course not. Mark had known a few drivers who felt a single beer wasn't going to impair their judgment any, but that explanation never seemed to hold water with the police at the scenes of their accidents, or with the judges who heard their cases. "I know that," he said.

Jimmy cleaned his plate. He must have been starving, given the way he wolfed down his food, making Mark feel uncomfortable about taking his time. He enjoyed some quiet time every day with a paper and a coffee, and since Jimmy had eliminated a lot of his daily coffee intake, at least he could spend a little time with a paper.

Mark put down his fork and shuffled through the paper to the sports section. But when he placed the paper back on the table and picked up his fork, the egg that had been on his plate was gone.

"All right," he said. "Where'd it go?"

"Where'd what go?"

"The egg that was there on my plate?"

Jimmy shrugged, but there was a speckle of egg stuck to the

side of his mouth. Not only that, he was still chewing the damn thing. "I don't remember any egg there."

"There was an egg there, I was looking forward to eating it and now it's gone."

Jimmy smirked. "Maybe it's with the Wolf truck."

Mark's eyes narrowed and he pressed his lips tightly together to keep himself from cursing the boy inside the restaurant.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe."

Jimmy let out a laugh, then said, "I'll get you another order of eggs."

"No, that's fine," Mark lied. "I'm full anyway."

"Do you want your toast, then?"

"Not at all. Help yourself."

Mark said nothing more while they were in the restaurant, using the time to figure out a way to teach this young smartass a lesson. And by the time they paid their bill, he had come up with a plan, excused himself, and went to make the single phone call that would make it work.

After filling up with fuel and conducting yet another one of the regular en route inspections, Mark tossed the keys to Jimmy and said, "Why don't you drive for a while?"

"Me?"

"No, the other driver who's been a pain in my ass since we left New Brunswick."

"But we're heading into Calgary."

"Yeah, so."

"So, it's city driving."

"You can't drive in the city?"

Jimmy paused a moment, as if thinking, then said, "Of course I can. I just wasn't sure if you trusted me with your truck, you know, on city streets."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Mark said, trying hard to keep a devilish grin from breaking over his face.

"All right," Jimmy said, suspicious of Mark but happy to be driving. "If you say so."

"Oh yeah," said Mark, "I say so."

The drive into Calgary was a short one. Mark had delivered to the same packing plant several times before but he played dumb with Jimmy, forcing the kid to find its location in a map book and figure out the best way to get there.

"It looks like it's on a main street," he said. "Shouldn't be too bad."

Mark smiled. Sure the address on the paperwork said the plant was on a main street in the downtown core, but that was the head office. The pallets needed to go to the end of the packing lines, and those were around the corner and halfway down the block.

"I guess this is the place," Jimmy said.

"Aren't you sure?"

"Well, it's the right address."

"That's true," said Mark. "But I don't see any loading docks here."

"They must be here somewhere."

Mark shrugged.

Jimmy raised his head slightly as if he suddenly realized that he was on his own. He looked up and down the street, then said, "I'm going to go inside and ask a few questions."

"Sounds good," said Mark.

Jimmy opened the door and was ready to climb out when—

"Uh-uh," Mark said.

"What?"

"Are you going to leave this truck idling while you go searching around inside there? For all you know they might all be on lunch and the truck'll be idling the whole time you're waiting for them to get back."

Jimmy turned off the truck and climbed out of the cab without a word.

Mark couldn't contain his delight, and even let slip with a giggle as he watched Jimmy head for the company offices. Inside was a woman named Irma who was either one of the sweetest or rudest office managers on the planet. She was sometimes a gruff, irritable old woman who absolutely despised dirty truck drivers who came in and messed up her office. Other times she was a sweet old grandma who offered you chocolates and candies whenever you popped in to say "hello".

Mark had called ahead to make sure that Jimmy would meet up with the former version of the woman. With any luck, she'd be all over him in a second, asking him if he could read, since there was a sign posted out on the street informing drivers where deliveries were to be made. Mark had missed that sign the first time he'd delivered here, and there didn't seem to be any reason why he should spare Jimmy the pleasure of this woman's charms.

Jimmy exited the office five minutes later, a shocked sort of expression on his face. Seeing that face, Mark knew Jimmy had just been through hell.

"Well?" asked Mark when Jimmy got back into the truck. "How'd it go inside?"

"Uh, I have to go around the block," was all Jimmy said.

"Irma give you directions, did she?"

"How do you know her name?"

"I heard stories... Big old woman, silver-grey hair, three-toothed snarl and a foul mouth?"

"That's her."

"Did she tell you where to go?"

"In more ways than one."

"Well, let's go then."

Jimmy nodded, started up Mother Load and headed down the street. At the corner he turned right, and then at the end of that street he turned right again.

"Oh no."

"What's wrong now?" Mark said.

The packing plant had been in operation since the turn of the last century and was located in the heart of the city's industrial core. And since the plant was built when livestock were either herded through the city to the plant, or later delivered from the farm in small stake trucks, the street was very narrow with all sorts of poles and signs on either side of it, making the roadway seem even smaller.

"There's no room to move there," Jimmy said.

"Piece of cake," Mark said. "I've seen guys pull up and back in their trailers as if the things were on rails."

"I haven't had a lot of practice with this kind of manoeuvre."

There were beads of sweat forming on Jimmy's upper lip.

Mark was loving every minute of it.

"Practice, shmactice," he said. "You've had driver training, and you have your licence. With all you know, this should be a snap."

Jimmy sighed, swallowed once, but did not move.

"C'mon, you're burning up my fuel here."

He finally put the truck into gear.

Like a cat in a strange yard, Jimmy crept down the street as slowly as Mother Load would allow. "That's the loading dock there?" he asked.

"Yup," answered Mark. "Just slide her right in and we'll be out of here."

Jimmy's face looked pale. To back the truck up to the loading dock would take several gymnastic-like turns of the wheel, and even then it looked as if it was going to be a tight fit.

But instead of backing down, Jimmy began to nod his head. "I can do this."

"Sure you can," Mark echoed.

Jimmy began his turn, trying to get as much turning radius as possible in the confined space.

"Watch out for that pole," Mark said, looking out the window and away from Jimmy. "Oh, there's a garbage can... Pedestrian coming this way. Watch out for that car... Don't forget the building..."

Jimmy's arms worked the wheel first left, then right, trying desperately to snake around all the objects lining the street and still get the rig into position so he could back it up to the loading dock.

Just then a bell rang, signalling the end of a shift at the plant. Within minutes there were scores of workers out on the street, either watching Jimmy wedge the truck between the curbs, or honking at him from their cars, wanting him to get out of the way.

He shifted into reverse and cranked the wheel, trying to back it up again and tighten his turning radius.

"Hold it!" Mark said. "You back up now and you'll smash the left-rear corner of the sleeper."

Jimmy slumped forward over the steering wheel, breathing deeply and shaking his head. "I can't do it," he said. "It's just too tight a turn. This truck won't make the turn."

Mark said nothing.

Outside, men on the street were slinging catcalls, and more and more drivers were honking their horns.

Jimmy looked up at Mark, his face a mask of defeat.

"Tough, huh?" Mark said.

"Impossible."

"No, not impossible. Just difficult."

"It can't be done. You can't turn a rig like this on this street."

"I know," said Mark.

"What?"

"Of course it's impossible to turn here. That's why, when you make your deliveries here, you make your turn down at the corner and back all the way down the block to the loading dock."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked."

"But I—"

Mark shook his head.

Jimmy seemed to think back on the past few hours and

slowly realized that he had never once asked Mark what he should do. "But I asked the woman in the office and she didn't tell me, either."

"Irma? She's probably watching you through the window."

They both looked over their shoulders and there was Irma, along with a dozen other office workers, all having a good chuckle at Jimmy's expense.

"She wouldn't want to miss the show, especially after I called her and told her what I needed her to do."

"You!"

"Listen, you might know a lot of things, but you don't know everything. One of the most important things you're going to need on the road is a good attitude and an open mind. There are thousands of drivers out there, all of them with more experience than you, yet still willing to share that experience. Knowledge is power, and in this instance, a little knowledge would have saved you a lot of fuel. If you'd taken a bit more time to figure out exactly where we were going, we would have been in and out by now. Just imagine the fuel we could have saved."

Jimmy sighed. "Point taken. Now can you get me the hell out of this mess?"

"Gladly," Mark said. "Move over."

CHAPTER**18**

As the pallets were being unloaded, Mark called Bud for his next load. Bud seemed to be in a better mood than usual and even responded with his customary “Mark who?” when Mark told him who was calling.

“You know damn well Mark who!”

“Hey, how’s it going? I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“I’ve been driving... We’ve been driving.”

Silence. “You let my nephew behind the wheel of your rig?”

“Yes, I did.”

Another pause. “And... how did he do?”

“He did just fine,” Mark said. “And now he’s a little more aware that he doesn’t know everything.”

“Taught him a lesson or two, did ya?”

“You could say that.”

“I knew sending him out with you would be the best thing for him.”

“Yeah, good for him, but what about for me? You got a load for me, or what?”

“Of course I do. Trailer-load of fresh beef headed for Vancouver.”

“Fresh?”

“That’s right, so you pick up your load and head straight for the port. You won’t have time for any of your adventures.”

“What are you saying?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Dalton. You’re always getting mixed up in something. You can never deliver a load without getting into some kind of trouble or messy situation, or going off on some wild goose chase...” A pause. “Which one is it this time?”

Mark was about to answer, “A wild goose chase,” but managed to hold his tongue. Finally, he said, “We’re just haulin’ ass and delivering the goods.”

“Yeah, sure you are, Dalton. Just don’t get my nephew arrested. I made my sister a promise.”

“You can count on me to do the right thing, Bud.”

“I know. That’s what worries me so much.”

Bud gave Mark the details about the load, and in an hour they were on their way across town to pick up some beef. It was actually a great load for them since, working as a team, they’d be able to get to the coast almost non-stop, making the most out of their time in the truck, and getting the most mileage out of the least amount of fuel. They’d also be able to make up for some lost time and hopefully bring that hijacked truck within their sights. Of course, finding the truck so far from the scene of the crime was a humongous longshot, a million-to-one most likely, but Mark was sure they’d be crossing paths with it sometime soon. Sometime very soon.

They reached the beef terminal in Calgary just before lunch.

The reefer container was waiting for them on a chassis when they arrived, and all they needed to do was the hook-up to be on their way. However, since they’d be driving around the clock until they reached Vancouver, it made sense to do a thorough circle check of the trailer and Mother Load before they drove a kilometre.

“You want to do it together?” Mark asked Jimmy.

“I’d love to, yeah.”

Mark had a checklist on a clipboard that he read off of as

they made their way around the truck. Together they checked the fan belts, radiator hoses, oil and coolant levels, power steering fluid, lights, and all of the other things that most often contribute to breakdowns on the road. The last thing Mark wanted was a breakdown while carrying a time-sensitive load like fresh beef. Even if the breakdown was minor, there were towing fees and the cost of repairs to consider, not to mention late delivery charges and the danger of something more serious happening to Mark, Jimmy, or someone else out on the road.

That's why when they got around to checking tires, Mark didn't mind a bit that Jimmy insisted on checking the pressure of each one with a tire gauge instead of just using the thump test. Thump tests were good for checking to see if there was air in a tire, but a gauge told you if the tire had the correct amount of air pressure. Some drivers liked to keep their tires under-inflated to give them a softer ride, but that only caused tire damage and shortened the life of the tire. Mark liked to keep his tires properly inflated, just like the manufacturer intended. After all, the entire weight of the truck and its load depended on the tires working the way they were designed.

Jimmy was able to check all the tires on the rig quickly, since the tires on the trailer and the tires on Mother Load had all been equipped with flow-through valve caps.

"Everything okay?" Mark asked.

"A couple of tires on the left side are low. We can fill them up at our next stop for fuel, but any further and we could have problems."

"Maybe we've got a slow leak?"

"Maybe, but it would have to be pretty slow."

Mark nodded. "Next stop—food, fuel and air!" he said, knowing that Jimmy may have just saved him a few dollars in fuel, and who knows how much more in long-term maintenance costs and resale value.

They headed out on the road for Vancouver. For the first time since he picked up Jimmy back in New Brunswick, Mark was feeling good about the drive.

What's more, he had a feeling things were going to get a whole lot better, too.

Better, as in interesting.

CHAPTER**19**

The Rocky Mountains loomed in front of them like a solid wall of rock.

“Wow!” was all Jimmy could say. They’d been seeing the Rockies from a distance for a while, but this was the first time the mountains were close enough, and big enough, to fill the entire width and breadth of Mother Load’s windshield.

“Kind of takes your breath away, doesn’t it?”

“I’ve never seen mountains like that before, you know, other than in school books.”

“Well, you’ll be seeing a lot more of them for the next little while,” said Mark. “And close up, too.”

Then, three hours later they were in the midst of the mountains, climbing their way through Kicking Horse Pass. Mark began the climb in top gear but quickly downshifted to prevent the RPMs from dropping and the engine from lugging. He liked to keep Mother Load around 1600 RPM, where he found the engine to be most efficient. Any more than that and he’d use more fuel and get less power and torque from the engine. Less than 1600 wasn’t necessarily a bad thing since modern engines had much wider power ranges than those built in years past, but he always tried to keep the revs above 1400. Below that level, there was a dramatic drop off in both power

and fuel efficiency. There was all kind of data to support this, which Mark was sure Jimmy could explain to him in great detail, but Mark had also driven Mother Load long enough to have a feel for when it was working at maximum efficiency and when it was burning fuel and getting nowhere fast.

By the time Mark crested the top of the hill, he'd shifted down into fourth and was doing all of 40 kilometres per hour. It had taken a little longer to get to the top of the hill, but Mark would take fuel savings over time, every time.

Jimmy had been watching Mark the whole run up the pass, saying nothing, but looking as if he wanted to get a word in somewhere and couldn't.

"What is it?" Mark asked. "Are you going to tell me I'm doing something wrong?"

"I was going to," Jimmy said. "But you didn't. I was watching the tachometer and you kept it between 1400 and 1600 the whole way up the hill."

"And?"

"And nothing," Jimmy said. "You did it right."

Mark started to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"That probably killed you, didn't it? Not being able to add your two cents' worth."

Jimmy said nothing in response. Instead, he looked out the window at the mountains.

"Look at that!" Mark said.

"No," Jimmy said, without even looking in the direction Mark was pointing.

"But it's the truck we've been looking for!"

"No, it isn't. The truck we—" He stopped himself abruptly. "Sorry. The truck you've been looking for is long gone. It was dumped, changed or delivered long ago, and the only reason I even remember it is because you won't let it go. In fact, you're

giving me the creeps with this truck thing. Let's just make our delivery in Vancouver and be happy with that, all right?"

Mark ignored Jimmy's little rant. The kid thought he knew everything, but if there was one thing Mark knew it was that Jimmy didn't know squat. "Remember I said that the trailer had blue and white letters with no 'E' on the end of 'Wolf.'"

"Yeah."

"And you swore that the trailer was green and yellow and 'Wolf' was spelled with an 'E' on the end, W-O-L-F-E."

"That's right."

"Well, there it is... green and yellow, with an 'E.'"

Jimmy finally looked up. His jaw dropped and he was unable to say anything.

"So the next time you think I'm crazy, think again smartboy."

Mark did his best to catch up to the green and yellow trailer in front of them. If there was a woman driving, then it was the one, but even if there wasn't a female driving, there was still a good chance that someone else was driving the trailer now, still headed for some clandestine rendez-vous at some small port along the coast.

Mark was able to overtake the truck on the next hill. Slowly, he crept up along the side of the truck, able to read the big yellow letters one at a time as they came into view: E-F-L-O-W. And then they saw the driver.

Not a female.

And not young.

Instead, the driver was an old balding white man, with a ring of thin grey hair around the back of his head, and a pair of bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows.

For a moment Mark thought the hijackers had just hired another driver, duped the oldtimer into taking their load, but then Mark noticed something that told him that wasn't the case.

"Not the one," Mark said.

"He's just the driver," Jimmy responded, the thrill of the chase evident in his voice. "Maybe they did a switch."

Mark just shook his head. "Plate on the tractor's American."

Jimmy looked at the plate and saw—like Mark did—that the truck was licensed in Washington State, which made the chances that this was the right truck very slim. Mark slowed Mother Load so the truck on their right surged forward and they were able to pull in directly behind it.

That confirmed it.

The trailer was also licensed in Washington State, meaning the driver was heading home to the United States, not driving across Canada with a trailer load of stolen cars.

"Seemed like a good fit for a while there," Jimmy said.

"Just means that the truck we're looking for is still out there."

"You still think we'll run into it?" There seemed to be a slight difference in Jimmy's attitude now. It sounded a bit like he believed there was a chance they might actually find this needle-truck on this haystack-highway.

Mark was pleased. It would be a lot easier finding the truck if they both believed they'd come upon it. "Of course we will," he said, "Or my name's not Mark Dalton."

The ride through the mountains was becoming tiring for Mark. While his senses were sharp, it was a bit of an effort to be constantly turning the wheel and working the gears up and down according to the terrain. Jimmy, for his part, had been pretty good about keeping quiet and letting Mark focus his attention on the road. But now that they seemed to be through the worst of it, it was quiet in the truck, like he was riding with someone else. And while Mark would never say as much out loud, he missed the playful teasing they'd done earlier in their ride. On his last break, Mark had looked through a few of the books and trucking magazines he kept in the sleeper for bedtime reading, and he was armed with a bunch of facts conveniently written down on cards he'd strategically placed on the dashboard in front of him that were going to make Jimmy's head spin.

“Keep an eye out for a fuel station,” he said.

Jimmy looked at Mark strangely. “We already filled up today. We should be good for a while still.”

“I don’t need fuel,” Mark said. “What I’ve got is too much of it. I need to pull over and empty some out.”

There was a look of confusion on Jimmy’s face, like he didn’t know what to make of Mark’s words.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, let’s see. I’m on cruise control and I know that improves fuel economy.”

“Yeah, by something like six percent,” Jimmy said.

“Okay, six percent.”

“I don’t have great aerodynamics on the truck, so I’m driving about eight kilometres per hour under my regular cruising speed, saving what—something like 8 to 15 percent.”

“That sounds about right. If you had excellent aerodynamics, slowing down eight kilometres per hour would only improve fuel economy by something like five to eight percent.”

“Okay, so we’ll say 10 percent for Mother Load. And I don’t have a bug deflector on my rig, and those things can increase fuel consumption by 1.5 percent, so I get that in my favour, too.”

Jimmy hesitated. “I guess.”

“Now, the tire set-up on this rig is all ribbed tires, which is a savings of two to four percent over a set-up with ribbed tires up front, lugged tires on the drive wheels and ribbed tires on the trailer.”

“That’s right,” Jimmy said, understanding a bit more and eager to add his two cents to the conversation. “And the savings are even higher if you switch from deep lug on the drive tires to ribbed tires and econo-rib on the trailer—something like 6 to 14 percent.”

“That’s too fancy for me, but for my set-up, let’s say it’s three percent.”

Jimmy nodded.

“Now I have a manual on-off fan installed under the hood—”

Jimmy was quick to jump in. “A thermo or viscous fan would be better. One of those improves fuel economy between 1.5 and 5 percent over a manual on-off fan.”

“That’s true, but when I had the thing installed, the service guy told me that a Technology and Maintenance Council study showed that turning off a manual on-off fan 100 percent of the time improved fuel economy from 7 to 18 percent over the fixed engine fan that was in the truck when I bought it. Since I don’t put the fan on while the engine’s warming up, and we don’t need it while we’re driving because there’s plenty of air flowing through the radiator, I’m claiming the whole 18 percent.”

Jimmy was shaking his head like he was beginning to understand what Mark was getting at. There was the hint of a smile creeping onto his face.

“We’ve been driving as a team for a while now, so I’ve been saving four litres of fuel for every hour that I’m not idling. Also, I’m not idling with the air conditioner running, which can increase fuel consumption by four to six percent as compared to idling without the air conditioning running, so there’s another say, three percent savings.”

“Sounds about right.”

Mark was running out of facts and figures. He searched the dashboard for a card he hadn’t referred to yet. “Ah,” he said. “I’ve got 15-inch cab extenders on this truck so that’s worth one to two percent in fuel efficiency because of improved aerodynamics, the air dam front bumper is worth three percent, and so are the tractor side skirts.”

“But you don’t have a wind deflector on the roof,” Jimmy was quick to point out. “That’s worth a savings of six percent. And full fairings on the side can increase fuel efficiency by as much as 15 percent.”

“I’ll be getting that stuff in time, but realistically my friend, I don’t know if I can handle any more savings. I mean, I’m already generating fuel while I drive as it is.”

“Yeah, who needs Petro-Canada when there’s Petro-Dalton,” Jimmy laughed out loud.

“Exactly,” Mark nodded. Now that Jimmy was on to him, Mark decided to bring out all the stops. “And did you notice how that trailer we’re pulling is in nice and close to the tractor. One of the few real aerodynamic features I’ve got going for me on this rig.”

“Yeah, I did notice.”

“Well, the gap between the trailer is just 25 inches. If I reduced the gap from 35 to 25 inches, that increases efficiency by 0.5 to 1 percent. If it was reduced from 45 to 25, well that’s an increase in efficiency of one to two percent. But I managed to reduce the gap from the previous trailer we were hauling from 65 inches down to just 25, increasing fuel efficiency by... do you know how much?”

“No, how much?”

“Between 2 and 15 percent.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

“You bet it is. But the best is yet to come.”

“How’s that?”

“We’re driving on a flat multi-lane highway, right?”

Jimmy looked out the window. They were still heading through the Rocky Mountains where the highway sometimes widened to accommodate rural traffic between towns, and climbed hills and descended into valleys following the lay of the land. “It’s not always multi-laned, and it’s not exactly flat.”

That was all true, but Mark wasn’t about to be slowed down by something as trivial as fact. He was telling a story here, after all. “You’re not being helpful, Jimmy,” Mark said with a sigh.

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s not always multi-laned or flat, but there are parts of it that are multi-laned, and parts of it that are flat. Are you at least willing to concede that?”

“Okay.”

“Well, if you were driving on a flat two-lane highway and then moved to a flat multi-lane highway, do you know by how much your fuel consumption would improve because of the better road surface and traffic flow?”

Jimmy shrugged. “I don’t know, two percent maybe?”

“Ha! It improves from 4 percent to 11 percent.

If you go from a mountainous road to a flat multi-lane highway it improves from 4 to 18 percent. A suburban route to a flat multi-lane highway: 25 to 35 percent. And from a busy urban route to a flat multi-lane highway, fuel consumption improves up to 45 percent. And that’s the improvement we’re enjoying right now.”

“We are?”

Of course they were driving on a mountainous road at the moment, but Mark wasn’t about to let that get in the way of a good story. “But wait, I’m not done yet. Because I consulted the weather maps, we’re driving without a headwind.”

“You know that for sure?”

“Yes! And because there isn’t a headwind of say, eight kilometres per hour that we have to drive into, we’ve improved our fuel economy by 5 to 10 percent. And without a crosswind of say—for convenience sake—eight kilometres per hour blowing against our sides, we’ve improved fuel economy yet another 5 to 10 percent.” Mark paused, a little breathless. “Shall I go on?”

“No thanks,” Jimmy said with a wave of his hand. “I think I get the point.”

“I don’t think you do. With all of those things working in my favour, I’ve increased my fuel efficiency by, let’s see... 129.5 percent. Which is why I have to find some place to unload some of this diesel my engine keeps making.”

Jimmy started clapping. “Very funny, but you know it doesn’t work that way. Each percent of improvement is calculated from a baseline. So making a single change to your rig will give you the maximum fuel savings, but if you’ve already got a good set-up

and you made a bunch of fuel-efficient changes, you'll get some savings, but not the maximum each time. In your case, you have to look at the overall fuel efficiency of your rig compared to another driver in a similar rig who gives no consideration to fuel efficiency at all."

Mark didn't want to let go of the joke just yet. "Oh no," he said. "The tanks are overflowing. A few more kilometres and I'm afraid she's gonna blow!"

Jimmy wasn't going to let himself to be sucked in any further by Mark's antics. He continued speaking as if Mark was actually listening. "That's why the difference in fuel consumption between the best and worst driver in a fleet can be as much as 35 percent."

Mark let out a sigh. The fun was over and Jimmy was back in the proverbial driver's seat as far as lectures on fuel efficiency went. "That high, eh?"

"Some drivers don't give much thought to saving fuel."

Mark looked over at Jimmy, wondering, "Your uncle ever mention where I ranked among his drivers?"

"Yes, he did."

Mark waited for Jimmy to elaborate, but the kid was tight-lipped. "Well, where'd I rank?"

Jimmy sighed. "Top five."

Mark smiled, feeling pretty good about himself.

"But there was a huge gap between you and number one."

Suddenly the smile was gone from Mark's face, replaced by a scowl. "You've got an answer for everything, don'tcha kid?"

"Pretty much."

Mark kept the frown on his face for a good half hour, but he smiled inside at the way the kid had been able to diss him even while handing out a compliment.

In a lot of ways the kid reminded Mark of, well, of himself.

CHAPTER**20**

They were passing Revelstoke, in the heart of the Monashee Mountains, when Mark yawned. He'd been trying to hold back his fatigue for the past few hours, hoping to get through the worst of the Rockies so that Jimmy could take over, but he couldn't hold back the yawns any longer.

"You want to take over for a while?"

"Me?"

Mark was tempted to answer the kid with a smart remark, just like the boy's Uncle Bud did whenever Mark called, but the truth was he was too tired to do anything but answer, "Yeah, you."

"I did okay on the straight and flat roads on the Prairies but this is pretty up and down."

"You can do it."

"You sure?"

"No, I'm not sure," Mark said. "But I'm tired and there's no way I'm driving for any longer than a few more minutes. I know this isn't exactly the best sort of road to learn on, but I trust you." Mark paused a moment, wondering if he'd just said what he thought he'd said. "You're a careful driver, and even without experience you're a better driver than I am in my present condition, so..."

"So pull over!" Jimmy said.

Five kilometres passed before Mark found a stretch of road that was straight enough, with a shoulder wide enough to stop. When he finally had Mother Load on the side of the road, Jimmy jumped out and immediately began conducting a circle check. They'd checked it at their last fuel stop just a few hours before, but Jimmy was making sure everything was right since he was going to be the one driving. Mark couldn't argue with that and had to admit that he'd probably be just as anal if he were in Jimmy's shoes. And that was the thing that convinced Mark he could trust the kid with his rig. If the boy was careful with his circle checks, knew all the rules of fuel-efficient driving, and wanted to be the best driver he could be, then it only stood to reason that he would also be careful and conscientious behind the wheel.

Mark had seen all kinds of drivers at the wheel of rigs that looked to be on their last legs, with broken and bent bits here, there, and everywhere. Looking at any of those trucks, you wondered if it was a game with them to see how many things they could leave in disrepair and still pass a CVSA inspection. That sort of thing would never happen with Jimmy, and maybe that was the reason why Bud had asked Mark to train him. Sure Mark could be wild at times, but he was careful about his truck and the way he drove for his customers. That was the sort of thing Bud wanted Jimmy to learn, and he'd asked Mark to show him, even though it probably killed Bud to ask Mark of all people for such a favour.

"It's all good," Jimmy said, as he climbed in behind the steering wheel.

"Excellent," answered Mark, moving into the sleeper to catch a few hours' sleep. The thought of sleeping on the road, while his truck was still rolling, brought a smile to Mark's face. This was actually the most ideal set-up for an owner-operator. Because Jimmy could drive while Mark slept, there were no more questions about idling the truck at night, or even using an in-cab

heater to keep the truck warm while they slept. It also eliminated a lot of idling time because there was no real reason for the truck to be stationary for anything more than short breaks for food or fuel, and there was rarely a need to idle the truck to warm up its oil since the truck hardly ever had any time to cool off.

Jimmy signalled left and slowly brought Mother Load back onto the highway. When he was up to speed and fully merged with traffic, Jimmy asked, "When do you want me to wake you up?"

Mark didn't answer.

"Are you there?"

"Huh? What?" sputtered Mark. Because Jimmy's progressive shifting was so easy on the engine—not to mention quiet to the ears—Mark had begun to fall asleep scant moments after his head had touched the pillow. And even when Jimmy had spoken to him, Mark had equated Jimmy's words with a sort of droning babble that was best ignored. He hadn't realized the boy had been asking him a question.

"I said," Jimmy repeated, "when do you want me to wake you up?"

"Oh, uh... Kamloops would be good. We'll get a bite to eat there and maybe fuel up."

"Sounds good," Jimmy said, shifting one last time.

"Any place in particular you want me to stop at?"

The question was answered by the sound of Mark snoring his way through a cord of British Columbia Redwood.

"Never mind," said Jimmy. Then, "Good night."

CHAPTER**21**

They stopped to eat outside Kamloops. The place was one of those greasy spoons where you could almost chew on the fat in the air the moment you stepped inside the place. Mark hated to admit it, but he liked that smell and it made him hunger for a good old-fashioned serving of a greasy burger and fatty fries. But instead of giving in to his temptation—or enduring Jimmy’s unwelcome glare—Mark decided on a compromise by substituting a salad for his French fries, and choosing a glass of juice over his usual coffee.

“So,” Jimmy said, opening up his BLT and shaking a bit of pepper over the lettuce, “what’s going to happen when we reach the coast and make our delivery?”

It was a good question, one to which Mark hadn’t given all that much thought. There were basically two options available. One, Mark shakes Jimmy’s hand and tells him to call Uncle Bud for plane fare back to New Brunswick. Or, two, they make their delivery in Vancouver, get a load headed east and drive back across the country as a team. A week ago Mark would have chosen the first option without a thought. But now, things were different. Jimmy had just about run through all of his “advice” and they were finding other things to talk about. In fact, Mark had come to enjoy having someone to talk to while he was on the

road. If they drove together for more than a couple of weeks they'd probably be at each other's throats. But for now the situation was still new and interesting and could probably withstand a trip back east.

And there were also finances to consider. Driving as a team was more efficient than driving solo, especially on long hauls across Canada. And it wouldn't make sense to head east alone when a second driver was already on board. All that added up to Mark leaning toward keeping Jimmy on for a little while longer. But Mark would be damned if he was going to let Jimmy in on that now.

"I don't know," he said in answer to the question.

"Should I call my uncle to arrange for a plane ticket, or will I be going back with you?"

"Yes."

"Well, which one is it?"

"I don't know yet."

"You'll let me know when you do."

"Of course."

After refuelling Mother Load and the tank on the chassis' gen set, Mark and Jimmy did another circle check, making sure everything about Mother Load was working properly and that the temperature inside the reefer was still within range of the set point.

"Next stop," Mark said, shifting into gear, "the Pacific Ocean."

"Let's roll."

They were on the road for less than a half hour when they spotted it.

"Do you see that?" was all that Mark said since it was obvious to both of them.

"I see it."

Directly ahead of them was a blue trailer that had the word "WOLF" written across the rear doors in big white letters. After all

those kilometres and all the false alarms, here was the trailer rolling along in front of them under the bright morning sun as if the driver didn't have a care in the world.

"I told you we'd find it," Mark said.

Jimmy pressed his lips together and shook his head slightly. "It looks like it might be the hijacked trailer, but I still say it was green and yellow."

"How can you say that when we're looking right at the thing? You colour-blind, or something?"

"No, I just distinctly remember the trailer being green and yellow."

Mark couldn't believe Jimmy was being so stubborn when it was obvious to both of them that the blue and white lettering on this trailer was the same as the truck they saw way back in Ontario. Either Jimmy was being difficult, or he was the one who was right. "Tell you what," Mark said. "I'll pull up alongside it and we'll get a look at the driver. If it's a women, it's the truck we're looking for, never mind blue and white, green and yellow."

Mark pulled Mother Load to the left and pressed hard on the throttle. The truck slid forward slowly, but it didn't take long for them to see that the left side of the trailer was painted green and the word "Wolfe" was spelled out in big yellow letters, right down to the extra "E" Jimmy had sworn was on the truck.

"Well, I'll be damned," was all Mark could say.

"We were both right," said Jimmy.

"I'll be damned."

"Uh, do you really want to pass it?" Jimmy said, noticing that they'd almost crept up past the front of the trailer.

"No. I guess not." Mark eased up on the throttle and Mother Load fell behind.

They pulled back to the right and drew up close to the rear of the trailer.

"There's something odd," Jimmy said.

"Just one thing?" chided Mark.

“Okay,” said Jimmy, “another thing that’s odd.”

“Look at the numbers on the trailer. It looks like they’ve been altered.”

Mark took a look at the trailer numbers, and sure enough, it appeared as if they’d been changed somehow, with the “three” being transformed into an “eight”, and one of the two “fives” made into a “six”. “That’s got to be the truck.”

Jimmy just shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” Mark asked.

“I can’t believe it. You were right all along. We actually ran into the same truck, what, 2000 kilometres later.”

“I told you strange things happen out on the road. They happen to me so often I sort of expect things like this.”

“Someone’s got to be either the most confident or the dumbest criminal in the country.”

“Probably a bit of both.”

There was a lengthy silence between them. Finally Jimmy said, “So we found the truck. Now what do we do?”

“I don’t know,” Mark said. That was true. While he’d been telling Jimmy they would indeed come across the truck, Mark had been just as surprised by its appearance as Jimmy had, and he really didn’t have much of a plan at the moment.

But of course, that would change.

“Let me give it some thought,” Mark said. “For now we’ll just follow it for a while, then maybe check it out at the next stop.”

“Shouldn’t we call the police?”

“Maybe. But let’s make sure it’s the right truck first.”

Jimmy started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“My uncle warned me that you might get me into some kind of trouble. I didn’t believe him at the time, but...”

“But what?”

“I guess I won’t be doubting him any more, either.”

Mark smiled, then eased off on the throttle even further to

put some more distance between Mother Load and the Wolf. Greater following distance would give him more time to react if something happened to the truck in front of him. The general rule was that if a truck is 40-foot long, the following distance should be four seconds. If a truck is 60-foot long, the distance should be six seconds. And, of course, the following distance should be increased during adverse weather conditions. Today the sun was shining and Mark's rig was probably between 60- and 70-foot long. By rights he should be at least seven seconds behind, but he pulled back by a gap of almost 10 seconds to give himself plenty of time to react, and to be inconspicuous since they could end up following the Wolf for a long, long time.

The Wolf stopped just past Lytton.

The truck stop came after a fairly sharp turn and Mark nearly missed seeing the truck slowing down and pulling off the highway.

By the time they were slowed down and in the parking lot, the cab of the tractor pulling the Wolf was empty and parked next to a couple of tankers at the north end of the lot, behind the restaurant.

"Must be getting a bite to eat," Jimmy said.

"Perfect. It'll give us a chance to look around."

"What are you going to do, break into the truck? We tried that before, remember? Nearly got us both killed."

"This time we know the driver is inside the restaurant. Even if she gets something to eat for the road, she'll still be 10 or 15 minutes."

"I think we should just call the police and tell them what's going on."

Mark shook his head. "It'll be fine."

Jimmy seemed unconvinced.

"Your uncle told you I do stuff like this all the time, right?"

"Yeah."

“Well, I’m doing it again. Right now! And you’re either with me or you’re not. So which one is it?”

“Uh...”

“I don’t have time to waste here.”

“Okay, I’m with you.”

“Good. You get between the rig and the restaurant and if you think someone’s coming, make a noise.”

“What kind of noise?”

“Like an animal or something.”

“You mean like a dog bark?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“I can’t bark like a dog.”

Mark sighed. “Then just call out to me.”

“You mean like, ‘Mark!’”

“No, not Mark. Use another name, but make it sound like you’re looking for me, not like you’re trying to warn me.”

“Got it!”

At last they got out of the truck.

“Don’t worry,” Mark reassured Jimmy as they parted.

“Everything’s going to be all right.”

“If you say so.”

Jimmy headed to the restaurant while Mark walked casually over to the Wolf.

The first thing he noticed was that the numbers on the trailer had indeed been changed with the careful use of some black paint. Funny, they would change those numbers when each side of the trailer was the equivalent of a billboard announcing their location. Perhaps it had something more to do with getting the trailer onto a ship than it did getting the trailer across the country.

Mark took a moment to listen for Jimmy, heard nothing, then slid around the back of the trailer. There was a seal on the back doors, of course, along with not one, not two, but three padlocks on each of the other seal locations. Somebody sure didn’t want anyone peeking inside this trailer.

Just then Mark felt something cold and hard pressed against the back of his head. He'd felt the sensation twice before and instinctively knew that the cold hard thing was the barrel of a gun.

"Can I help you?" said a gruff female voice.

"Uh, nice rig you've got here," Mark said, not daring to turn his head an inch.

"You seem pretty interested in it."

Mark turned and got his first look at the woman holding the gun. She was short with dark hair, her eyes covered by a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. There was a scar on her cheek, surrounded by a web of wrinkles. If he had to guess her age, he'd say fifty-something, but she was probably in her early forties and showing the effects of a hard life of crime. "Well, it's the most curious thing. Did you know that 'Wolf' is spelled without an 'E' on one side, and with an 'E' on the other?"

"And for that you follow us for more than two hours?"

Mark said nothing in response. Obviously the woman had become suspicious of them despite Mark's best efforts to follow them inconspicuously.

A moment later Jimmy joined Mark, ushered forward by a very large brute of a man with long black hair who—judging by Jimmy's posture—was holding a gun to Jimmy's back. Obviously, the woman they saw jumping into the truck back in Ontario had picked up a little muscle along the way.

"You said everything would be alright," Jimmy muttered.

"It will be," Mark said, thinking he might have been in tighter spots in his life, but unable to remember when.

"Shut up! Both of you!" the woman said, clipping Mark on the back of the head with the butt of her gun.

"Ow," Mark cried, wanting nothing more than to turn around and clock the woman for what she'd done. He promised himself he'd do it when the time was right, but since both of the bad guys had guns, his revenge would have to wait.

"You drive?" she said, pushing the gun against Mark's head.
"Yes."

She turned to Jimmy. "You?"

Jimmy nodded.

"What's in your truck?"

Mark was about to say something like popsicles, or ice for the new arena they were building in downtown Vancouver, but Jimmy beat him to the punch.

"Fresh beef," he said, like the words were going to scare their captors into letting them go.

Of course, that wasn't what happened.

"Excellent," she said.

Mark just shook his head. He couldn't see Jimmy's face, but he hoped the boy realized the mistake he'd just made. Fresh beef was a valuable load that could easily be turned into cash in a big city like Vancouver.

"You drive this truck," she told Mark. Then she turned away from him and said, "Take him to that truck and have him follow us. I know where we can sell the beef, no questions asked."

"What are you going to do with us?" Jimmy said.

"I said, no questions asked."

Mark heard the thump of the man's gun butt strike the back of Jimmy's head.

This time it was Jimmy's turn to say, "Ow."

"Let's go!"

They parted ways. Mark got behind the wheel of the hijacked rig while Jimmy went back to Mother Load.

They would be in Vancouver in a matter of hours, but it looked as if Mark wouldn't be delivering his load on time this trip.

Maybe not even delivering it at all.

CHAPTER**22**

The woman had instructed Mark to get in the truck, but instead of climbing into the cab, he walked past it and began inspecting the trailer it was pulling.

“Get in the truck!” she said.

Mark shook his head. “No way.”

“Get in!” she insisted, showing him the gun.

“I’m not going anywhere in this thing until I do a proper circle check to make sure everything’s in working order.”

“Everything’s fine,” she barked. “Get in!”

Mark just looked at her. “Perhaps you didn’t hear me. I said I’m going to do a circle check of this vehicle. If you can’t wait the extra five minutes it’ll take, then perhaps you better shoot me right now.”

The woman seemed a bit stunned by Mark’s defiance. She looked at him with an expression on her face that said, “Are you crazy?”

“I’m a truck driver, ma’am, and I pride myself on doing a good job, no matter who I’m driving for... even if it’s truck-hijacking scum like yourself.”

He leaned in to inspect the left tires on the trailer and noticed that the inside rear tire looked as if it was about to lose its tread.

“See, it looks like this tire here is close to coming apart. That’s a pretty dangerous thing to be driving around with.”

“It’s been good so far.”

“Yeah, so far. But you never know when these things are going to let go. Lucky for you I know how to fix it—at least good enough to get it to Vancouver.” Mark took out the pocket knife he kept clipped to his pants pocket and put an extra cut under the treads of the tire to help it unravel. Then he stabbed the point of the knife into the sidewall. The knife was small, and hardly strong enough to punch a hole through the tire, but the point of the blade was sharp enough to put a small hole into the sidewall. Mark leaned in closer and could hear the distinct sound of escaping air. “There,” he said, straightening up. “All done. That should be good to get us where we need to go.”

“You finished now?” She sounded as if she was becoming very impatient.

“Almost,” he said. “Still have to do the other side.”

Mark made it look as if he were checking the right side of the truck, but it was all for show. He’d initiated the circle check to see if there was anything on the truck that he could exploit, either to disable it or to attract the attention of the authorities. Hopefully, with the additional damage to the tire, the tread on it would unravel more quickly, flapping around and around on the back of the trailer like a flag. Surely it would attract someone’s attention, perhaps even that of a police officer. A lost tread might not prevent them from reaching their destination, but the truck itself wasn’t in all that good condition, and it was a miracle they’d gotten this far. It had most likely been in decent shape when they’d hijacked it, but it was obvious it had been used and abused on its cross-country trip, since the hijackers didn’t care one bit if this trip was the truck’s last.

“Okay,” Mark said. He looked back at Mother Load and saw that Jimmy had also insisted on doing a circle check. Mark didn’t think the boy would damage the truck, but hopefully he had fig-

ured out another way to disable it or attract the attention of the authorities somewhere down the road.

“Get in,” she commanded. “Drive!”

Mark climbed into the cab and sat down in the driver’s seat. He never liked driving other people’s trucks because he’d become so used to Mother Load’s layout. Everyone else’s ride seemed odd and awkward to him. Everything was in the wrong place and he always had trouble finding what he was looking for.

“Let’s go!” she said, poking the barrel of the gun into his side.

“Relax, sister,” he said, brushing aside the gun with a pass of his right hand. “You’ve got the gun, okay, so you’re in charge. But I’m in charge of the truck, so I drive it how I want to. Okay? Understand?”

She said nothing in response, but kept the gun on him, watching his every move.

“See, I’m pretty sure you’re probably going to kill me, so I’m not afraid to take my chances driving this thing off a cliff or into a ditch.”

Her body seemed to relax at that, but the gun stayed where it was. She said nothing more, allowing him to get the truck going at his own pace.

Mark put the truck in gear, not worrying too much if he had the clutch fully engaged, or even engaged at all. Once he had it in gear, he gunned the throttle and let out the clutch, causing the whole truck to surge forward with a decided lurch to the right.

She looked at him as if he were crazy.

“I said I could drive,” Mark said. “I didn’t say I could drive well.”

The woman was not impressed.

A quick check of the gauges told Mark there was a good chance they might run out of fuel before they reached the coast. With that in mind, he began to drive even more erratically, gearing up and down for no apparent reason to use up as much fuel as he could. He also changed lanes as often as he could, putting as much strain on the tires as possible.

One way or another, this truck was going to stop before it reached its destination and Mark didn't really care how it happened—police intervention, equipment malfunction or fuel starvation—any one of them would offer him a chance for escape, or the opportunity to take the gun from the woman and shove it down her throat.

The thought of that put a smile on his face.

They were 50 kilometres from Vancouver when it happened. The left inside-rear tire on the trailer had finally begun to unravel. Mark couldn't feel anything different in the ride of the truck, but he could see grey smoke and tiny bits of black rubber coming off the back of the trailer. That, and Jimmy had radioed them from behind to inform them of the situation.

"You got an alligator looks like it's ready to leave the nest," he said over the Cobra.

Mark turned to the woman to his right, who to her credit hadn't moved the gun an inch from the moment they'd first set out.

"Keep driving!" she said.

Mark didn't argue. Normally he would have stopped the truck immediately to assess the problem and see whether the unravelling tread would damage the trailer. Then, if possible, he'd limp to a safe spot where he could park it and wait for a tire service to change the tire. Obviously, neither of those things was going to happen, and Mark was just as happy to keep driving along. With the tire looking more and more like the propeller of a Cessna with each passing kilometre, surely someone would call the police to report what they saw. Not only was driving a vehicle with a shredded tire unsafe, the threat of flying rubber and perhaps even steel belts posed a threat to the highway-going public.

But of course, there's never a cop around when you need one.

Mark drove 30 more kilometres without stopping and the

alligator finally became shredded enough to allow tread and tire to go their separate ways. The smoke stopped billowing from the back of the truck and Jimmy radioed once to inform Mark that, "You are now officially driving a 17-wheeler."

It was apparent that these people were not going to stop for anything and they would force Mark to drive into Vancouver on the rims if he had to. But people often have intentions about what they will and won't do that never take into consideration the things that are beyond their control.

For example, the moment Mark was instructed to drive, fuel consumption came under his control. And while he'd been the model of fuel efficiency from New Brunswick to Alberta, with this other rig, Mark had driven as if diesel fuel was water. Bad gear selections, poor shifting, and cruising in lower gears at higher revs had all combined to use up fuel at an accelerated rate. On top of all that, the shredded tire had put an extra strain on Mark's fuel consumption and he was finally reaping the benefits of his offensive driving techniques.

"We're going to need fuel," Mark said, tapping at the fuel gauge, the needle of which was well to the left of the E.

"No stopping."

Mark shrugged. "You keep a good thought," he said. "But while you're thinking that, this truck might have some ideas of its own." To emphasize the point, Mark shifted from fifth gear to eighth, making the engine lug noisily and struggle to generate any power. "See?"

"Keep driving."

Mark shifted again, this time letting the engine stall completely before finding a lower gear to bring it back to life.

Suddenly there was a look of concern on the woman's face and Mark had a good idea why. Since they were conducting an illegal activity, Mark would have to take their load to some clandestine location either right in the heart of Vancouver's port area, or somewhere up the coast. Running out of fuel on the way

to either place was going to arouse suspicion, not to mention the wrath of their bosses, who would surely be asking how stupid could they be to run out of fuel five kilometres from their destination.

“Stop here!” she said, as a rest stop appeared on the highway to their right.

“Whatever you say,” Mark replied, content to show his poker face and hide the smile he felt coming on over how well his plan was coming together.

CHAPTER**23**

Mark had hoped he'd be able to put gasoline in the tanks so the truck would stop cold somewhere before Vancouver, but the woman was watching over him every moment, directing him to the diesel pump and making sure he only put in \$40 worth of fuel. When he was done, Mark reached for his wallet, hoping to be able to pay for the purchase himself, but she stopped him and used a credit card to pay at the pump.

When she was done, she motioned for him to get back into the truck, but Mark hesitated. "I need to check the truck again," he said.

He could see she was losing patience with him, but didn't seem to want to push him, especially at the pumps with so many other people milling about.

He started at the back of the trailer and the tire that had lost its tread. There were two tire walls held together by a lumpy mess of black rubber. There was a sharp smell of burnt rubber and marks on both the trailer and the other tires surrounding the shredded wheel. Nobody saw that? Mark wondered. Mark couldn't remember if there might be an inspection station between here and Vancouver. He thought there might be, but didn't want to bet his life on it. If he was going to get out of this mess, he needed to do something himself—but what? The longer things were in a holding pattern, the more his options were being

eliminated. He needed to do something drastic and soon, or they would reach their destination and Mark—Jimmy too, most likely—would be dead.

Mark decided to try something bold and daring.

As he completed his circle check, he took some time to inspect the fifth wheel, reaching in with his hand and pulling on the handle that released the jaws surrounding the kingpin. The move had created a bit of noise, and when Mark emerged from between the trailer wheels she was looking at him strangely.

“It was loose,” he said, “but it’s all good now.”

“Then, let’s go,” she barked.

Mark got into the truck and started it up. As he sat there letting the oil circulate, Mark marvelled at how old habits died hard. He didn’t care about this truck, and it was already well past its prime, but there were still times when Mark drove it as if it were his own. He glanced over at Jimmy, parked off to the side of the fuel pumps, waiting for Mark to return to the road. Jimmy waved and seemed to be smiling at him, as if the kid knew what was about to happen.

Mark nodded to Jimmy once, then shifted into gear.

He sat there in first gear with his left foot on the clutch and right foot on the brake pedal, waiting.

“Move it!” she said, pulling out the gun.

Mark did not move.

“Drive, or I’ll shoot you in the leg.”

This was a twist. Previously, she’d just threatened to kill him, but now she seemed quite content to wound him and cause him pain, and probably a much slower death.

“You want me to move?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Mark released the clutch and the truck slowly moved forward. The trailer, however, remained where it was.

BANG!

The tractor rocked as the trailer let go. There was a tremendous crash as the trailer suddenly dropped three feet onto its raised landing gear. The loud noise was followed by a pair of pneumatic snaps as the two gladhands let go and air pressure was suddenly bled from the trailer.

Mark stomped on the brakes and looked in his mirror. The trailer was still at the pumps, bent forward like a horse that had been trained to get down on its knees.

“What happened?”

“I guess I didn’t tighten it enough,” he said.

There was a knock on the driver’s side door, then a face appeared in the window.

“Hey, Buddy,” the trucker said. “You forgot your trailer.”

Mark smiled and said, “Thanks.” Then he looked over at the woman on his right. She seemed nervous, frightened and just a little pissed off. “What do you want me to do, go back and get it?” Mark asked, even though he knew he’d never be able to get the trailer up to the correct height without the help of a full-sized tow truck.

She pushed the gun hard against his side and said, “Drive!”

“I don’t know. If we drive off and leave our trailer there like that, people are bound to get suspicious.”

“You think I’m stupid?” she said, pushing the gun barrel against the side of Mark’s face. “You did that on purpose.”

As she pulled the gun away, Mark got a good look at it. There was a deep, long gouge on the barrel, just as the driver had described back in Ontario. This was the same gun that had jammed when the woman had tried to kill before. Mark was willing to bet that she hadn’t fired the gun since then, and that it still wasn’t working right.

“It was an accident,” Mark pleaded. “Equipment malfunction.”

“Shut up!” she said, emphasizing her words by striking Mark in the head with the gun barrel. “Drive!”

“Ow!” Mark cried, putting the tractor in motion. His head

hurt from the blow and his scalp felt as if it was bleeding, but Mark couldn't be happier. Obviously she'd struck him in the head with the gun because the weapon was still jammed. All of her threats had been empty and she'd relied on the mere presence of the gun to get Mark to do as she said.

Well, Mark was through taking orders, and this woman had just reached the end of the line.

Mark drove five kilometres down the highway, then slowed and pulled over to the side of the road.

"Don't stop!" she said, shoving the gun into his face. "Drive or I'll shoot."

Mark just looked at her, a hint of a smile creeping across his face. "It doesn't work, does it?"

"It works," she said. "I'll shoot you, I swear."

Mark pulled to a stop and set the parking brake.

The woman pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

She tried again.

Nothing.

Mark grabbed the gun and wrenched it from her fingers. Then, still holding her hand, he clubbed her on the side of the head with the gun, knocking her out cold. He usually had a problem being physical with women, but this particular woman had erased all gender lines when she hijacked a truck, held him hostage, beat him and tried to kill him.

Without wasting any more time, Mark climbed into the sleeper and lifted the woman in with him. Then he found a roll of tape and a few bungee cords and used them to tie her up and gag her mouth. The bindings were all pretty makeshift, but they would likely hold her long enough for Mark to take out the second hijacker.

The two of them had obviously been working together, and when Jimmy and the other man came upon their tractor stopped by the side of the road, the second hijacker would undoubtedly

want to know what was going on. When he did, Mark would be ready for him.

It wasn't long before Mark heard a vehicle pulling off the highway and coming to a stop behind him.

Mark listened closely as a door opened and someone got out. The door slammed shut and Mark pictured the hijacker slowly creeping up on the idling tractor.

"Come on out!" the man said.

"Come in and get me!" shouted Mark.

There were several long moments of silence.

Then the door opened.

Mark held his breath.

The curtains opened and Mark threw a hard punch at the man's face, hitting him squarely with the middle knuckle of his right hand.

It was only after blood began to spurt from the man's shattered nose that Mark noticed the RCMP flashes on the sleeves of his shirt.

An RCMP constable.

Imagine that, thought Mark.

Not a hijacker at all.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought you were someone else."

With one hand trying to staunch the blood streaming from his nose, the RCMP officer pulled out his gun and pointed it directly at Mark's head. He looked to be in pain, and just a little angry.

"Don't shoot," Mark shouted. "I can explain."

"For your sake, I hope you can."

Mark smiled. "Of course I can. This one was my biggest adventure yet."

CHAPTER**24**

After spending nearly a full day with the RCMP, sorting everything out—including the angry constable’s bloody nose—Mark and Jimmy were able to reach their port destination in Vancouver with half a day to spare.

“Tell me something,” said Jimmy as they waited in line to enter the port’s yard. “When that woman had her gun on you, weren’t you scared?”

Mark hesitated a moment, wanting to say, “Of course not,” and then blow a lot of smoke about how brave he’d been in the face of danger, but somehow he knew that that wasn’t going to wash with Jimmy. So, instead, Mark just told the truth. “Sure I was scared. This woman had stolen cars and arranged to ship them across the country and halfway around the world, and she’d nearly killed a fellow trucker. There was no telling what she might be capable of.”

“So why did you risk it?”

Mark smiled. “The gun she was holding on me was the same one that had jammed back in Ontario.”

“Ah,” Jimmy said. He had a bunch of fuel receipts in his hands and was tallying up their expenses for the trip west.

“That, and I figured she was going to kill me—us—eventually, and I wanted to die fighting instead of blindfolded and tied to a chair in some dirty warehouse up the coast.”

Jimmy said nothing for the longest time, his hands not moving over the papers. Finally his mouth began to move. "She was going to kill me, too?"

"Probably, but the thing is," Mark said quickly, "It's over now and everything turned out all right, just like it always does."

They moved ahead in the line.

"You know, there's a first time for everything."

"You're right," Mark said, looking to change the subject. "And this was the first time... The first time I had another driver with me."

Jimmy smiled at that and returned to his calculations. After a while he asked, "Do you have any expense sheets for any previous loads into Vancouver?"

"I think so," Mark said. He shifted into neutral, engaged the parking break, and climbed back into the sleeper where he grabbed the binder in which he kept most of his records.

"Did you find it?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah. Here." Mark handed him the binder. "They should be in there somewhere."

Jimmy began leafing through the binder.

Mark moved up again in the line.

After a half-hour and 10 moves up the line, Mark looked to Jimmy and said, "Well?"

"How much fuel do you have in the tanks?"

Mark read the gauges. "About half-full."

Jimmy did some figuring.

"Does that make a difference?" Mark asked, interrupting Jimmy's train of thought.

"Do you know your cost-per-mile rate?"

There was a time when Mark knew what his rate was, but because he basically lived out of his truck and there was no mortgage or other expenses to worry about, the amount in his bank account only ever grew. He imagined that if he had a wife and family to support, or was always close to losing his truck,

he'd be a lot more careful with his money. The truth was, he made money as a truck driver, and as long as he did, he never bothered too much with the details. As much as it annoyed him to admit it to Jimmy, he had to tell the boy the truth. "I don't pay close attention to that stuff."

Jimmy shook his head. "Well, you'd better start."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong right now, but if you don't measure anything, how do you know you're improving?"

Mark shrugged.

"This is an older truck, so it's harder for you to keep track of things, but the technology is out there now for a driver to keep track of everything."

"I've heard that," said Mark.

"For example, trucks today can keep constant track of your fuel mileage. If you were getting 2.5 kilometres a litre, and you improved it to say, 3.0, that's a huge savings over the course of a year."

"All right, I get the message," said Mark. He'd been thinking of getting a new rig for the past few months, and this sounded like yet another good reason to start getting serious about shopping around.

They moved up ahead another two spots. The gate to the port was just five trucks away now.

"Is there anything you can tell me about this trip? How'd I do?"

"It's just a guess, but as best I can figure it, you probably saved something like \$20 or \$30 on fuel."

"That's it!" Mark laughed. "Twenty or 30 bucks!"

Jimmy didn't even crack a smile. "On this trip," he said again with some emphasis. "That's with all the extra running around you did trying to track down the hijackers."

"Twenty bucks. That's like a decent meal and a glass of wine."

"Exactly," Jimmy said. "And how often do you come west to Vancouver?"

“Maybe five, six times a year.”

“So that’s a hundred to two hundred dollars a year, just on your trips west.”

Mark suddenly felt a little foolish. It was one thing to laugh at twenty dollars, but it was something else to start snubbing your nose at two hundred.

“If you paid closer attention to your bottom line and practised fuel-efficient driving all the time, you’d probably be saving something like \$4,000 a year in fuel.”

“Four thousand!”

“That’s right.”

Mark felt downright foolish. Four thousand dollars was nothing to sneeze at, especially when you considered all the things it could buy, from an extended vacation to a whole lot of truck maintenance, from accessories that could save him even more fuel to a down payment on a home. Furthermore, he’d been driving for 10 years and \$4,000 a year over that time was... \$40,000.

“That’s a lot of money.”

Jimmy sat back in his seat and let out a deep sigh.

“At last, I got your attention.”

“Of course you did,” Mark said.

“I guess money talks.”

“More than you do,” Mark nodded. “And it’s a lot easier to listen to.”

Jimmy looked at Mark. “What are you saying?”

Mark didn’t answer. The trucks ahead all moved forward and Mark brought Mother Load up to the entrance gate. After a few seconds’ wait, they were allowed into the yard.

“Made it!” was all Mark said.

When they left the port, neither of the two men were speaking, since the time had come for Mark to make a decision on Jimmy’s fate. They would either drive back together, or Mark would let

Jimmy off on some street corner and it would be up to him to find his own way back to New Brunswick.

"Hello," Bud said.

"Hi Bud, this is Mark."

"Dalton?"

"No, Mark O'Polo..."

"Who?"

"Of course it's Mark Dalton."

A pause. "Is my nephew still with you?"

Mark looked over at Jimmy. "Yeah, he's here... for now."

A sigh could be heard over the line. "So, what's it going to be?"

Mark hesitated, making Jimmy squirm. "I've been thinking about it."

"Yeah?"

"And... there are still some things I need to teach him about driving, so I guess we'll be driving back together."

"You're teaching him now?"

"I guess there might still be a few things he can teach me about saving fuel, but I don't think he's left anything out."

"Holy cow!"

"What's wrong?"

"I thought you already knew everything, Dalton."

"Not everything. Just most things."

"Is that right?"

"That's right, like I know that since I'm driving east anyway, I might as well do it with a second driver if I have the chance."

"This isn't like you, Mark. I'm impressed."

"It just makes more sense to drive back as a team rather than solo. See, it's way more fuel efficient."

Jimmy smiled.

"Ah," said Bud.

“Speaking of which,” said Mark. “Have you got a load for me or what? I’m burning fuel by the minute here waiting on you.” Bud gave Mark the load information.

Two hours later they were pointing east, heading for home.

THE END

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