



Mark Dalton — SmartDriver 2

Trouble Load

A FleetSmart Novel by Edo van Belkom
Sequel to *Mark Dalton: SmartDriver*

In *Mark Dalton: SmartDriver*, owner/operator Mark Dalton took a young know-it-all driver named Jimmy on a coast-to-coast trip that included everything from road rage, stolen cars and hijacking to kidnapping and attempted murder. Along the way, Mark Dalton learned a lot about fuel-efficient driving, and Jimmy learned that not everything about trucking can be taught in the classroom. Now, after a successful conclusion to their cross-Canada adventure, Mark is looking forward to an easy westward trip home. Problem is, there is no such thing as easy when Mark Dalton's behind the wheel, and what starts out as a milk run quickly heads south, literally, as they take a load into California, where the laws are strange and danger lurks behind each truckstop.

Natural Resources Canada – through the Office of Energy Efficiency’s ecoENERGY for Fleets (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.

For more information on fleet energy-savings opportunities, contact

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Un roman Écoflotte d’Edo van Belkom



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DEDICATION

For Tony Nguyen, who took us on for the long haul.

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Once again a special thanks to the author Edo van Belkom for lending his character Mark Dalton and sending him on another energy efficiency adventure.

CHAPTER



“ You don’t have to be an owner-operator to drive a truck for a living,” Mark Dalton said as he guided Mother Load eastward along the Trans-Canada.

“I know,” said Jimmy, the younger and less experienced of the two. “But I’ve always had my heart set on owning my own rig ... you know, being in charge of my own company, having a hand in choosing my own destiny.”

“As an owner-operator all you’re going to have a hand in choosing are your destinations, and sometimes not even those. Your destiny ... ” Mark paused to lift his coffee cup to his lips and take a sip before continuing. “That’s determined by a higher power.”

“Who? God?”

“No, your dispatcher.”

Jimmy laughed under his breath. His uncle Bud was a dispatcher — and he was Mark’s dispatcher — but Jimmy had probably never thought of the overweight, rough-talking, grizzly of a man as having power over people.

Mark had been kidding, of course, but the sentiment was easy to understand. He’d been driving for years, but it was his dispatcher who determined where he went and when, and by extension how much money he made in a year. Although it was Mark’s job to coach Jimmy about trucks, truck driving and trucking on this eastward leg of their cross-country run, Jimmy would learn about the relationship between drivers and dispatchers in time. Right now Jimmy needed help with more basic things ... like what kind of truck driver he wanted to be.

“But seriously,” Mark continued, “it’s not a bad idea to be a company driver for a while before going out on your own.”

Jimmy stared out the passenger window at the thick fir trees that slid past in a seemingly never-ending stand of forest. “But being a company driver, that’s just putting money in someone else’s pocket instead of your own ... like renting a house instead of owning one.”

Mark shook his head. He’d coached Jimmy all the way across the country, from New Brunswick to British Columbia, and in that time he thought he’d taught the young man a few valuable lessons. But here he was, talking like a greenhorn again, as if buying a rig and being an owner-operator was an easy first step on the way to becoming a wealthy man.

“Sure, as a company driver you’ll be making money for someone else, but you’re guaranteed a paycheque at the end of every week.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy agreed with a slightly sarcastic tone, “after the company takes its cut.”

“Of course the company takes its cut, but the company is the one taking all the risks.”

“What risks?” Jimmy chuffed. “You drive, you get paid.”

Mark smiled. “Eventually maybe, but not always. Say you’re an owner-operator and you make a bunch of deliveries for a company, but they don’t pay you for three months or more. What do you do then?”

“What do you mean?”

“You own the truck, you’ve got payments to make on it every month. The truck runs on fuel and you have to pay for that up front ...”

Jimmy opened his mouth to speak.

“But even if you buy your fuel on credit, that bill comes in each month too. If you have to wait three months to get paid for your loads, how do you get by in the meantime?”

Again Jimmy tried to say something, but Mark cut him off.

“And keep in mind, there are other costs too, like maintenance, insurance and road tolls ... and you need money to live on, don’t forget that. If you’re a company driver, all those problems are the company’s problems. If you’re an owner-operator, they’re your problems.”

Jimmy sat thinking for a bit. Finally, he said, “If it’s so risky, why do you own your own truck?”

It was a fair question, and Mark’s first instinct was to tell Jimmy

“Do as I say, not as I do,” but that wasn’t an answer. Jimmy honestly wanted to know, so Mark gave it some thought before speaking.

“I’ve driven for other people,” he said, “and it was a great way to gain experience. But it’s true in everything, not just in trucking, that you’ll never get rich working for someone else, so I became an owner-operator thinking I might get rich.”

Jimmy looked around the cab of Mother Load. The truck was new enough, and Mark kept it clean, but there weren’t any signs that Mark was rolling in it.

“So what happened?”

Mark shrugged and took another sip of coffee. “I’m more of a truck driver than a business man. Some guys buy a truck, drive it for a while and make enough money to buy another one. They get someone to drive for them and that truck makes them money, and so on and so on, until one day they own a fleet. Me, I have enough trouble trying to make one truck profitable.”

“But you’re still an owner-operator.”

“Yeah, I guess you could say I’m a glutton for punishment. That, and it’s a bit of what you said before.” He paused as a Kenworth hauling a reefer passing him on the left signalled to pull into the lane ahead of them. Mark flashed his headlights for the driver to let him know the coast was clear and then continued talking. “I’m the kind of person who should be his own boss ... has to be his own boss. I like being free to go wherever fate takes me. I don’t respond especially well to being told what to do, and I’ve got the kind of mouth and temperament that gets me in trouble with people in charge ... so I work for myself, and even at that I can barely stand my boss.”

Jimmy laughed out loud at that one.

“And so, like everyone else in this game, I struggle to keep my costs down. Way down. Like most drivers, I’ve spent time searching for the best deal on insurance and shopping around for the cheapest and most honest mechanic I can find. And now more than ever with the price of fuel the way it is, I try to idle as little as possible, and — this is probably the most important thing — I do everything I can to save fuel.”

Jimmy sat up straight in his seat. “And is it working? Are you making any money?”

Mark didn’t know how to answer. He could tell Jimmy what he grossed or what he netted, but neither gave a good picture of what an owner-operator earned in a year. Because Mark basically lived out of

his truck, he didn't have the expenses that other drivers did. "I do all right," he said in the end, "but there's always room for improvement."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

No, thought Mark, I'm not. If Jimmy wanted to get an idea of what a trucker's finances looked like, he could always ask his uncle to open up his books. That way he'd see the full picture, top to bottom, and not just an anomaly like Mark.

"Well?" Jimmy prodded.

Mark spotted a truck stop ahead and decided to use that to his advantage.

"Let's stop to eat," he said. "You can drive when we get back on the road."

"Great," said Jimmy, almost bouncing in his seat.

Mark eased off the accelerator and began slowing down so the engine would be ready to be shut off by the time they came to a stop.

They spent half an hour in the restaurant eating, then another ten minutes checking their e-mail in the truck stop's Internet café. For Mark, it was all business, looking for payments, following up on invoices he'd sent and paying a few bills online. For Jimmy, on the other hand, it was all fun and games, answering e-mails from friends, updating his Facebook page and watching the videos on YouTube that came up after doing searches for "idiots" and "stupid people."

Then it was time to get back on the road.

As they walked across the parking lot toward Mother Load, Mark fingered the keys in his pocket but put off giving them to Jimmy in favour of some fun. They were more than halfway to the truck before Jimmy said, "You said I could drive."

"I did?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When we got back on the road."

"No. When did I say it?"

"Before, when we ..."

"I don't remember that."

"Yes, you did. When we started slowing down for the stop you said ..."

Mark grinned.

"I thought you were kidding with me, but I couldn't be sure," said Jimmy.

“Why not?”

“Cuz you don’t like me driving your truck.”

“That’s not true,” Mark said immediately, knowing it was.

“Yeah, it is too true,” Jimmy said. “I look over at you all the time while I’m driving. Most of the time your fists are clenched, and you watch the road with your eyes as big as lug nuts.”

Mark rubbed his hands together. Maybe that was why his fingers had been sore this past week. “I really do that, huh?”

“Yup, and sometimes you sweat so much I can see it running down your face.”

“Really?”

Jimmy nodded.

“I’ll try not to do that this time,” he said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be gentle with her.”

Mark felt better hearing that but only a little. On their trip west, Jimmy had proven to be a good driver and a quick learner. Still, Mark’s truck was more than just his business; it was his home, his life, and it felt odd to be sitting anywhere but the driver’s seat.

They stopped in front of Mother Load and Mark took the keys from his pocket. “I want you to be more than gentle,” he said. “I want you to drive like you own her.”

Jimmy took the keys. “I can do that.”

Mark climbed up into the truck and waited for Jimmy to do a quick circle check.

A few minutes later the driver’s door popped open. “Good to go!” Jimmy said as he climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Great,” Mark said, easing his own seat back and closing his eyes. He was determined to show Jimmy he trusted his driving. “Wake me up when you’re tired or you want me to drive.”

Jimmy adjusted the driver’s seat to suit himself. “Will do!” He fired up Mother Load’s Cummins and shifted her into gear.

The truck lurched forward ...

Mark’s eyes burst open and he turned to Jimmy.

“Sorry,” he said.

Then it rolled easily through the gears.

Mark tried to stay awake, but the gentle rocking of the truck and the thrum of its engine quickly had him drifting off.

Until ... something was shaking his arm.

“Mark, wake up!”

Mark opened his eyes and looked around. “My turn already?”

Jimmy shook his arm again. "I think something's wrong."
"Huh? What?" Mark's mind was still shrouded in the fog of sleep.
"With Mother Load. I think something's wrong with her."

That got Mark's attention and he was suddenly wide awake.
"What is it?"

Jimmy didn't say anything at first. Instead, he listened to Mother Load as she rolled down the highway. "There's some kind of vibration that wasn't there before."

Silence again.

This time Mark tried to determine if anything was wrong. There was something there, something different about the sound and feel of the truck. Mark was able to pick up on it right away, but it was so subtle that he was surprised Jimmy had recognized that there was a problem.

"What do you think it is?"

"Could be a lot of things," said Mark. "The engine still sounds right, so I don't think it's anything to do with that."

"That's good, right?"

Mark looked over at Jimmy and could see fear on the young man's face. He was desperate for some good news. "It's one less thing to worry about, yes." Mark listened some more. "I also don't think it's anything to do with the transmission. I don't have enough kilometres on it for it to be acting up like this."

"So it's an easy fix?"

"Ease up on the gas," said Mark.

Jimmy lifted off. "Sorry, Mark. I wasn't driving crazy or anything. I didn't mean to break your truck."

Mark laughed at that — on the inside. He imagined Jimmy was beside himself with worry over breaking Mother Load. It wasn't Jimmy's fault, or anyone's fault, for that matter. Long haul trucks were driven hard, and every once in a while things broke down. It was a fact of life. Mark decided to keep that bit of wisdom to himself for now and let Jimmy sweat it out.

"Did you hit something?"

"No! I was being real careful, cruising along just under the speed limit when the noise started up. It's gotten a bit louder since it began but not much."

And now that the truck was slowing down, the vibration and the noise it was making were also losing steam. That suggested to Mark that it had something to do with the wheels or the driveline.

Furthermore, it was obvious that this breakdown would have happened, no matter who was behind the wheel.

“Pull over and stop!”

“I wasn’t driving crazy or anything.” There was a crack in his voice as if he might cry any minute. “I’ll make it right, I swear.”

Mark didn’t have the heart to let Jimmy go on.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “Trucks break down all the time. It’s part of the cost of doing business.”

They had slowed down enough to pull onto the shoulder where Jimmy eased the rig to a stop.

“So you’re not mad at me?”

“No, I’m not mad at you ... and don’t apologize to me again.”

“Sorry ... I mean, what are we going to do now?”

“We’re going to take a look and see if there’s anything obvious we can see. Then we’ll call your uncle and let him know our load’s going to be late.”

After a close look at the truck, both under the hood and under the cab, Mark was on his cellphone talking to Bud. “Yeah, Jimmy broke it,” he said. “Driving like some company driver who doesn’t care one bit about the company’s bottom line.”

Jimmy gasped. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I ...”

Mark put a hand over the phone and laughed. “Relax, I’m just kidding.” He took his hand off the phone. “No, Jimmy’s been real good behind the wheel. We broke down while he was driving, but it could’ve happened to anybody.” He looked over at Jimmy and winked. “Even me.”

“So you can’t drive at all?” Bud asked. There was concern in his voice, but Mark knew it was over the load, not for him, Mother Load or even his nephew Jimmy.

“Not without making things worse, especially pulling a full load like I am.”

“Any idea about what might be wrong?”

“I’ve got a couple. From the way the truck was vibrating, it’s either a universal joint or a bearing on the front drive housing.”

“Nothing in between?” Bud asked.

Bud understood the problem. A broken universal joint was an easy repair, but a bearing on the front drive housing might not be something that was regularly stocked by a repair shop. Furthermore, the cost between the two parts was like night and day, as were the

labour costs to replace them.

“Nope,” Mark answered. “It’s either going to cost me a glove and a sock, or an arm and a leg.”

Bud was silent a moment, then said, “That load’s got to be in Calgary by tomorrow.”

“I can almost feel your sympathy, Bud.”

“I’m sorry you broke down, but I still have a business to run.”

“I understand. Can you send someone by to pick up the load?”

“I’ll do you one better. Not only will I have the load picked up, but I’ll send you a mobile mechanic too. Give me your location there.”

Mark explained just where they’d broken down.

“Right, someone will be there shortly.”

“We’ll be here,” said Mark, closing the phone.

“So what do we do now?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“We wait.”

It was two hours before someone came. A bobtailing Freightliner with Alberta plates pulled over onto the shoulder in front of them.

“Hey,” said the tall man as he approached Mother Load and climbed up to the driver’s window. He wore a pair of freshly washed jeans, worn boots and a denim shirt. His hair was cut high and tight. “Havin’ a little trouble, are you?”

Mark nodded politely. “You could say that.”

“Well, sorry for your trouble, but I’m happy to take your load. I was bobtailing to Calgary when Bud called me.”

“Glad we could make your day.”

“I wasn’t driving crazy or anything,” said Jimmy.

The tall man looked at Jimmy curiously.

“He was behind the wheel when it broke down.”

“But I wasn’t doing anything wrong,” Jimmy interjected.

“No one said you did,” Mark replied.

The tall man’s gaze shifted from Jimmy to Mark, then back to Jimmy. “Uh, I’m just going to get my truck ready.” And then he was gone.

“What was that all about?” Jimmy asked.

“He thinks we’re more than just a driving team,” Mark said with a smirk. “If you know what I mean.”

“What? No!”

Mark just laughed. “Get out and drop the trailer so we can send this cowboy on his way.”

Jimmy got out of the truck and set to work on the landing gear and the glad hands. When the trailer was set, Mark started up Mother Load and inched forward, leaving the trailer behind. Then he checked for traffic, and when he saw it was clear, he pulled out onto the highway and drove around the Freightliner, pulling over onto the shoulder once more.

In the few moments he'd been mobile, Mark again tried to assess Mother Load's problem. Although he hadn't been travelling very fast, he got the impression that it was something he'd experienced before. Still, it would be best to wait for a mechanic and a second opinion.

The tall man had his rig hooked up in short order, and in minutes he was at the window again, this time looking for paperwork.

"Good luck with your truck," he said, taking an envelope from Mark.

"Thanks," Mark answered. "We just might need it."

The mechanic arrived an hour and a half later. Mark was relieved to see the man pull up since an hour and a half sitting still in the truck had seemed like three. Mark cracked his door and climbed down from behind the steering wheel.

The mechanic had driven up in a beat-up, run-down van that made Mark wonder if the man was even a licensed mechanic. But he remembered his mother often told him that shoemakers' children always went barefoot, so he decided not to judge him based on the appearance of his truck alone.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

As he approached Mother Load, Mark saw that the man wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty, or his face, for that matter. He also noticed he wasn't too fussy about cleaning, well, anything, judging by the dirt covering just about every part of his body and clothes. The name on the coveralls read "Lars," but Mark didn't think he was Swedish. With his black hair, brown eyes and strong square jaw, Mark guessed the man's background was likely Eastern European.

"Vibrations," Mark said.

"That's not good," the mechanic said, shaking his head.

Jimmy was about to say something, but Mark got his hand up in time to stop him.

"I figure it could be a couple of things."

"Like what?"

"Universal joint, for one."

“Yeah ... and?”

“Maybe a bearing on the front drive housing.”

“Okay,” the mechanic nodded. “They would both cause bad vibrations.”

“But I’m just the driver. I want to know what you think.” Mark had a few other ideas, but he didn’t want to let the mechanic know he had even considered the possibility of anything more costly being wrong with his truck.

“Let’s see, then.”

Lars stuck his head under the cowl and began inspecting the front drive housing, then crawled under the truck to take a look at the driveline. Twenty minutes later he was back on his feet, wiping his hands with a greasy rag from his back pocket that only moved the dirt from one hand to another.

“Well?” Mark asked.

“You were right. It’s the universal joint.”

“Great,” said Mark. “How much to fix it?”

“If we were in my shop and I had the replacement part in my hand, maybe a couple hundred bucks.”

Mark knew there was something more. “But?”

“If I have to get the part, that’s two hours of my time right there, and then I’d have to fix it under less-than-ideal conditions, so ... ”

“Yes?”

He took a deep breath and said, “I’m going to have to tow it.”

“What?”

“It’s better that way. Say it turns out not to be the universal joint, and the bearing on the front drive housing is gone instead. If you drove it to my shop you’d risk damaging the front yoke, the bearing seal, the input shaft going into the housing and the steady bearing. That’d be a bigger repair, and I don’t even have all those parts in stock. It’s just safer to have it towed.”

The more he heard this guy talk, the less Mark liked him. “And you could call a tow truck for us?”

“My brother-in-law has a rig.”

“What luck!”

“He could be here in thirty minutes. We could be back at the shop in an hour and have you on your way in three.”

“No, thanks,” Mark said.

“What?”

“I’m going to drive it.”

“You could make it worse, you know.”

“Or not.”

“It’s your truck,” he said, “but I’ve got to be paid for my time.”

“What’s your fee?”

“It’s a hundred dollars to get me to the roadside.”

Mark took out his wallet. He kept a few larger bills in it for just this sort of situation.

“Suit yourself,” said Lars as he took the money.

But Mark didn’t let go. “I’ll need a receipt.”

Lars hesitated. Then he said, “I’ve got a book of receipts in my truck.”

Jimmy waited until the man was gone, then asked, “Why didn’t you let him fix the truck?”

“He’s trying to scam me. Towing a truck to a shop can get very expensive. There’s a charge just for the call, then for the truck and driver by the hour, then mileage to the shop. And if our tow goes past business hours, there might be a premium for that too, maybe as much as double the usual rate. And all that for a problem he’s not exactly sure of.”

“So what are we going to do?” Jimmy asked.

“There’s a shop I’ve been to before in Kamloops. Instead of padding the bill, they just fix what’s wrong. Period.”

“Here!” Lars said, thrusting a receipt in Mark’s face.

Mark gently took the paper from him. “Thank you.”

Jimmy watched the mechanic walk back to his truck, start it up, then peel away from the side of the road with a squeal of tires. “Won’t driving the truck the way it is make things worse?”

“We’ll be going slow,” Mark said, “and we’re not pulling a load, so as long as we don’t go too far, we should be all right.”

“I would have paid for the tow,” Jimmy said, unable to keep the apologetic tone from his voice.

“I know.”

“But I guess it’s your truck.”

“That’s right. I’m an owner-operator. It’s my decision. My responsibility.”

Jimmy raised his hands. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” said Mark, climbing up into the truck.

Minutes later they were headed east again ... slowly.

CHAPTER

2

Mark kept Mother Load at a slow and even pace, never going any faster than 80 kilometres per hour. There was still quite a bit of vibration, but the farther he drove, the more Mark was convinced that it was a universal joint and not a front drive bearing.

And as he drove, Mark would glance over at Jimmy and feel a bit sorry for the kid. The boy was slumped back in his seat with his head resting in his hands like some kid who'd just lost his dog or been told he couldn't have ice cream after dinner.

"What's bugging you?"

"We broke down and lost our load home."

"Something else will come up. It always does."

"I guess, but now you're driving the truck while it's broken," Jimmy said, "and you might be making things worse."

"It'll be fine."

"But if it isn't, I'll feel terrible."

Mark thought about pulling over to have a heart-to-heart with Jimmy, but he realized that if he hadn't gotten the message by now, he never would. Despite that feeling, Mark decided to give the boy one last chance to understand what was going on.

"Look, this universal joint was going to go, no matter who was driving. They've only got so many miles on them, and when they're done, that's it."

"I suppose."

"And I could have gotten a tow and let that mechanic fix it, but I had a bad feeling about him."

"Really?"

Mark nodded. "That guy reminded me a lot of another mechanic who came to my rescue once out on the Trans-Canada near Thunder Bay. I was stalled by the side of the highway and although I could get the engine started, there was no real power behind it. Well, he gave me a song and dance about what was wrong, and I believed him. Mother Load was towed back to his shop and when he was finished, all he'd done was change a cut fuel line."

"That was it?"

"Yeah. The tow cost ten times what the repair did when he probably could have fixed the problem on the side of the road. Even if he didn't have a spare fuel line with him, a couple of feet of tape would have let me get to a garage."

"That was an expensive lesson."

"Right, and you just learned that same lesson for free."

Jimmy sat up straighter in his seat. "Okay."

"Just stop worrying," Mark said, giving Jimmy a comforting slap on the knee. "It's really no big deal. We'll get it fixed and be on our way in no time."

"Yeah, but without a load."

Mark sighed. Was there no getting through to this kid? "There will be another load for us when we're ready."

Jimmy nibbled on the nail of his right thumb and stared blankly out at the road ahead. "I hope so."

Forty-five minutes later, they arrived at a truck shop in Kamloops called Good Guys Truck Shop. It was a small independent shop in the north end of town with a dozen or more trucks parked in the lot surrounding it, something Mark always found comforting when he brought his truck in for repair.

"Here we are," said Mark.

"It's not very big," noted Jimmy.

"You think you get better service in a big place?" Mark asked.

"Well, a bigger shop fixes more trucks, has better tools and equipment and their mechanics have more experience, so they do a better job fixing your truck."

"Not bad," Mark said. It all sounded logical, and it could very well be true, but there was one thing Jimmy neglected to mention, so Mark added, "But a bigger shop also has a bigger staff, higher overhead and set fees for service."

"And that's worse?"

“That’s been my experience. When I come to a smaller place like this, I deal directly with the mechanic who fixes my truck, not a service manager who works the counter.”

And before they could get out of Mother Load, a man in a pair of greasy coveralls was already on his way out of the garage to greet them.

“Well, if it isn’t Mark Dalton himself.”

“Hey, Ken,” Mark said, shaking the man’s hand, “you ever meet my dispatcher, Bud?”

Ken was silent, thinking.

“Big guy. Sounds mean, but he’s really a teddy bear at heart.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Ken said.

“Well, this is his nephew, Jimmy. I’m sort of coaching him.”

Ken shook Jimmy’s hand, then looked at Mark. “Don’t teach him to drive like you. Teach him to stay out of trouble.”

“I’m working on it,” said Mark.

Jimmy was still holding Ken’s hand, looking at the Good Guys sign over the garage and then back at the man in front of him.

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking,” he sighed. “What kind of a name is ‘Good Guys,’ right?”

“It is kind of . . . ”

“Lame,” Ken said. “It’s okay, you’re not the first. But I didn’t come up with it, one of my customers did. I called it ‘Ken’s Truck Shop,’ but after I did a minor repair for him for no charge, he said I was a good guy. He told all his friends, and they pulled up asking if this was the Good Guy shop. I got tired of telling the story, so I changed the sign. It’s the best thing I ever did because now everyone knows me as the good guy in Kamloops.”

“I think it’s great,” said Jimmy.

Ken gave Jimmy’s hand another vigorous shake and turned to Mark. “Well, what’s wrong?”

Mark explained the situation.

Ken listened intently.

“Let’s get it inside and see what’s what.”

Mark handed Ken the keys, and then he and Jimmy went into the little room off the shop’s office to wait. The Good Guy waiting room was as well-appointed as every other auto-shop waiting room he’d ever been in. There was a total of four magazines lying around, the most recent one nearly four years old. The two chairs were the sort of thing you found at the curb on garbage day, and the air

conditioner jammed into the window hummed loudly like someone was using a power tool. They spent ten long minutes sitting in silence. Mark had looked at the faded Michelin poster on the wall for about the hundredth time when Jimmy finally spoke up.

“You ever think about trading in Mother Load for a new one?” he asked.

“Of course,” Mark said, “all the time, but I’m a little leery about buying a new truck in 2010.”

“Worried about the engines?” Jimmy asked. In 2010, all engine manufacturers will have to comply with EPA 2010 emission standards.

“I’m not crazy about being the first to buy into any new technology. I once bought a Beta tape player, and a couple of years later I had to buy a VHS machine.”

“Wow,” Jimmy said, “you are old.”

“Watch it!”

“But you’re also a little misinformed,” Jimmy continued. “One of the new emission systems has been used in Europe for years. Selective Catalytic Reduction, or SCR, reduces nitrogen oxide emissions by adding urea to your exhaust flow, which causes a chemical reaction that breaks down the nitrogen oxide into harmless water and nitrogen.”

It sounded complicated. It also sounded dangerous. “Urea? That sounds dangerous. How am I supposed to add that to my exhaust?”

“It’s pretty easy,” Jimmy said. “There’s a tank for it on the truck that carries about thirteen or so gallons, which will last you a couple of tankfuls.”

“And where am I supposed to get this urea?”

“By 2010, you’ll be able to buy it wherever you fuel up.”

That doesn’t sound so bad, thought Mark. “But aren’t there two ways the engine companies are reducing emissions?”

“That’s right. The other way is Exhaust Gas Recirculation or EGR, which is basically better recirculation of your exhaust gases into the engine.”

“Don’t they do some of that already?”

“Yes, but this will be on a much larger scale, ramping up the firing pressure inside the engine block to something like 30 000 psi.”

“So, which one’s better?”

“According to what I’ve read from the manufacturers, both of them, or neither. Volvo, Mack, Detroit Diesel, Paccar, Mercedes-Benz

and Cummins will be using SCR while Navistar — that's International — will be using EGR. The advantage of SCR is that you can get better fuel economy out of an engine because whatever nitrogen oxide you're producing from the burn is transformed by the urea. Of course, your fuel economy is offset by the cost of the urea."

"And the other one?"

"It reduces exhaust emissions by burning up gases in the engine instead of releasing them into the atmosphere."

"Okay," Mark said, feeling he had a basic understanding of the two technologies. "Which one's better?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Who knows right now? Maybe they're both right, but eventually it'll come down to which one is better for the owner-operator's bottom line, and that might not be known for a few years."

"Thanks," Mark said with a bit of a sarcastic tone to his voice. "That's a real help."

"Didn't I make it clear?"

"Yeah, clear as mud."

Just then, Ken came in with Mother Load's universal joint in one of his greasy hands.

"You were right," he said. "It's shot."

"What's one of those cost?" Mark asked. "About a hundred bucks?"

"About that."

Mark looked over at Jimmy, beaming.

"But I don't have one in stock. It'll take an hour or so to get one delivered."

"No problem. Jimmy will wait."

"I'll order it, then," Ken said, heading back into the garage.

"And what are you going to do while I'm sitting here?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"There's a laundromat down the street. You watch the truck and I'll wash our clothes."

"I guess I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Nope."

"Okay then," said Jimmy. "I'll wait here."

Jimmy glanced at his watch. It had been all of ten minutes since Mark had left for the laundromat, and the parts delivery truck was at least another fifty minutes away. That's why Jimmy was happy to see

another driver enter the waiting room and take the empty seat across from him. The man was a little older than Jimmy, dressed well in a black T-shirt and black denim jeans, and best of all, he had a copy of today's Kamloops *Daily News* tucked under his arm.

When they made eye contact, Jimmy nodded hello but said nothing. He would have loved to have a section or two of the paper to read, but how was he supposed to manage that. It wouldn't be right just to ask, would it?

Luckily the man solved Jimmy's problem.

"Want something to read?"

Jimmy was speechless at first, but still managed to say "uh, sure."

The man shuffled through the newspaper and pulled out a single section. "Yeah, I've been here a few times before and there's nothing to do but wait."

Jimmy smiled.

The man kept the one section, then passed the rest of the newspaper to Jimmy. "I just like to read the sports."

That suited Jimmy fine. "Thanks."

The man sat down but didn't start reading. Instead he just stared across the room. He wasn't looking at Jimmy exactly, but Jimmy still felt like he was being watched. He waited to see if the man was going to say anything, and when he didn't, Jimmy selected the entertainment section and started into a review of the new comic book superhero movie coming out on Friday.

"What's wrong with your rig?"

"Huh?" Jimmy looked up and then at the man. "What?"

"I said, your rig, what's wrong with it?"

"Oh, that. Just a universal joint. Should be fixed in about an hour or so."

"That's not bad. You'll be back on the road in no time."

"Sure, except we don't have a load."

"We?"

"Oh. Yeah, me and my" He struggled for the word. "Partner."

"How come?" The man leaned forward seemingly interested in Jimmy's predicament.

"We had to give it up just to get here."

"That stinks. Where were you headed?"

"Calgary, on our way to Toronto and eventually back home — for me anyway — to the east coast."

"Gee, that's too bad."

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, really. Long haul to the east is nice, but south is where the money’s at.”

“By south, you mean?”

“The States.”

“The United States?” Jimmy asked, knowing he sounded a little naive but not caring. “Like across the border.”

“That’s the one.”

Jimmy couldn’t believe his luck. A load into the U.S. would be fantastic. Not only would it make up for losing their load home, but it would be a great experience to travel into another country. “That would be so cool.”

“Well, it just so happens I know a guy who’s got a bunch of loads headed south. Needs drivers all the time.”

“Really?”

“Yup, right now he’s got some loads to California. Best of all, him and his associates pay strictly COD, cash on delivery. No invoicing. No waiting. No nothing.”

Wow, thought Jimmy. California. The sun, the sand. The ocean and beaches. And best of all, California girls. “Do you think he has any loads today?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know. But I can give you his number and you can call him yourself.” He grabbed one of the garage’s business cards tacked onto the waiting room wall and scribbled a phone number on the back of it.

“My name’s Jimmy, by the way,” Jimmy said, extending his hand.

“Right.”

That sounded a little odd, Jimmy thought. He’d need the guy’s name as a reference if he were going to call the number on the card for a load. “What’s your name?”

He finally reached out to shake Jimmy’s hand. “Johnny,” he said. “Johnny Morricone.”

“That’s quite a name.”

“It’s Italian.”

“I bet it is.”

“Anyway,” Johnny said, “I think my truck’s ready. I’m going to go check on it.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jimmy said, waving the business card in front of him. “And thanks for the tip.”

“Give him a call.”

“Should I say Johnny sent me? Or Mr. Morricone?”

But the man was gone.

Jimmy sat back in his chair, turning the card over in his hand, anxious now for Mark’s return so he could tell him all about their good fortune.

At the laundromat, Mark was pulling whites from the front-loading washing machine when he noticed something strange about the clothes. They had all gone in white, but now they had a slight pink hue to them.

“What the heck?” Mark said aloud.

He pulled them out in bunches and clumps — T-shirts, socks, underwear, each one redder than the last — until he reached the bottom of the machine.

There, lying next to one of Mark’s favourite T-shirts was a pair of red underwear. Jimmy’s red underwear. Mark had done his best to separate the colours from the whites, but this piece must have been wrapped up in one of Jimmy’s shirts.

Mark shook his head. The boy had a lot to learn, and not just about driving a truck. He pulled the red shorts from the machine and reloaded all the whites so he could do it all over again before the colour set.

When Mark got back to the shop, Mother Load was parked in the lot and Jimmy was outside the shop waiting.

“Is she ready?” Mark asked.

Jimmy ignored the question. “I’ve got some great news,” he said, bouncing excitedly on his left foot, then the right.

Mark couldn’t help but smile. “What? There’s no charge for the repair?”

“Huh, what?” answered Jimmy. Then a moment later, “Oh, no, that came to two seventy-nine. I’ve got some really good news.”

Good news, thought Mark. The repair is double what I thought it would be, and he’s got some good news. “Okay, let’s hear it.”

“While I was waiting for you, I met a guy and we started talking ...”

“And you’re going to team up with him the rest of the way east?”

“No,” Jimmy answered immediately. Then after a moment’s thought, he added, “No-o-o-o. I got to talking to him, and he said he knows a guy here in town who’s got plenty of loads and no drivers.”

Mark was intrigued but skeptical. If Jimmy was able to find a load while he was just sitting in a truck shop for a couple of hours, there had to be a catch. “Okay, where’s the load to?”

“That’s the best part. San Francisco.”

“Ah,” said Mark.

“Isn’t that great?”

Sure it was good news, but there was something about this that didn’t seem right. Either Jimmy had been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, or there was something wrong with the deal. “Sounds too good to be true.”

“Why do you have to be like that?” Jimmy asked. “We lost our load home, and now that I find us a really good load, you’re trying to put it down before you know any of the details.”

Mark shook his head. “No, it’s not that. A trip to San Francisco would be fantastic, not only for the miles, but for the experience.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Mark thought a moment about how to explain it, then said, “There are always loads going east and west across Canada because, except for a little traffic headed north, those are the only real directions we have. So, of course loads going south into the U.S., especially nice faraway destinations like San Francisco, are hard to come by.”

“But trucks are going into the U.S. all the time.”

“That’s right, they are. A lot of them belong to American trucking companies, or they’re driven by drivers who do those routes on a regular basis and know exactly where they’re going. They know what they need to get across the border, and they know the best and quickest routes to get there. They need to because knowing those things saves time and fuel.”

Jimmy wasn’t convinced. “I bet you’ve been to California plenty of times before.”

“That’s right, I have. So I know how easy it is to get lost in a big place like San Francisco. But that’s not the biggest concern.”

“No, then what is?”

“Crossing the border can be a real hassle. Depending on what the load is, the paperwork can be a nightmare if you don’t know what you’re doing, or you’ve hired the wrong customs broker.”

“Isn’t that stuff arranged for you by the shipper?”

“It is, but the shipper’s never there at the border with you when the agent asks you about your CBP 7501 or CBP 301.”

“What are those?”

“Exactly. A CBP 7501 is an Entry Summary, and a CBP 301 is a Canadian Border Patrol Bond. But that’s not the half of it. There could be a formal warehouse entry that has to be filed, the goods could be subject to quota or visa restrictions, then there are Harmonized Tariff Schedules, TIBs, FTZs ... are you ready to learn all that?”

“I don’t know, but I’m willing to try.”

“Okay,” said Mark. “What if we do take this load? Even though we aren’t required to have one to enter the United States in a vehicle yet, I like to use my passport as my identification because it helps speed up my border crossing. Since you don’t have one, you’re going to have to use something ...”

Jimmy had been searching through his travel bag behind him and came back with his passport in hand. “It’s all up to date,” Jimmy grinned. “Uncle Bud said I should take it with me just in case. He said you never know where you’re going to end up riding with Mark Dalton.”

Jimmy, Mark had to admit, was a real boy scout: he was always prepared. But it shouldn’t have come as such a surprise. There was no one in the world who knew him as well as Bud. “Okay, so you’ve got all your travel documents in order, let’s look at this in another way.”

“Okay.”

“British Columbia’s a big province, right?”

“Yes.”

“And there are plenty of trucking companies and drivers here, correct.”

“Yes.”

“So, why, with all of the trucking companies and drivers looking for loads in B.C. at this moment, why in the world should this guy give a load to me, Mark Dalton from Ontario, who he’s never seen before and knows nothing about, and whose only connection is some guy my driver-in-training met in the waiting room of a truck repair shop who knows a guy who’s got some loads?”

Jimmy didn’t answer right away. Instead he seemed deep in thought, trying to follow the path of Mark’s long-winded question so he could come up with a suitable answer. Finally, Jimmy smiled

and said, “The guy who gave me the number said I was the kind of driver they were looking for.”

“What kind of driver is that, naive and inexperienced?” Mark felt bad taking a shot like that at Jimmy, but it just happened to be the truth. Even so, Jimmy didn’t seem to be hurt or insulted by the comment.

“No, young and eager to make a buck.”

“Look, I’d love to drive to California. I could use a few days on the beach and a drive down the western coast of the United States would be a nice change of scenery from the Prairies. But driving in the U.S. is a lot different from driving in Canada, and there are a lot of new laws and programs in the U.S. lately — especially in California — that I’m not even aware of yet. Who knows what might happen? For all I know, we could get down there only to find out that myself, my truck or both are not qualified, licensed or allowed to take a load back.”

“What new laws and programs do you mean?” Jimmy asked in a cool and even tone, like he knew something Mark didn’t. “Do you mean the SmartWay program, nonattainment areas or all the new anti-idling laws?”

“Don’t tell me, let me guess. You know all about these things too?”

“Not all, but a lot of them.”

Mark had to hand it to Jimmy: he seemed to have an answer for every excuse Mark could come up with as to why heading south was a bad idea. Maybe that was a sign that a trip south across the border would be profitable, relaxing and just a little bit fun. Perhaps Mark’s feeling that there was something wrong about this load was in itself wrong. If nothing else it would be an adventure, and Mark was always up for one of those.

“Here’s the guy’s number,” said Jimmy, handing Mark the card. “The least you could do is call him.”

Mark couldn’t argue with that.

He took the card.

“All right,” he said. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to call.”

Mark took out his cellphone and dialled the number.

CHAPTER

3

Mark had little to go on over the phone. The guy who'd answered his call hadn't said much other than he had loads to the U.S. and if he wanted one he should drop by the warehouse. It sounded kind of hokey, but Mark figured he'd gone this far, so he might as well see it through to the end.

The warehouse itself was tucked up against the foot of a mountain on Tagish Street, just off Highway 5. There was a fenced-in yard with a large warehouse building connected to an office/reception area out front. There was no sign in front of the place, but a lot of buildings in the mostly industrial area didn't have any either. And since it was after business hours, there was little traffic on the wide streets leading to the warehouses and factories.

"Is this it?" Jimmy asked, as they slowed to a crawl in front of the shop.

"The lady says we're here," said Mark, gesturing to the GPS on the centre of his dashboard. He'd given the unit a female's voice with a slight British accent. He'd tried several different voices over the past few months, and he liked this one best — she just seemed so classy and sure of herself that Mark never questioned the directions she gave.

"You trust that thing?" Jimmy asked.

"Pretty much with my whole livelihood."

Mark had been using GPS systems for a few years now, and it had become an invaluable tool for him. Initially, he'd been skeptical of the new technology, but after it had directed him to the loading dock of a warehouse in the middle of the Florida Everglades, he was

convinced that it was a tool he couldn't do without. Knowing where you were going had made a real difference to his bottom line, cutting out idling time while he read maps or asked for directions, as well as the wasted miles he'd driven circling back after missed cut-offs. Best of all, it gave him some peace of mind knowing that he was always headed in the right direction. Sure, there were still problems with GPS systems, but now didn't seem to be the time to discuss them with Jimmy.

As they pulled up to the loading dock, Jimmy searched the sides of the building for an address number or a company name. But like in front of the building, there was none.

"Go knock on the door," Mark told Jimmy as he shut down Mother Load.

"Right," said Jimmy, getting out of the truck.

Mark watched Jimmy approach the door to the right of the loading dock. It was a clean enough place, and there were two well-maintained trailers backed up to the docks looking as if they were loaded and ready to go. There was a single car by the door — a black BMW, probably belonging to the business's owner.

Jimmy reached the door and put his hand on the door knob. Instead of knocking, he turned the knob and the door opened. A moment later, Jimmy disappeared inside.

For a while, Mark wondered if Jimmy would ever reappear, but then the door opened again, and Jimmy was there beckoning Mark with a wave.

Mark exited Mother Load, locked up the truck and went to join Jimmy inside.

The door opened with a bit of a squeak. Mark stepped into the warehouse and was struck by how bright it was inside and how clean. There was also a lot less merchandise in the place than Mark had expected. Mark had seen a lot of warehouses in his time, and every one of them had been packed to the rafters with boxes and pallets. Warehouses made money by selling space, so every bit of usable space was ... well, used. This place, however, looked as if it were only half full, and that was no way to make money in the business. Either this guy had just started up, or he was on his way out of business.

"Mark, this is the guy you spoke with on the phone," Jimmy said. "His name is Bruno."

The man extended his hand.

Mark took his hand and they shook. "Bruno what?" he asked.

“Bruno Scorsese.”

Mark hesitated. “Like the director?”

“Yeah, just like the director. Unfortunately, we’re not related. I think my ancestors and his maybe came from the same town in Italy, but that’s about it. What’s your name?”

“Mark Dalton. And if I’m related to anyone famous, I don’t know about it.”

“You got a truck?”

“Yes.”

“You got all your papers in order for the U.S.?”

“He’s got everything,” Jimmy cut in. “Mark’s been driving for years. He one of the best drivers around.”

“I’m not as interested in the best as I am in professional.”

Mark was about to say something, but again, Jimmy cut him off.

“Pro? Are you kidding me? The reason my uncle got Mark to coach me is because he’s one of the most professional drivers he’s got working for him.”

Bruno seemed unimpressed.

“You drive across the border before?”

This time Mark answered before Jimmy could say a word. “Hundreds of times.”

“And California?”

“Dozens.”

“And all your paperwork’s in order?”

He’d already asked Mark that question, and Mark was getting annoyed with all the questions. “Yeah.”

“You have a criminal record?”

Mark didn’t like that question either, but at least he understood it. If he had a criminal record he could be prohibited from entering the U.S., and that would mean that the load would have to sit until someone else came to pick it up, costing money and wasting time and fuel. He did have an old drug possession charge that once held him up at the border, but he’d straightened that out years ago. “Nothing that would stop me from entering the United States.”

Bruno said nothing, seeming to consider Mark’s answer.

Mark took the opportunity to ask, “Why all the questions?”

“My friend said somebody might be coming around looking for a load, but I was expecting him,” he pointed at Jimmy, “not you.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Mark asked.

“Nothing. You just seem too smart, that’s all.”

Jimmy chirped up again. "Mark's not that smart."

"What?" Mark uttered under his breath.

"He tried to own two trucks once and that failed miserably. He's been ripped off by mechanics and truck detailing guys. He was almost charged with murder once on a movie set. He's had his truck stolen, and one time, his rig was smashed up by punks when he tried to be a Good Samaritan by helping out a girl on the side of the road."

"Really?" Bruno asked.

Mark didn't care at all for Jimmy's "not that smart" comment, but when Jimmy started listing all of the boneheaded things he'd done in his lifetime, he couldn't exactly argue. He had done all those things, and they'd all been pretty stupid. "Yeah" was all he could say.

"Then maybe you are the right guys."

"Right guys for what, exactly?" Mark wanted to know.

"I've got plenty of loads going to California in the next few weeks. And my business associate down there has loads coming back here just as often. If you two guys work out, you could be driving for me for a while."

"Wow, did you hear that, Mark? We could be spending half our time in California. That wouldn't be too bad in January and February, eh?"

Mark had to admit it sounded good. Regular warm-weather driving in the winter months was a good deal and pretty hard to come by, but Mark had never been anyone's regular driver. He liked taking different loads to different places. That's what made the job interesting and a lot less like a job than some others he'd had in his life. If he drove the same route to the same loading docks week after week, then driving a truck for a living would seem too much like work.

This, Mark realized, was his chance to politely refuse the load. "I appreciate the offer," said Mark. Jimmy looked crushed. "But I don't really want to be tied down to a regular route for too long."

"Even better," Bruno said. "You do a few trips for me and see how you like it. If you want more loads, great. If you don't, you move on. We both pay cash on delivery, so if you walk I've got nothing to hold back from you."

Jimmy looked at Mark with his eyebrows arched. "That seems fair."

It was fair, since Mark had seen plenty of drivers leave a company on bad terms and have to fight like hell to get paid for their last load.

“What do you say?” Jimmy asked. “We’ll take the load, right?”

Mark hesitated, feeling like the other two were ganging up on him. Jimmy was so eager to drive in the U.S. that he would agree to anything right now, but Mark didn’t know Bruno from Adam, and the only person who’d recommended him was some guy Jimmy met in a truck shop. Mark knew nothing about how the man operated. He said he paid cash on delivery, but did he really? And what kind of support did he provide his drivers, and how good was his paperwork? “I don’t know,” Mark said at last. Then he turned to Bruno. “What’s the load anyway?”

“Carpet,” Bruno replied. “I get it from Asia at a steal and sell it to a distributor in the U.S. It’s quality stuff. Inexpensive but not cheap.”

Mark shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy asked.

“Textiles are tough to get across the border,” Mark told Jimmy. “There’s a lot of paperwork involved, and everything’s got to be right or they stop you cold.”

“But you know what you’re doing.”

“I’d have to look at the paperwork,” Mark said. “We’d need a bill of lading ...”

Bruno pulled the papers out of the envelope he’d been holding.

“Entry summaries.”

Again Bruno was there with the documents.

“Custom bonds.”

He had them.

“And besides San Francisco, I don’t really know where I’m going.”

Bruno took the last pieces of paper out of the envelope. “That’s why I provide all my drivers with maps and contact numbers.”

Mark was impressed. Bud had never done that for him.

“So, we’re going, right?” Jimmy asked.

Mark pulled Jimmy aside so he could talk to him in private. “I’d like to, but this guy ... he’s too slick to be a real shipper. Look at his clothes.”

Jimmy tried to casually look over his shoulder at Bruno.

“Shippers are supposed to be overweight and rough around the edges,” Mark continued. “Like your Uncle Bud. This guy’s right off the cover of *GQ* magazine. By now, a real shipper would have told us

to take the load or leave it, as long as we didn't waste any more of his time. This guy's spending a lot of time trying to convince me to take the load."

"But this could be so great."

"Of course it could be great, but if it is so great, then why on earth is he offering it to me instead of a bunch of regular drivers who he's been working with for years?"

Jimmy wasn't listening. "I want to go to California," he said.

"That's not the point," said Mark.

But in contrast to Jimmy, Bruno had been listening to Mark. "I understand your concerns," he said, "and I respect them. You're right. I'm not your typical shipper, scrambling to keep trucks on the road and drivers happy. What I am is a successful businessman making money in the trucking business ... even with fuel prices going crazy the way they are. The reason I don't have regular drivers is that my business tends to go in cycles. I could be busy for months and then have nothing for just as long. Sure, drivers like steady work, but they don't like steady work that only lasts a few months at a time."

That made sense to Mark, and he was beginning to think that maybe this guy was on the level.

"What I need," he continued, "are professional drivers who deliver their loads intact and on time. From what I understand, you're one of those drivers. But I'm not going to stand here all day arguing with you or begging you to take the load. If you want the load, great, if not, maybe you can tell some of your driver friends that I've got loads to California. I'm sure they won't be as tough to convince as you. Most people I've dealt with over the years like money."

"Well?" Jimmy asked with a measure of desperation in his voice. "What do you say?"

Mark took a moment. It was a good opportunity for both Jimmy and him. And it was just one trip to California, after all. How much could possibly go wrong? "All right, all right," Mark said at last. "We'll take the load."

Jimmy let out a yell and pumped his fist into the air. "Yes!"

CHAPTER

4

After they'd hooked Mother Load to the blue trailer at the loading dock, Bruno spent twenty minutes explaining to Mark just how to get to the warehouse in San Francisco and who would be waiting for them there.

"Is everything clear?" Bruno asked through the driver's side window of the cab.

"Crystal," Mark answered.

"Yeah, yeah, let's go," Jimmy urged. He'd done a thorough circle check of Mother Load and its trailer and was eager for them to be on their way.

Bruno climbed down off the truck and waved. Mark released the parking brake, then shifted Mother Load into gear. The truck lurched forward as he let out the clutch, then settled down into a smooth acceleration as Mark went up through the gears.

"Why's he spending so much time giving you directions?" Jimmy asked. "We've got GPS and a map, and knowing you, you've probably been to this place a half-dozen times before."

"The address doesn't ring a bell," said Mark, "but even if it did, I'd still take any instructions or advice he wanted to give me. I know a lot, but I sure don't know it all."

"But what about the GPS system? You said you trusted it with your livelihood."

"I do trust it, but as good as GPS systems are, they're not perfect. Sometimes they'll send you down a residential street or a school zone, or places where there are no trucks allowed. I was once sent down a dirt road barely wide enough for a subcompact to drive on, never mind a semi."

“It can’t be that bad.”

“It usually isn’t, but it can be,” Mark said. “I know a guy who trusted his GPS absolutely. He ended up going through this tunnel that wasn’t tall enough for his rig and he got stuck halfway through. They had to let the air out of all his tires and drag his rig a quarter of a mile on the rims before he was free.

“And as far as getting instructions goes, I don’t know how many times I’ve pulled up to a warehouse or factory and left my rig idling while I ran inside to find out exactly where my load was supposed to go. You think you’re going to be two seconds and you end up being a half hour, idling dollars down the drain. So now, I follow instructions, and if I have to leave the truck for any reason, I shut it off.”

“Oh” was all Jimmy said.

“I think GPS systems are great and I’ll never be without one, but technology is just a tool designed to help you, not to do the work for you. It’s sort of like spell checkers on computers. They’re fine for checking to see if words are spelled right, but they can’t tell the difference between the words ‘therapist’ and ‘the rapist.’ Both are spelled right, but they mean two different things. After you spell-check, you still have to read over what you’ve written to make sure it’s right. Likewise, once the GPS gets you to your destination, you still have to look out the window to make sure you really are where it says you are.”

“Okay, I get it,” said Jimmy.

“Just trying to make my point,” Mark said. “I’m still supposed to be teaching you about the business, right?”

“Right.”

Mark turned onto Highway 5.

Jimmy could barely contain his excitement. “California, here we come!” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “This trip is going to be awesome.”

“That’s one word for it,” Mark said coolly.

Jimmy sighed. “Don’t tell me you’re still worried about this trip. You checked out all the paperwork yourself and everything’s in order. What could you possibly be worried about now?”

“Everything is good, and I’m looking forward to the sunshine just as much as you are.”

“Then what is it?”

“The fact that he pays in cash.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing’s wrong with cash,” Mark said. “Cash is good, cash is king, and you’d be hard-pressed to find another shipper that paid right away, never mind COD.”

“Maybe it keeps his operation simple,” suggested Jimmy.

“Yeah, that could be it.”

“Or maybe it’s his way of keeping his drivers happy?”

“That could be it too.”

“Then why are you so concerned?”

“Experience. I’ve worked for cash a couple of times and it usually worked out fine. But this one time a guy offered me cash to move some construction equipment for him.”

“Did he pay?”

“Oh, he paid all right.”

“Then what was the problem?”

“The problem was the construction equipment he wanted me to move didn’t belong to him, and he was basically paying me to steal things for him.”

“Oh” was all Jimmy could say.

Mark was silent.

“But this stuff isn’t stolen,” Jimmy reasoned. “You looked over the paperwork yourself and everything checked out.”

“I know.”

“Then stop being such a Wanda Worrier and start enjoying the ride.”

“Wanda Worrier?”

“You know, like Chatty Cathy, except for worrying.”

“You call me Wanda again and you’ll be walking to California.”

“Okay then, how about Doubting Dalton?”

“Better.”

“So I get to stay in the truck?”

Mark nodded. “For now.”

About halfway to the U.S. border, Mark called up Bud, his dispatcher, to let him know what was going on.

It rang twice before Bud said, “Hello?”

“Hi Bud, this is Mark.”

“Mark who?”

It had been a while since Bud had pulled the “Mark who?” thing on him and hearing it after so long put a smile on Mark’s face.

“Trade Mark.”

“Dalton, is that you?”

“You remember me, do you?”

“Is my nephew still there?”

“Hi, Uncle Bud,” said Jimmy.

“Hey Jimmy.”

“Your uncle says hey.”

“Where are you guys? And are you ready for a load?”

“We are ...” Mark took a moment to see if there were any signs or landmarks to let him know where he was. There were none. “We’re about halfway between Kamloops and the border.”

“The U.S. border?”

“That’s the one.”

“What’s going on?”

“We sort of got a load headed south.”

“We’re going to California, Uncle Bud!” Jimmy yelled.

“I thought you were going to call me once the truck was repaired.”

“I was,” said Mark, “but your nephew met a guy who knew a guy who had loads to California.”

“And so you’re cutting me out of the loop, is that it, Dalton?”

Mark couldn’t tell if Bud was joking or serious.

“It was Jimmy’s idea. He’s so keen on the idea of going to California that I couldn’t convince him it wasn’t such a great idea.”

“Well, if you want to turn your back on all the years we’ve been working together just so you can race down to where the sun shines, that’s your business.”

“Sorry.”

The line was silent for a moment. Mark was sure Bud was going to let him have it.

But instead of tearing a strip off Mark, he said, “Hey, you’re running an independent business. If you get offered a good load then you should take it. And since you’re coaching Jimmy, it’ll be a great chance for Jimmy to learn something about crossing the border.”

“So you’re okay with it?”

“Sure, I’ve got more drivers than loads right now anyway.”

Mark was relieved. It was always nice to get a choice load, but Mark had to keep an eye on next week, next month and next year when Bruno would be out of business and Bud would still have loads for him every time he called. “I’ll bring you back something nice.”

“Like a new nephew?”

“I heard that, Uncle Bud,” said Jimmy.

“What are you haulin’ anyway?” asked Bud.

“A trailer full of Chinese carpet.”

“Uh-oh, better make sure your paperwork’s in order.”

“Done.”

“And be sure you know where you’re goin’.”

“It’s already punched into my GPS, but the guy gave us maps and a set of instructions.”

“I see,” Bud said. “Well then, do you need a list of full-service truck stops along the west coast?”

“He gave us that too.”

“How about spots selling cheap fuel?”

“Ditto,” said Mark. More and more shippers were providing econo-tour services to their drivers to help them find the quickest, most comfortable and cheapest way to get to their destination. It was a little thing, but it did a lot to save money on fuel, accommodations and other essentials along the way. It had to be making a difference because even Bud had begun to offer the service in recent weeks.

After a long silence, Bud sighed into the phone. “Well then, I guess this guy’s got everything covered.”

“He was pretty thorough,” said Mark. “He even pays COD.”

“Wow,” said Bud. “What’s his name? Maybe I should start driving for him.”

“It’s Bruno. Bruno Scorsese.”

“Like the director?”

“Yeah, but they’re not related.”

“What do you know? The guy’s even got a famous name ... how can I compete with that?”

“Change your last name to Wisser or Light.”

“I’ll think about it,” Bud laughed. “Anyway, have fun, take care of my nephew and stay out of trouble.”

“No worries,” Mark said. “Two out of three are a given.”

Bud hung up the phone, thinking. Mark had a sweet load to the States, and Jimmy seemed over the moon about heading for California. But it all sounded so good that Bud couldn’t help but think that it was a bit too good to be true. And the guy’s name, Scorsese ... as if that was really his name.

Bud knew a few dispatchers in British Columbia.

He picked up the phone again. It wouldn’t hurt to give them a call.

CHAPTER

5

Mark stopped at a truck stop a few miles from the border and sent Jimmy for coffee while he headed for the stop's Internet café.

"Aren't you coming with me?" Jimmy asked.

Mark shook his head. "Nah, get me a medium double-double. I want to look over the papers one more time. I don't want any surprises at the border."

"Right."

Mark found an open terminal in the café, sat down and opened up the envelope Bruno had given him. Just as they were before he'd left Kamloops, all the documents were there and in good order. It seemed silly to check everything over again when he knew it was all there, but Mark knew you could never be too cautious when crossing the border. Driving for a new shipper and with so many documents to worry about made it easy to overlook something. Besides, it would be to Mark's benefit if he was familiar with all the paperwork so he'd be able to answer any questions the border agent might ask him.

Putting aside the papers for a moment, Mark logged on to the Internet to do a little surfing. He was getting tired of having to find Internet hook-ups on the road, and after this trip he promised himself he would purchase a laptop with Wi-Fi so he'd be able to log on from anywhere. But that would come later; for now, he was happy to be online.

Just because he wasn't there yet didn't mean he couldn't find out what things were like at the border ... right now. There were several Web sites that provided updates on traffic at the borders. Some, like www.borderlineups.com, even provided access to cameras

overlooking the lineups at various border crossings so you could actually see what the delay looked like before you got anywhere near the border. Information like that was invaluable to a trucker who wanted to get across the border as quickly and as smoothly as possible.

For example, when he logged on to the Canada Border Services Agency Web site (www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca), he could check on border wait times at all four of the B.C./Washington state border crossings. The easy-to-read graph told him that there were no delays for commercial traffic at the Pacific Highway, Boundary Bay or Huntingdon crossings, but there were substantial traveller delays at all four border sites, including a one hour and forty-five minute delay for travellers going from Canada into the U.S. Besides that info, the Web site reminded Mark that there was no commercial traffic allowed at the Peace Arch crossing from Surrey, B.C., into Blaine, Washington. Mark knew that already, but he wanted to make sure the commercial lanes at the other three crossings were open.

So he also logged on to the Government of British Columbia's Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure Web site (www.th.gov.bc.ca/ATIS) and checked on border-crossing sites there. While the Pacific Highway crossing into Blaine was open to trucks 24/7, the other two border stations had limited hours for commercial vehicles. For example, the border between Aldergrove and Lynden was only open to trucks between 8 a.m. and midnight, while the crossing from Huntingdon into Sumas was only open Monday to Friday between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. The latter border crossing was the one where they wanted to go.

Mark checked his watch.

It was just after three in the afternoon.

"We better get moving," Mark said under his breath. He logged off, picked up the envelope with the papers and hurried into the coffee shop.

"Jimmy!" he called.

Jimmy was off to the side grabbing some paper napkins.

"Let's go!" said Mark.

"But, I'm just ... "

"Now!"

Jimmy grabbed the coffees and a couple of paper bags, but left everything else on the counter. "What's the rush? The United States will still be there in an hour."

“No, it won’t,” Mark said. “The border will be closed to trucks in an hour. I don’t want to get stuck in a line and have the bar come down just as we pull up to a booth.”

Jimmy laughed. “That would be a major hassle.”

“Yeah,” Mark agreed. “And if I had to backtrack all the way to the Pacific Highway crossing at Blaine it would cost me time and money.”

“Then let’s hurry,” said Jimmy, breaking into a jog.

Mark hopped inside Mother Load, turned the ignition key and shifted into gear.

“Don’t you want to do one last circle check before the border?” asked Jimmy.

“It would be best,” Mark admitted, “but I don’t have the time. Maybe we can look things over if there’s a delay at the border and we get stuck in a line-up.”

“Gotcha.”

But true to the information on the CBSA Web site, there were no delays for commercial vehicles at the Huntingdon border, and the lane was clear ahead of them all the way up to the booth.

“Now,” said Mark, as he slowed, “don’t volunteer anything. Just answer the questions you’re asked.”

“Of course,” said Jimmy.

“You got your ID ready?” he asked Jimmy as he slowed Mother Load down to a crawl.

Jimmy passed his documents to Mark.

Mark eased up to the booth and slowed to a stop that was as smooth as glass.

The U.S. Customs officer reached up and took the papers and documents from Mark without even looking up. The officer was female, and Mark guessed, in her mid-forties with plenty of experience on the job. Since it was just before four and the commercial lanes at this crossing were due to close in a few minutes, she probably wanted to get through the last bit of her shift without incident so she could go home on time. Or at least Mark hoped that was the case.

“Where are you headed?”

Mark opened his mouth to answer when Jimmy interrupted.

“San Francisco!” he exclaimed. “San Francisco, California.”

Mark looked at Jimmy in astonishment. He had told him only to answer the questions he was asked, but he hadn’t specified between questions meant for Jimmy and those meant for the driver.

“Yeah,” said the officer. “That’s where it is ... California.”

Suddenly the officer seemed to have all the time in the world to look over their paperwork and documents.

While she studied the papers, Mark looked over at Jimmy and glared at him with a look that would burn through steel. “Shut up!” he mouthed, flicking his index finger up in front of his mouth in the universal sign for “keep quiet!”

“Okay, Mr. Dunston.”

“Dalton,” said Mark.

“What?”

“Dalton,” Mark repeated, wishing he hadn’t said anything. “My name’s Dalton, not Dunston.”

“Right,” she said. “Well, whatever your name is, pull over to the secondary inspection area and wait there.”

She stepped out of the booth with Mark’s and Jimmy’s paperwork in hand, and another officer immediately took her place.

“Great!” Mark said, looking over at Jimmy. “You had to tell her all about San Francisco.”

“She asked the question,” said Jimmy.

“She asked me, not you.”

“How was I supposed to know that? And how can you be so sure she was asking you and not some other driver named Dunston?”

Mark couldn’t help but smile as he pulled Mother Load to a stop in the designated waiting area and left the engine running. “Yeah, that was pretty funny.”

“Can you imagine what she does with a really tough name?”

“Like what?” Mark asked. “Balasingam or Kanagarajah.”

“No, like Scorsese.”

They both laughed.

And then they waited.

A minute later a different U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency agent approached Mother Load. This one was a huge bear of a man with tattoos on both arms, a goatee, sunglasses and a close-shaved head that was crowned with a table-flat crew cut.

“Oh,” Mark said, “this ought to be good.”

Jimmy rose up in his seat to take a look out Mark’s side of the truck. “Uh-oh.”

The officer climbed up the side of Mother Load and tapped on the window with the wedding ring on his left hand.

Mark rolled down the window.

“Shut her down!”

“What?”

“I said shut off your engine!”

“Oh sorry,” Mark said, not realizing in all the excitement that he’d left the engine running. Mark shut down Mother Load, then said, “Is there something wrong with my paperwork?”

The officer looked at Mark a long time, most likely glaring at him from behind his sunglasses. “How the heck should I know?”

It was a good question, one that Mark didn’t have an answer to. “I thought you were telling me to shut off the engine because I was going to be here a while.”

That put a smile on the officer’s face. “Sorry,” he said. “I don’t know anything about your case. I just wanted you to shut it off because of the anti-idling law in Washington state.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Yeah, I just saved you a couple hundred bucks.”

All Mark could say was “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” the officer said with a little wave. He climbed down off the truck and continued on his way.

“Anti-idling laws,” Mark said. “Who knew?”

“I did,” said Jimmy.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I knew there was a law for Washington state, but I didn’t know how low the idling time was. I guess it’s probably something really low, like thirty or sixty seconds.”

Mark stared at Jimmy for the longest time. “How do you know that?”

“When my Uncle Bud first told me I’d be riding with you, he said there might be a chance we’d be travelling to the States, so I looked up a bunch of things that deal specifically with driving in the U.S.”

“What do you mean, like SmartDriver?”

“Kind of. The big program in the United States right now is SmartWay, and what they do is certify fleets that have attained a level of efficiency by using a bunch of new technologies.”

“So, what? If you have an auxiliary power unit you get a gold star or something?”

“I don’t know about gold stars, but you do get points for having APUs and cab heaters in your trucks.”

“That’s all well and good, but how are they going to make drivers do all of those things? There’s already no money in the trucking

business. There's lots of money around it, but there's no money in it."

"Yeah, but the push for this program isn't just coming from governments, it's also coming from big business. So while there's already talk about how any truck operating in California might have to be a SmartWay certified truck in the near future, companies like Walmart and Coca-Cola will only ship their goods on SmartWay trucks."

"That'll get drivers to comply," Mark said, already wondering how close Mother Load was to being SmartWay certified. "It'd be pretty tough to stay in business if you can't operate in California or drive for the biggest retailer in the world."

"Not only that," Jimmy went on, "but California is turning out to be the tail that wags the dog."

Mark said nothing for a moment, wondering when Jimmy had gotten smart enough to use a phrase like that. Finally, he said, "You wanted to go to the States just so you could show me how smart you think you are, didn't you?"

"I'm just telling you what I know."

"All right, carry on."

Jimmy swallowed to clear his throat and continued. "Like I said, California's probably got the strictest laws regarding the environment, so if California makes it a law, that makes it easy for the rest of the states to adopt California's law instead of coming up with one of their own that's weaker or less environmentally friendly."

"Like what?"

"Well," Jimmy paused, searching for an example, "like in 2008."

"What happened then?"

"On January 1, 2008, California no longer allowed sleeper berths to idle during sleep or rest periods."

Mark made a mental note that he already had an APU.

"And because the law applies to any sleeper truck operating in the state, not just vehicles licensed in California, the whole industry will have to comply to continue doing business in there."

"Now that you mention it," Mark said, "I think I remember reading something about that."

"So, owners of 2006 and older trucks will have to buy engine-off HVAC technology, and owners of 2007 and newer trucks will have to install emission controls on their diesel-powered heaters and APUs if they aren't already plumbed into the engine's emission control system, or they will have to order an engine that meets a special

reduced-emission standard.”

Mark was impressed, but he wasn't about to admit to Jimmy that the kid knew more than he did. “So if you knew all this, when were you going to tell me?”

Jimmy shrugged. “It never came up ... until that officer pointed it out. Besides, each state's idling times are different.”

“How different?”

“Well, I remember a few of them,” Jimmy said, staring out the window as if the answer was written on one of the buildings in front of them. “In Colorado, you're allowed five minutes idling, time within any one-hour period.”

“That doesn't seem fair, what if it's -20°C out and you have to warm up your engine. Five minutes isn't going to cut it.”

“They make allowances for that, and besides, the main thing is they don't want trucks idling for a prolonged or unreasonable amount of time.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“New York State's got a five-minute limit too, but they make exceptions for traffic conditions, passenger comfort — which I think is more for buses than trucks — auxiliary purposes like loading or unloading, and fire, police and public utility vehicles that are performing emergency services.”

“I guess they're expecting drivers to have APUs.”

“I think it's a bit stronger than that,” said Jimmy.

“Yeah, I guess ‘demanding’ is more like it.”

“It's getting there,” Jimmy said. “Utah doesn't allow the engine of any unattended vehicle to be left running at all. Their limit on idling time is fifteen minutes, but they make an exception if you're idling to provide heat to a sleeper compartment.”

“That'll change,” Mark said under his breath.

“And in Wisconsin, you can't idle to heat or cool your sleeper if the temperature is between 40° and 80°F ”

Mark was shaking his head in amazement. “How do you know all this?”

“It's on the Internet,” said Jimmy. “If you go to the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site, I think it's www.epa.gov, they've got idle times for every state as part of their SmartWay program. You should check it out.”

“Yeah, I guess they're trying to tell me something ... the less idling I'm doing, the more fuel I'm saving, and the more fuel I'm

saving, the more money I make.”

“And it’s better for the environment,” reminded Jimmy.

“Right, and it’s better for the environment.” Mark turned the ignition to power up Mother Load’s systems and checked his idling percentage. “Ten percent,” he said. “That’s not bad.”

“No, it’s not bad,” Jimmy agreed. “But it could be better.”

Bud dialed a number in the 250 area code for a shipper named Bart. Over the years, Bud had kept in touch with several shippers in British Columbia, which had proved invaluable to him in getting his drivers back east after long hauls into Vancouver, which was another reason he wanted to give Bart a call. Most of the trucks in Canada moved east-west. There wasn’t a lot of north-south traffic, which made Mark’s easy score of a load into San Francisco curious, to say the least.

“Hello?”

“Hi Bart, this is Bud.”

“Bud? Bud who?”

“Rosebud ... who do you think?”

“Oh, Bud, how’s it goin’?”

“The wheels keep on turning, you know what I mean?”

“I hear you,” Bart said. “What can I do for you?”

“I want to ask you about a shipper out your way that one of my drivers is hauling for.”

“I got my ears on.”

“His name is Scorsese, but he’s not related to the director or anything.”

“Oh, yeah ... I heard of him. At least I think it’s him.”

This was promising, thought Bud, in an ominous, not-good-for-Mark-Dalton sort of way.

“If it’s the guy I’m thinkin’ of ... ”

“You’re not sure?”

“Well, the guy I’m thinkin’ of changes his name a lot, so it could be him.”

“I see.”

“This guy’s company is fly-by-night. He’ll rent out a warehouse for a while, have a lot of good loads, then he moves and no one knows where he went. Guys come back from delivering a load and there’s no sign of him.”

“He’s paying my guy cash on delivery.”

“That’s probably why then,” said Bart. “He’s good to drive for, don’t get me wrong, but he’s changing drivers like you and me change socks and underwear.”

Bud tried to remember if he’d put on clean underwear that morning or if he was wearing repeat offenders from the day before.

“As far as I know the guy’s still in operation and he hasn’t been shut down yet, but the talk from drivers around here is that it’s only a matter of time before something BIG happens and somebody — the cops, border services, immigration, maybe even the Department of Transportation — closes him down.”

Bud thought about that for a moment. There was something big going to happen, and here was Mark Dalton (and his poor nephew, Jimmy) smack dab in the middle of it. That meant only one thing ... something big was definitely going to happen very soon.

“That’s all I know,” said Bart. “I hope that helps.”

“Somewhat, yeah.”

“I could ask around if you like, see if anyone else knows anything.”

“I’d appreciate that,” said Bud.

“All right,” said Bart. “I’ll see what I can do.”

They’d been waiting in the secondary inspection area on the U.S. side of the border for over half an hour. While Mark couldn’t get comfortable in his seat, Jimmy couldn’t sit still in his. He was moving forward and back, rolling his window up and down and fiddling with the radio every few minutes looking for what, Mark didn’t know.

“Would you stop that!” said Mark.

“I’m just looking for something I like.”

Mark reached into the pocket in the door on his left and took out the satellite radio guide. “Here,” he said, “find something you like, then tune the radio.”

“Hey, cool,” said Jimmy.

That kept Jimmy quiet for all of five minutes before he was back fiddling with the radio again.

He settled on a station playing 1980s pop.

“I don’t like this,” said Mark.

“What do you mean? Everyone likes The Police.”

“No, not that,” Mark said. “This. This border crossing. There’s no reason why we should have been stopped, and now we’re sitting here too long. Everything was right with the paperwork. Something else

has got to be wrong.”

As if on cue, another officer was heading across the lot toward them carrying Mark’s envelope under his arm and their identification in his hands.

“Whatever the problem is,” Jimmy said, turning down the volume on the radio, “we’re about to find out.”

This officer was smaller than the last one, with longer hair that was threatening to grow into a mullet if it weren’t cut within the week. He wore dark wraparound sunglasses and was clean-shaven, and much to Mark’s surprise, he was smiling.

“This ought to be good,” Mark said under his breath as he rolled down his window.

“Here you go, sir,” the officer said as he handed Mark the envelope and ID. “Sorry for the delay.”

“Was there a problem?”

“No, not really.” A smile. “We were just checking something out.”

“Checking what?”

A bigger smile. “I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say. We just had to check something is all.” The smile was gone, replaced by a grin. “But everything’s all right now.” He tipped his hat. “Have a good day.”

But Mark didn’t want to leave just yet. “What happened to the woman?”

“What woman?”

“The female officer who first pulled us over.”

The officer ignored Mark’s question and climbed down off Mother Load. “You drive safe now.” One last ear-to-ear grin, then the man spun on his heels and headed back toward the building he’d come out of.

Mark just watched the man walk away.

“See,” Jimmy said, “I told you it would be okay. We’re good to go ... so let’s go!”

“Not until we do a circle check first,” said Mark.

Jimmy sighed.

“I don’t want to start up in a new country on the wrong foot. Just a quick inspection and we’ll be on our way.”

Jimmy was nodding, seeing the importance of it.

“If we both do it, it’ll go twice as fast.”

They both got out and did a circle check of Mother Load.

“See, that wasn’t so bad,” Mark said when he got back inside.
“Guess not.”

Mark started up Mother Load. Despite the fact that they were through customs and the whole of the United States was in front of them, Mark couldn’t help but feel that something hadn’t been right about that border crossing. There’d been something different, but what? But the more he thought about it, the more a voice somewhere deep in the back of his mind told him he’d be finding out exactly what before too long.

“Anyone behind me?” he asked Jimmy.

Jimmy stuck his head out the window. “Coast is clear.”

Mark backed Mother Load up a few feet, shifted into first and rolled the first few feet toward San Francisco.

“Woohoo!” Jimmy shouted, pumping his fist in the air. “We’re in the States, man. Isn’t this great? California, here we come.”

“Not so fast,” said Mark.

“What?”

“We need to find a place to park and get some rest. Both our logbooks are maxed out for driving time.”

Jimmy was visibly disappointed, but he knew as Mark did that they couldn’t drive anywhere until they rested.

“All right,” Jimmy said, “but we’ll start up again as soon as we can, right?”

“As soon as we’re allowed,” Mark said, “I promise.”

CHAPTER

6

They got a good night's rest thanks to a truck stop just a few miles from the border and Mark's Auxiliary Power Unit, which kept the cab warm through the night for a fraction of the fuel he would have used idling.

In the morning, after a healthy breakfast and hot coffee, they got an early start on their American adventure. Now they were an hour or so deep into Washington state with about four more hours on Route I-5, going through Oregon and into California. Jimmy was taking a turn behind the wheel. He was doing his best to keep his speed steady and his engine revs just under 1200 rpms, which was Mother Load's most efficient running speed and where Mark liked to say the money was. Jimmy was also making an effort to tuck the rig in behind other trailers to take advantage of a draft whenever the opportunity arose.

"You think that works?" Mark asked from beneath his ball cap as he sat way back in the passenger seat.

"Yes," Jimmy said. "They do it in NASCAR because it helps them go faster while using less fuel."

"NASCAR? How do I know I'm in the U.S.?" Mark asked.

"It's science," said Jimmy.

"But those guys follow each other with little more than inches between cars. You can't do that with semi-trailers."

"Of course not, but they tested the theory on an episode of 'MythBusters.' And while you get the best fuel economy following directly behind a vehicle, there's still measurable fuel savings even if you're more than a truck-length back."

“Well,” Mark said just a bit sarcastically, “I guess I can’t argue with science.”

“The bottom line is that you save more fuel if you’re behind something cutting through the air for you rather than pushing through the air on your own.”

Mark nodded. “I can see how that would make a difference but it’s still not safe. You should follow the four-second rule.”

Jimmy looked at Mark and said, “Yeah, you’re right,” and eased off the accelerator. “I think we covered that four-second rule in my SmartDriver class.”

They drove on for a while in silence. And despite Jimmy’s best efforts to do all he could to keep his fuel consumption to a minimum, he was still burning fuel and sooner or later he would have to stop to top up Mother Load’s tanks.

“Hey,” he said, “there’s a truck stop coming up. You want me to start slowing down to cool the engine before we fill up? I know a bit about idling laws, but I’m not sure how much idling time I’m allowed to properly cool off an engine prior to shut down.”

“Probably best to drive like you’re allowed zero idling time,” Mark said. Then, “How much fuel do we have?”

“A little less than one quarter.”

“Keep driving.”

“But didn’t you tell me once that it was a good idea to always keep the tanks topped up?”

“As a general rule, yeah, it is, especially in Canada where who-knows-where the next fuel stop is going to be, and in the winter when you don’t want to let condensation put any extra moisture in your fuel tanks. And it’s also a good practice for a guy like me who never knows where he’s going next and doesn’t know if there’ll be a gas station selling diesel at the other end of the line.”

“So, I should stop for fuel?”

“No, keep going.”

“Let me guess.” It was Jimmy’s turn to be sarcastic. “Because the truck is lighter when the tanks are empty, we use less fuel.”

“While that’s true — and you can thank your NASCAR friends for that bit of wisdom — that’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“There’s a weigh scale coming up, and I want to go through it with tanks empty, just in case this load we’re hauling is putting us anywhere near the gross weight allowed for the truck.”

Jimmy's head began bobbing. "Smart."

"Yeah, but only because I've made the mistake before ... twice. First time I was fifty pounds over, the second time seventy-five." Mark pulled his ball cap down over his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

Ten minutes later, Jimmy pulled Mother Load off the highway and began downshifting until he was moving along at a crawl. "Mark! Wake up!" he said.

"Huh? What?"

"Weigh scale."

"You woke me up for that?" Mark asked, struggling to get himself upright in his seat.

"Sorry, I thought you'd want to be awake for it."

"Only if there's a problem."

They cruised through the weigh scale with nothing more than a wave from the officers inside the booth.

"Oh, sorry," said Jimmy.

"It's all right, I'm up now. We'll stop at the next truck stop on Bruno's list." He dug the sheet out of the envelope and studied it. "We've got another fifteen miles to go." Then he leaned back in his seat and pulled down the hat again. "Let me know when we get there."

A quarter of an hour later Jimmy reached over and gave Mark a nudge.

"Already?"

Jimmy began slowing down, running the engine with a slack throttle and allowing the engine to cool down on the move. If he timed it right, the engine would be sufficiently cooled down to be shut off by the time they parked the truck.

When the truck stop signs appeared in the distance, Jimmy asked, "Is this one of the stops on the list?"

Mark glanced at the econo-tour list again. "Sure is."

Jimmy stopped in front of the pumps and looked them over. "Too bad they don't sell winter diesel here. I would have filled up with that."

It was a good suggestion. They were still in Washington state, and it could still dip below freezing overnight allowing wax crystals to form in the fuel causing gelling, which made start-ups and general operation difficult. But despite the cold overnight temperatures, they were heading south into California, and every

mile they put under their wheels meant warmer and better operating conditions for Mother Load. "Summer diesel will be fine."

Jimmy took another look around. "Hey, they've got bio-diesel here, want to try that?"

Mark took a look at the nearest pump. "It costs more."

"Yeah, but it's better for the environment," said Jimmy.

"It burns just the same as regular diesel, doesn't it?"

"Well, actually it burns cleaner because there's more oxygen present in the fuel before combustion. This results in less carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons and particulate matter, but since the carbon dioxide from bio-diesel is absorbed by growing plant matter ... that's why they say bio-diesel is carbon-neutral. It's made from living plant matter and its emissions are used by the same plants."

"I heard it's not as powerful as regular diesel, and it's hard to start in cold weather."

"That's only if you're using one-hundred percent bio-diesel. The stuff they're making is getting better all the time, but the sign says this mixture is a B20, which means just twenty percent is bio-diesel and the rest is the regular stuff, so you probably won't notice a significant drop in power."

Mark still wasn't convinced it was worth the extra money. It was all well and good to be a friend of the environment, but it was hard to be green and all that when it cost more.

"Plus," Jimmy said hopefully, "it might make Mother Load's exhaust smell like French fries."

Mark let out a little laugh. "Okay, what the hell. Let's try it."

"All right," Jimmy said, inching Mother Load forward until she was in line with the pump offering bio-diesel. When he was in position, he set the parking brake and shut down the engine. "Fill'er up with bio-diesel?"

"Yeah, you go ahead and I'll get us something to eat," said Mark. "Just make sure it's not a high-pressure fuel pump."

"What? Why not?"

"A high-pressure pump that blasts fuel into the tanks can stir up sediments that might end up clogging the fuel filter."

"Okay," Jimmy said, "anything else?"

"Well, since you asked, don't spill anything when you reach the top of the tank. Fuel that's been wasted like that around the world could run a fleet for the year. Besides, this is the expensive stuff, so don't waste any of it."

Jimmy smiled. "I'll do my best."

“Good,” Mark said, getting out of the truck and heading for the coffee shop.

“Good,” Jimmy repeated, mimicking Mark’s tone perfectly.

But as Jimmy uncapped the fuel tank, he glanced over at the pump next to him and watched as the driver of that rig took out a rag and wrapped it around the nozzle before fuelling.

“That would stop any spillage,” Jimmy said to himself in a whisper.

And moments later he was wrapping one of the rags from Mark’s tool box around his own nozzle before setting it down into the tank. When he was satisfied he was all set for fuelling, he squeezed the pump once to see just how fast fuel exited the nozzle.

Not fast at all.

He squeezed the pump again and began fuelling.

By the time the tank was full, Mark had returned from the coffee shop.

“Here,” he said, handing Jimmy a bag.

“What is it?”

“It’s a cap lock for the fuel tank.”

Jimmy looked the device over. “Do you think we need it?”

“You do know what the price of fuel is these days?”

“Yes.”

“And we are in the U.S.”

“Meaning what?”

“Well, I’ve got to do something to prevent fuel from being stolen out of my tanks.”

“Why don’t you just get a gun?” Jimmy laughed, putting the lock on the cap, securing the full tank of fuel from any would-be thieves.

“I’ve thought about it,” said Mark.

“Oh” was all Jimmy could say.

Bud was still busy on the phone. Bart, the first shipper he’d called, hadn’t called back with any new information, so he had to keep digging if he wanted to find out more about this Scorsese character.

He looked through his card file and found the number of another shipper he knew in B.C. It had been a while since he’d talked to the man, but hopefully the guy had a good memory.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dirk, how’s it going?” Bud asked.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Bud.”

“Bud who?”

Bud had been afraid of this, but he’d prepared himself.

“Remember a few years ago you had a driver run off with a woman in Timmins and leave your load sitting by the side of the road. I’m the Bud who found you a driver and got that load delivered on time.”

“Oh, that Bud. How you doing?” A pause. “If I haven’t heard from you in all that time ... you must need a favour.”

Bud wondered if he sounded this prickly with Mark whenever he called and concluded that he probably did. It was likely something to do with the job that made shippers so ... What was the word?

Ornery. “Well, I do need a favour ... ”

Dirk sighed on the other end of the phone.

“But it’s only a small one.”

“All right, what is it?”

“A driver of mine got a load from a shipper named Scorsese. I was wondering if you’d ever heard of him and what the deal was?”

“Scorsese?”

“Yeah, it’s a shipment to San Francisco. Pays cash on delivery.”

“I’ve heard of him. But I didn’t think he was still in business.”

After they topped up with fuel, Mark let Jimmy continue driving and would probably keep him there for the rest of his allowable hours.

Mark was once again relaxing in the passenger seat, just finishing up his sandwich and coffee. The food and drink had done him good, and for the first time on their trek south, he was starting to feel good about things. They were headed south, their paperwork and load were in order, and the weather was forecast to be warm and sunny the rest of the way into San Francisco. With little else to worry about, Mark began to wonder about Jimmy. When they got back east and Mark dropped him off at the Big Stop where he’d found him, Jimmy was going to have to make a few decisions about his future. Sure his Uncle Bud would play a strong role in shaping his future, but it wouldn’t hurt the boy if he talked things out now so he knew what he wanted to do when the question came up with his uncle.

“So, Jimmy, what’s your plan?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean for the future, as a driver and such.”

“Didn’t we have this conversation already?”

“Sure, but you’ve done a bit of driving now. You might have a

better idea what you want to do with next few years of your life.”

“Well, I want to drive a truck.”

“Yours or someone else’s?”

“My own, if I can.”

He’d said the last words like he was expecting Mark to laugh at him, but Mark respected his goal of owning his own truck. Mark had driven for others, and the experience had only strengthened his resolve to never do it again. He was his own man, and regardless of the problems and responsibilities that came with owning your own truck, he would never trade them in for anything as boring as a regular route and steady paycheck. Mark liked the open road, and the new things he saw and experienced every day made the job more of an adventure than work. If he felt that way, how could he chastise Jimmy for wanting the very same thing?

So, all he said in the end was “New or used?”

“Have you seen some of those new trucks? The features they offer now ...”

“Yeah, like monthly payments higher than some people’s mortgages.”

“But that’s part of the cost of doing business. Besides, I’ll be making money with the truck.”

Mark laughed at that. “There’s no money in trucking, Jimmy. There’s a lot of money around trucking, but there’s no money in it.”

“What are you saying?”

“There are a lot of things to consider when you’re spec’ing a new truck.”

“I know that,” said Jimmy, as if he’d been driving for twenty years.

“Okay,” said Mark, calling Jimmy’s bluff. “What would you be looking for in a new rig?”

“Well, I guess I’d be looking for the smallest, most fuel-efficient engine that would get the job done.”

“That’s ideal, sure, but what job is that? Do you know what kind of loads you’ll be hauling?”

“No, not yet.”

“Then you really can’t spec an engine, can you?”

“I guess not.”

“If you’re hauling everything, once in a while you’re going to need some extra power. Also, remember that if you’ve got a big powerful engine, it won’t have to work as hard all the time, and you’ll save money on maintenance.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“And this one’s big and probably overlooked by most drivers, but if you’ve got a truck with a small engine, not many people are going to want to buy it used since the engine will be all used up by the time you’re done with it.”

“I never really thought of that.”

“But there’s always someone looking for a used truck with a big engine with lots of power. You can always sell those kinds of trucks while you could end up losing when you sell or trade-in a small-engine truck.

“There’re other things that can affect resale value too, like sleeper cabs and APUs. Sure, you might save some money on the initial purchase price of a new rig, but you might lose whatever you saved when it comes time to sell.”

“That’s a good point,” Jimmy said, “but what about other stuff you can get new that saves you money?”

“Sure, if you have your choice when you’re buying new, it’s best to get everything you can to maximize your fuel economy.”

“Like wide tires?”

“Yup, they cost a little more at first, but they save fuel in the long run.”

“And aerodynamics?”

“Sure, buying the most aerodynamic package you can is a real money-saver over the long haul, and it boosts resale value.”

“Resale value,” Jimmy said wistfully. “I never thought about that when I spec’d trucks in my mind.”

“And don’t forget extra chrome and lights. They might not help fuel economy any, but all those extras sometimes help resell a truck faster than any of those other fuel-saving features.”

“What about automatic transmissions? Do they save fuel?”

Mark had always driven a standard transmission, but he was on the fence about automatics. “Sure, they save fuel because they always shift gears at the right number of revs, but there are a lot of moving parts in them and they can be expensive to repair. So, all of the money you save on fuel with an automatic could be lost to repair bills. I guess it depends on what kind of driving you want to do and what types of transmissions are available for the job.”

“So I’d have to know what kind of driving I want to do before I start looking at a new truck?” Jimmy asked.

“Sure, if you know that, then a salesperson can spec a truck that will give you the best fuel economy for the job, which will give you

big-time savings on your annual fuel bill.”

“So you think I should buy a used truck versus a new one?”

“My advice to you would be to start out with a used truck.”

“Used.” Jimmy said the word as if it had been dragged through the mud.

“Unless you’re independently wealthy, a new owner-operator should never buy a new truck. Instead, you should start out with a \$40,000 truck instead of a \$140,000 truck because a \$40,000 truck is a lot easier to get rid of if things don’t work out, or if you decide you don’t want to be a owner-operator anymore.”

“But new trucks are cheaper to operate.”

“Of course they are, like everything new ... but a new truck is something you work up to, not start out with.” Mark was a little disappointed that Jimmy, for all his thirst for knowledge, would argue with him on this point. “Let me tell you something, Jimmy. There’s a reason I’ve been in business for more than ten years.”

“And that is?”

“Because I’ve listened to the advice I’ve gotten from people who have been in the business longer than I have.”

“Oh.”

“And probably the most important thing I learned very early on is that it’s not about how much money you make but how much money you keep. If you buy a new truck now with little or no down payment, you’re going to spend your whole life working to pay it off.”

“I suppose.”

“And while it’s great being an owner-operator, you have to be prepared to be a businessman too, because you are running a business that has all kinds of expenses that have nothing to do with the truck.”

“Like what?”

“Overhead, accounting, office equipment, legal fees ...”

“Sounds like you’re trying to convince me not to buy my own truck.” From the tone, Mark felt Jimmy was starting to come around.

“That’s because I am, Mark said.” “I told you before and I’ll say it again: it’s not a bad thing to start out being a company driver.”

“Okay, I get it.”

Mark was silent a moment, thinking. Then he said, “There’s one more thing I should mention since we’re talking about it.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“That’s probably best right now because if you’re going to start driving full-time, any girlfriend you’ve got now is probably not going to put up with you being gone for days on end for very long. Better to meet a girl while you’re already driving and hope she understands.”

“But a lot of truck drivers have girlfriends ... wives too.”

“Yeah, and they’re angels from heaven.”

Jimmy smiled.

“There’s a saying in the trucking business that in a marriage, the truck comes first. That’s why a lot of truckers are single.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“Maybe not, but if you’re thinking of driving for someone else, keep in mind that some companies don’t like to hire new drivers who don’t have a stable family life.”

“Isn’t that discrimination?”

“It’s not a hard and fast rule, but they like it when their drivers have roots.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know, and most of them are things that you can only learn from experience ... which is why when I tell you something — or any experienced driver tells you something — you should take it to heart. That way you won’t have to learn it by making a costly mistake yourself.”

“So you think I should buy used?” Jimmy said at last, this time sounding like he agreed with the sentiment.

“Yes, I do.”

Jimmy looked around the cab and turned his head so he could peer into the sleeper. “Is this truck for sale?”

Mark had thought about selling Mother Load in another year or two, and he’d still be well within his business plan if he sold it now ... but for how much? Obviously he wanted as much money for the truck as he could get, and Jimmy probably wouldn’t have it. Still, it wasn’t an impossibility.

“I’ve thought about it.”

“Have you thought about selling it to me?”

“No.”

“What about to my Uncle Bud?”

So maybe Jimmy did have enough money, or at least he had access to it.

“Just keep driving” was all Mark said.

Jimmy had been driving for close to five hours and they were nearly through Oregon. Mark had kept an eye on Jimmy while the young man drove, making sure he didn't nod off or otherwise lose his concentration. To his credit, Jimmy didn't seem to mind the night driving, but it was obvious he was getting tired. Mark had counted two yawns in the last ten minutes, and it was time for a rest.

For both of them.

Although Mark hadn't been driving, he hadn't been able to get any real sleep, knowing Jimmy was behind the wheel of his beloved Mother Load in unfamiliar surroundings, and as a result he was in no condition to relieve Jimmy. And since they were on schedule and in no danger of missing their delivery appointment in San Francisco, the best thing to do was park the rig so both of them could get a good night's sleep.

“You getting tired?” Mark asked.

“Uh-uh,” Jimmy replied. “I've got some driving time left. I could go for another hour, no problem.”

Mark didn't believe a word of it. “You're a better driver than a liar, you know.”

“I can do it. Really I can.”

“Look, this isn't about who can drive their allowable hours, or even who has hours left on his day. I could take over and drive for the next 12 hours if I wanted to.”

In Canada, drivers are allowed to be on duty for 14 hours out of every 24, which allowed for 13 hours of driving, with one hour on duty and two hours off duty every 16 hours. In the U.S., there was a 14-hour window for 11 hours of driving. Both Jimmy and Mark had plenty of driving time left in their day, but what they needed right now was rest to make sure they didn't spend several hours of their time watching Mother Load being pulled from a ditch.

“But I want to get a bite to eat,” Mark continued. “And then I want to sleep ... the kind of peaceful sleep that you get when you're not worried that your rig might be driven off the road.”

“Okay, I hear you,” Jimmy said. “Where do you want me to stop?”

Mark switched on an overhead light. “I've been looking over this list of truck stops that Bruno gave us, and if I'm not mistaken, there's a big truck stop near Canyonville, Oregon.”

“I think I saw a sign for a town like that a while back.”

“We must be close, then,” said Mark.

“What’s the name of the truck stop?”

Just then, Mother Load’s headlights flashed across a billboard that stood in front of the trees lining the side of the highway. “Seven Feathers Truck and Travel Center,” Mark said, reading the sign.

Jimmy eased off the accelerator to start Mother Load’s cool-down. But the further they got along the highway, the more it became obvious that this place was more than just a truck stop.

“It’s got a casino,” Jimmy said, reading one of the direction signs. He began to gear down.

“And a hotel,” said Mark.

“And a couple of motels.” There was a hopeful tone in Jimmy’s voice.

“I think we’ll stay in the truck tonight.”

“All right,” Jimmy said, turning off the highway and slowing to a crawl as he looked for a place to park in the travel-center lot, “but if they’ve got all this stuff, I bet they’ve got something else too.”

“What?”

“Shorepower.”

“What the hell is that?”

Jimmy pointed to one of the yellow-and-white stanchions that dotted the parking lot. “See those things?”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“That’s a Power Pedestal,” Jimmy said, pulling up next to one of the colourful posts and setting Mother Load’s parking brake.

“You mean like an electric outlet in a trailer park?” Mark asked. He’d seen these things in truck stops before, mostly in New York state, as well as the last time he was through Oregon, but he hadn’t given them much thought. Obviously, Jimmy had thought about them ... a lot.

He was busy checking Mother Load’s gauges to ensure the engine had cooled down enough to allow it to be shut off without any damage. “They call it the STEPS system.”

“Which means?”

“The Shorepower Truck Electrified Parking Space.”

“I think I like STEPS better.”

“Each one of these pedestals delivers 120-and 208-volt power, Internet access and cable TV.”

Mark considered that for a few moments, wondering why no one had thought of something like this sooner. “That’s a good idea.”

he said. "If I can surf the Net from here and watch cable, I might not want to leave."

Jimmy must have been satisfied with Mother Load's readings because he shut down the engine, which filled the cab with a strange yet welcome silence. "More important than that is the money you save."

"But don't I have to pay for the hook-up?"

"Of course you do, but it's cheaper than idling the truck all night long."

"Oh, yeah?" Like most owner-operators, Mark was always interested in things that saved him money. "How much cheaper?"

"If you use Shorepower to heat your truck overnight instead of idling, the saving is something like \$2 per hour."

"Two dollars." It didn't sound like all that much on its own.

"Two dollars times eight hours is \$16, times five nights is \$80, times 52 weeks a year is ..."

"Over \$4,000, I get it."

"But there's a bigger benefit than just saving money. Every parking space that's used by a diesel rig for eight hours per day, instead of idling that amount of time, cuts out 30 tonnes of carbon dioxide that would have been emitted into the atmosphere over the course of a year."

"Okay already, I'm sold. How do I get hooked up?"

"Do you have an electric heater in the truck?"

"Of course," said Mark. He'd been parked in plenty of places that had electric outlets nearby, and he'd heated his truck on more than a few occasions with "free" electricity.

"And an extension cord?"

"I think I've got one in the back here," Mark said, getting up and looking in one of his sleeper compartments for the cord.

"Then you've got all you need. There are even kits that you can buy that allow for heating, air-conditioning, cooking, television, even a block heater for the engine. But an extension cord is good enough to start."

"What's that other one I've seen with the thing that goes in the window?" Mark asked, still looking for the cord.

"That one's called IdleAire. The window template you're talking about costs about ten bucks and gives you a phone connection, Internet hook-up, heating and cooling, a built-in television monitor and even a keyboard if you don't have your own computer."

“And how do I pay for these miracles ... through the nose?”

“Nope,” Jimmy said. “You pay remotely with an authorization call. I’ll do that for you ... so tonight’s heat and electricity will be on me.”

Mark was pleased to hear it. “That’s nice of you,” he said. “Thanks.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Jimmy said, “since you’ll be buying dinner.”

“How’d you sleep?” Mark asked, after checking his watch and realizing it was past seven in the morning and time they got started on the day.

“Very well, and you?”

“Like a baby,” he said. Mark had to admit he’d gotten a good night’s sleep. Not only had the Shorepower set-up saved him money, but with all of the other trucks in the lot using Shorepower as well, there were fewer trucks starting up throughout the night, making things especially quiet for a truck stop.

“Do you want to eat before we go?” Jimmy asked with a yawn.

“Sure,” Mark said. “And this time, you’re buying.”

They ate at one of the more casual restaurants in the complex, with Jimmy making sure Mark had a balanced meal that included yogurt, fruit and protein. Mark allowed himself a coffee, knowing it wasn’t the best thing to keep him alert over the long term (not to mention the need to stop a short way down the road to drop the coffee off in a restroom), but he promised that he’d keep his coffee intake to one cup and replace his java with orange juice throughout the rest of the day.

When they returned to the truck, Mark said, “Let’s do a real good circle check this time.”

“Why? You feel something’s wrong?”

“No, it’s just that we’re in the U.S. now, and the last thing I want is for some state trooper or highway patrolman to pull us over for having a light out or something out-of-whack with the trailer.”

“Right.”

So Mark opened up the bonnet and inspected the engine compartment while Jimmy made his way around the rest of the rig. Mark was happy to see that all of his fluids were topped up and none of his belts and hoses was showing any signs of wear. If he did end up selling this rig, someone was going to get a very well-maintained

machine. As he closed up the engine cowl, Mark could hear Jimmy thumping the tires. They all sounded right, even from the front of the truck.

“Don’t forget to check the pressure,” said Mark.

“Right,” answered Jimmy.

The thump test was a quick and easy way to make sure there was air in the tires, but ensuring that tires had the proper psi was an easy way to maximize fuel economy. After all, the reason manufacturers specified a specific tire pressure was to get the most out of their product. And considering the cost of tires these days — even retreads — it made sense to get the best ride and longest life out of his investment.

“Everything looks okay,” Jimmy said when he was done checking the tires.

“It’s all good up here, too. Jump in the truck and I’ll check the lights.”

Jimmy climbed up behind the driver’s seat and turned the ignition. A moment later he fired up Mother Load’s engine.

“Go ahead,” Mark instructed.

Jimmy switched on the headlights.

Mark gave him the thumbs-up.

Then Jimmy flashed the left-turn indicator light.

“Working ... ” Mark said, then, “not working ... ”

Jimmy stuck his head out the window. “What?”

The light continued to flash. “Working ... not working ... working ... not working.” It was a joke Mark had first seen on a Three Stooges show years ago. He used it whenever he helped another trucker check his lights. Some guys thought it was funny. Some, like Jimmy, didn’t.

“Very funny,” he said. “Ha! Ha!”

Mark made his way around the rest of the truck without finding a problem. When he returned to the cab, Jimmy was still sitting in the driver’s seat.

“It’s my turn,” said Mark.

“But we’ve both had a rest.”

That was true; there was no reason why Mark couldn’t drive later in the day. “All right,” he said. “Just be careful getting out of here.”

“I can do it.”

Mark walked around Mother Load and saw that a truck had parked in front of them during the night. It was a bit too close to

allow them to drive straight out of their spot. "You need to back up to get around that rig," Mark said when he got into the truck. "You want me to back you up?"

Jimmy checked his rear-view mirrors and concluded, as Mark had, that he'd only need to reverse a couple of feet. "Nah, I'm okay."

"You sure?" Mark had specifically asked Jimmy about helping him back up to remind Jimmy that he should never back up his rig without help, if help was available.

"I can do it!"

Against his better judgment, Mark stayed in the truck, feeling that if he put Jimmy behind the wheel, the boy should be able to make these decisions for himself. Furthermore, not only would it be a confidence booster for him, but Mark didn't feel much like getting out of the truck again just to back Jimmy up into a few feet of empty parking lot.

Jimmy shifted into reverse.

Mother Load began beeping.

One ... two ... three feet back. Jimmy just kept on going, until ... BANG!

"What the ... " Jimmy slammed on the brakes and then pulled forward.

Mark looked skyward and rolled his eyes. The day had started out so well. "Let's see what you hit." He jumped out of the truck and ran to the back of the trailer. "Aw, hell!" he said.

Jimmy was there too, staring in disbelief. "How could that have happened?" he said. "I didn't move that far back."

"Well you did and it happened."

For the next few moments Mark and Jimmy stood there staring at the smashed headlight of a red Peterbilt. It was an older-model truck with round lights over the fenders, and the broken one on the passenger side was right in line with the steel guard on the back of Mother Load's trailer. There wasn't a scratch on the trailer and there wasn't any glass lying on the asphalt, but there could be little doubt the two had come into contact with each other.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The truck was also decorated in a very unique way with flames streaking back from the front of the cowl-and-skull and crossbones graphics all over the outside of the cab. The words "Road Killer" were painted on the driver's door, and most unsettling of all and true to the truck's name, the front of the truck was spattered with blood-red paint.

“What do I do?” Jimmy asked.

“Well, you’ve got to take responsibility for it.”

“You mean I can’t just drive off?”

“No, you’ve got to find this driver, tell him what happened and make it right.”

Jimmy climbed up the side of Road Killer’s cab and took a look inside. To his dismay, there was a shotgun resting on a rifle rack hung up on one of the sleeper’s walls. “I’m not sure this guy’s going to be very understanding,” he said. “Besides, he could be anywhere in this place.”

That was true enough. There were so many hotel and motel rooms, activities and restaurants that they could spend the entire day looking and still not find the driver. “All right, we’ll wait a few minutes and ask around the lot here. If the driver doesn’t show, you write a note about what happened, put it in an envelope with \$100 and slip the envelope into his cab.”

“I like that idea better,” said Jimmy.

“Start writing, I’ll ask around.”

But half an hour later they weren’t any closer to finding the driver of the Peterbilt with a broken headlight.

“Well?” Jimmy asked.

Mark wasn’t happy with Jimmy getting off so easily. If he wanted to drive for a living, he had to know that these things took money right out of his pocket and had to be avoided at all cost. “Safety first” wasn’t just a saying; it was a practice that saved money too. “Make it \$150 and we’ll be on our way.”

“Uh, do you have \$50 you could lend me?”

Mark took out his wallet. “I’ll take it out of your pay.”

Jimmy took the money without saying anything and slipped it into an envelope. Then he hurried over to the truck and slid the envelope through the open crack at the top of the driver’s window. “Let’s go!” he said, running back to Mother Load along the driver’s side of the truck.

“Where are you going?” Mark asked.

“Aren’t I driving?”

Mark shook his head. “I think it would be better if I were the one to drive us out of this lot.”

Jimmy turned and took one last look at the broken headlight of the red Peterbilt. “I think you’re right.”

CHAPTER



The Seven Feathers Truck and Travel Center was an hour behind them, but Jimmy didn't look so good. He seemed tense, like he'd been back in high school when he'd just broken his mother's favourite vase and was dreading what she'd say when she got home from work.

"Relax," Mark said. "After all, we drive for a living, right? You're bound to hit something now and then."

"Oh yeah, when was the last time you hit something?"

Mark tried to remember, but he couldn't recall anything in recent memory. But telling Jimmy that would hurt the boy's feelings and make him a nervous wreck behind the wheel. "Why, it was just last winter. I was driving through this parking lot and everything was covered in snow. There was this snowbank that turned out to be a white VW. It was kind of funny, actually, except the owner didn't think so."

Jimmy stared at Mark skeptically. "You didn't hit anything."

"Sure I did. It was last winter."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

Mark hesitated. Jimmy was young and green, but he wasn't dumb. "All right, I made that up, but still, it happens to everyone."

"Maybe we can talk about something else for a while. You know, get my mind off of things."

"Yeah, sure, okay," Mark said, wondering what they could talk about after so long on the road together. And then he had it. "There was one thing I wanted to ask you about."

"Shoot!" said Jimmy.

"Last night at dinner, I overheard a few drivers talking about non-attainment areas. Do you know what they are?"

“Yeah, I think so.”

There was a long silence.

“Well?” Mark asked expectantly.

“Okay,” Jimmy began, as if trying to remember. “You know how starting in 2007, all new engines had to have the new emission control equipment?”

“I heard about that. Because of it, engines cost between \$3,000 and \$7,000 more than the previous year.”

“Right.”

“So, how’s a poor slob supposed to make that money back when these new-fangled engines use the same amount of fuel — even slightly more in some cases — than the older models?”

Jimmy smiled. “It’s a little complicated.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“From what I understand, a non-attainment area is an area that’s been identified by the Environmental Protection Agency as having poorer air quality. Usually, non-attainment areas are around big cities, like St. Louis for example.”

Mark had driven to St. Louis several times and had to admit that the smog there was sometimes noticeable.

“So the EPA, that’s the Environmental ...”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“They make the area improve its air quality.”

“How can they make them do that?”

“The area and the state government have to come up with a plan. Then the EPA monitors the air to see if they’re complying with the plan.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then the government holds back on the money they usually give the city to build roads and infrastructure.”

“Okay, that’ll do it,” said Mark.

“So, that’s why there are anti-idling laws everywhere. It’s also why there’s so much going on with new trucks in terms of reducing emissions. The federal and state governments are making new rules even before the technology exists to make them happen.”

Mark just shook his head. “It doesn’t seem right. In fact, it’s ass-backwards is what it is.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, trucks started running on diesel because it was cheaper than gasoline. Sure, diesel engines ran dirtier, but the lower cost

made it an acceptable trade-off. Now they're trying to cut emissions, and the advantages of running diesel are less and less."

"But it helps the environment," said Jimmy.

"Sure it helps the environment," Mark answered. "If I never took another load and left my truck sitting in a field somewhere, that would help the environment too, but people wouldn't have anything to eat, to sleep on, to wear, to drive, to ... well, they wouldn't have anything."

"If you think it's tough now, wait 'til 2010."

"What happens then?"

"There will be a new set of standards for emissions."

Mark didn't like the sound of that. "Then the truck and engine companies better get on it. Never mind emissions, we need trucks that run on less fuel."

"They're working on that, too."

"Sure, but every time they figure out a way to save fuel, they go and add something to the engine that uses more fuel."

"Like what?" Jimmy asked.

"Like diesel particulate filters."

Jimmy stared at Mark with a shocked expression.

Mark laughed. "I know a few things about trucks too, you know."

"Diesel particulate filters really cut down on emissions," said

Jimmy.

"Which is great in an urban environment where transit buses are stopping and starting every few hundred metres, and there are people all around breathing in fumes. But what's the point of having one of these filters on my truck so it runs cleaner while I'm driving through Saskatchewan where there's no one around for a hundred miles in any direction?"

Jimmy didn't have an answer.

"And they're more work. Every once in a while, I've got to do a regeneration and use some really intense heat to burn off the accumulated diesel soot in the particulate trap. If I don't, my engine will lose power until it ultimately shuts down on its own."

Again, Jimmy said nothing.

"And another thing," Mark continued to rant, "every emission control system I've ever seen introduces a fuel penalty."

"Yeah."

"So, how does using more fuel help the environment?"

Jimmy thought about that for a bit before he said, "Cleaner air is

a big deal. You may not always see it, but my children's children will be thankful for your efforts."

"I hear ya," Mark said. Mark couldn't deny that all the efforts being made by governments and the trucking industry to clean up their act was the right thing to do for the environment; he just wished all the measures they were asking truckers to take didn't cost so damn much to implement.

"Everyone's got to do his part," said Jimmy.

"Well, I'd like someone else to pull up the slack for a while."

"It's not easy being green."

Mark looked over at Jimmy and laughed.

And that's when he saw it. "What colour was that Peterbilt you backed into?"

"Red."

"And which light was it that you broke, right or left?"

"Passenger side. Right."

"I think he's behind us."

"What?" Jimmy looked in the mirror and saw the older red Peterbilt following close behind them, with only the driver's-side headlight shining brightly to light its way.

"I wrote him a note and said I was sorry. I even gave him more than enough money to fix the light," Jimmy said, his voice cracking slightly with fear. "Why's he chasing us?"

"You want me to stop so you can ask him?"

"No, that's okay. Maybe he's, uh, maybe he's just heading south like us. There aren't that many southbound routes for semis, so maybe he's just going the same way we are."

"I could find out for sure," said Mark.

"Are you going to call him on the CB?"

"No. I could speed up a bit and see if he keeps pace. If he does, then he's following us. If not, he's just driving efficiently, like me."

"Do it!" Jimmy snapped. "Do it!"

"But what about fuel efficiency?" Mark smiled. "And the environment and all that?"

"Just go!"

Mark pressed down on the accelerator and increased Mother Load's revs a few hundred rpms. The speedometer crept upward from 55 to 56, 57, 58, settling on 63 miles per hour.

The red Peterbilt with the broken headlight slowly grew smaller in their mirrors until it was obscured by several other trucks that had

pulled into the lane behind them.

“Not following us,” said Mark.

Jimmy sighed in relief.

Mark slowed.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving money.”

“Let’s we splurge a bit,” Jimmy said, “at least ’til the next stop.”

“Okay,” Mark said, “but just this once. I have a business to run, you know.”

But Jimmy didn’t answer. He was still staring into the mirror, fixing his gaze at the tiny speck of light as it got smaller and smaller and smaller

CHAPTER



The drive into San Francisco was scenic as they drove south on Highway 280. Jimmy was most impressed by all the houses built up on the hills and the drop on their left that led to the bay.

“You know,” Mark said, “a guy I know who drives through San Francisco all the time told me that sometimes when you drive through at night you can see muzzle flashes from the gunfights between the gangs.”

“You’re kidding me,” said Jimmy.

“Yeah, that’s what I said too, but he was serious.”

Jimmy said nothing in response. Obviously Mark had given him a lot to think about. It was great to be driving to new and different places, but you had to remember that they were different and you couldn’t expect everything to be the same as they were at home, or even in your own country.

“Hey, there’s where the cable cars are,” Jimmy said at last as they passed Mariposa Street where one of San Francisco’s three remaining cable cars was still operating. “Do you think we could go for a ride on one?”

Mark wasn’t all that interested in sight-seeing. Even though everything had checked out so far, he couldn’t help but feel there was something wrong about this load. The sooner he delivered it and they were on their way back home, the better. “We’ll see” was all he said.

Finally, their exit onto Pennsylvania came up, and Mark slowed to take the exit ramp. Mark had let Jimmy drive a few hours over the course of the day, but once they hit the city limits, they switched up again so he would be the one driving on the tighter, more congested city streets.

“Make a left and drive for less than a block,” Jimmy said, following the directions Bruno had given him, “and then we should find, yup, 25th.”

“Right or left?”

“Make a right, and Mississippi is your first right.”

Mark made the turns, and they suddenly came upon a row of industrial units lined up on either side of the street. Over one of the units was a sign that read “Off the Wall Flooring.”

“Is that it?” Mark asked.

“Must be,” Jimmy said. “It’s the right address.”

“Let’s just hope he’s still open,” Mark said, pulling to a stop by the front door of the unit so Jimmy could get out and see if they were still open for business.

Mark let Mother Load idle while he watched Jimmy try the front door, knowing he’d have to shut her down if Jimmy had to knock again.

The door opened and Jimmy stepped inside.

“So far so good,” Mark said under his breath.

Jimmy reappeared less than a minute later, giving Mark the thumbs-up sign and then heading back into the unit. Mark put Mother Load in gear and headed around back where he expected to see a loading door rolling up and Jimmy standing on the dock.

And sure enough, as Mark rounded the corner, that’s just the scene that welcomed him, except for the shipper who was standing by Jimmy’s side with a clipboard in his hand and a pencil tucked behind his ear.

The dock was wide open, and there was plenty of space to manoeuvre Mother Load for an easy reverse up to the dock.

Mark shifted into reverse, and as he began to back up, Jimmy jumped to the ground to guide him back to the dock. But before he reached the dock, Mark stopped to give Jimmy the chance to break the seal and open the doors to the trailer. A minute later, Jimmy cracked open the barn doors of the trailer and pushed them open despite a series of creaks and groans that would have been more at home on Halloween ... or at least a midnight delivery.

“Okay,” Jimmy said when the doors were secure, guiding Mark until he’d backed up to the dock with barely a bump.

“That’s good,” Jimmy shouted with a wave.

Mark checked his engine temperature to make sure it was safe to shut down and then he switched off the ignition.

Mother Load slowly rattled to a stop, chuffing like a horse settling into its stable after a long, long run.

“Now,” Mark said under his breath as he grabbed the paperwork, “let’s see if this fairy tale load is for real.”

He climbed down out of the truck and met up with Jimmy. Then the two of them joined the shipper inside the warehouse.

“Right on time,” the man said, extending his hand.

“Mark, this is Frankie,” said Jimmy.

“Frankie De Niro,” the man said as he shook.

“Like the actor?”

“Yeah, just like the actor, but no, I’m not related ... although my mother thinks we have the same eyes.”

Mark looked around and saw no one else in the shop. “Is it just you here?”

“I don’t need anyone else.”

“All right, then,” Mark said, holding out the envelope with the paperwork. “If you don’t need us, we’ll just collect our money and be on our way.”

“Did my cousin tell you it was going to be COD?”

“Who, Bruno?”

“Yeah, Bruno. Did he promise COD?”

“As a matter of fact, he did,” Jimmy said. “Is that a problem?”

“No, it’s just that it would have been nice if he’d let me know, is all.” But despite his protestations, Frankie reached into his pocket and took out a bankroll that was an inch thick and wrapped in \$100 bills.

Jimmy’s eyes grew wide.

Mark wasn’t as impressed. In fact, he took the sight of all that money as a sign of trouble. Shippers rarely had cash like that on them. In fact, most legitimate businessmen had chronic cash flow problems with most of their money tied up in merchandise, payroll and overhead.

Frankie didn’t seem to have such problems. He began peeling off bills, counting out 32 of them before pocketing the rest of the wad. But before handing Mark any money, he held it close to his chest and said, “You did good delivering the load. How’d you like to have another one, back to where you came from?”

Mark nodded.

But Jimmy was shaking his head.

“I’d like that,” said Mark.

Jimmy looked at Mark with puppy-dog eyes. “But ... but we’re

in California. I thought we could spend some time here, you know, cruise around, check out the sights. Remember the cable cars?"

Normally Mark would have taken some time off to play tourist since it wasn't all that often he visited San Francisco, and he'd always wanted to ride a cable car. But there was something not right about this trip, and the sooner he was on his way back to Canada, the better. Jimmy's sightseeing would have to wait until next time, and seeing as he would be driving for himself soon enough, there would be plenty of "next times" for him on the horizon.

Mark looked at Jimmy. "I really want to get back." Then he pulled Jimmy closer so he could speak to him in a whisper. "Most of the traffic in this industry moves east and west, not north and south. We're lucky to get a load back into Canada so quickly, and I don't want to pass up the chance."

Jimmy looked disappointed, but it seemed as if he at least understood.

"Besides," Mark continued, "the way things are going green here in California with SmartWay and all that, my rig's legal to haul loads today, but I can't be sure about two days from now. That's how fast things are changing."

Jimmy nodded. "Okay, but can I do a bit more driving on the way back?"

"Sure," said Mark. Then he turned to face the shipper. "We'll take the load. What is it?"

Frankie handed Mark the cash. "Ceramic tiles from Mexico."

"And the paperwork?" He wasn't as worried as he'd been taking the load into the U.S. This was a load back to Canada, back home, after all, but he still had to ask.

"Everything's done," he said. "I've got everything I need to get the load across the border, except a driver."

"And payment?"

"COD at the other end, just like with me."

Mark felt the bills in his hand. "Excellent," he said, thinking he'd just scored another milk run. "When can we leave?"

"I'll load you up as soon as I get this stuff off. Shouldn't take more than an hour."

"Great, you mind if we get a bite to eat somewhere?"

"Be my guest."

"Thanks," said Mark.

"No, no," Frankie insisted, "be my guest." He pulled a \$50 bill

from his pocket. "Dinner's on me."

Mark took the money, shaking his head in disbelief. This load was working out better than he could have ever imagined. There had to be a catch somewhere, and he wondered just when the hammer was going to fall.

Mark did a thorough check of the trailer while Jimmy did a full circle check of Mother Load.

"Good to go?" Mark asked Jimmy when they'd both finished their checks.

"Golden," Jimmy replied.

"Then let's get the hell out of this place and back to where we belong."

"Can I drive?" Jimmy asked.

Mark hesitated, wanting to make sure they got out of the city and onto the Interstate without any problems, but he knew how much Jimmy wanted to get behind the wheel so he could tell his friends all about his drive through California.

"All right," Mark said at last. "But if you hit another thing, you won't have to worry about any mad trucker running you down ... I'll kill you myself."

Jimmy grabbed the keys and climbed up into the driver's seat.

Mark was on pins and needles the whole way, but Jimmy seemed comfortable enough behind the wheel, and they reached the San Francisco city limits without incident. Finally, when they were well onto the Interstate and heading north, Mark gave Bud a call to let him know what was happening.

"Hello?" said Bud.

"Bud, it's Mark."

Mark waited for it.

"Mark who?"

"Mark of the beast, who do you think?"

"Hey Dalton, I was hoping you'd call. What happened in San Francisco? Did you get stiffed? Did you call the cops?"

"No, we were paid in cash, just as promised."

"What? No shady characters? No backroom deals? No ethnic stereotypes telling you to 'fegedaboutit' when you mentioned you'd like to get paid?"

"No, why?"

"Well, I've been calling around asking about this shipper, Bruno

Scorsese.”

“And?”

“Nobody’s got a good thing to say about him. He’s as shady as the ground beneath my belly, and as fly-by-night as a vampire.”

Mark smiled at that. “Yeah, it is pretty shady down around your shoes.”

“C’mon, Mark, I’m serious. Everyone I talked to said you’re going to get burned working for him.”

“I appreciate your concern, Bud, but everything worked out great. The guy was real professional. We got paid right away, and we even got a load of ceramic tiles made in Mexico headed for Kamloops.”

All the thunder was gone from Bud’s voice. “Oh” was all he said.

“That’s right, we’re coming home.”

“What was the shipper’s name for that load?” Bud asked.

“Funny thing about that,” Mark said. “It was Frankie De Niro.”

“But not related to the actor,” Jimmy said from across the cab.

“Don’t you think that’s odd?”

“What? That he’s Italian?”

“No, that one shipper is named Scorsese and the other is named De Niro.”

“What should they be named? Sam? Jeff? Or how about Bud?”

“Cut it out, Mark. I mean that one’s the name of a famous director and the other a famous actor.”

Mark thought about it but didn’t care too much. The man’s money was good, and that was the most important thing, after all. “It is kind of strange now that you mention it,” Mark said at last, “but maybe Italians like doing business with other Italians.”

“What about the first guy I talked to, Johnny Morricone?” Jimmy asked, obviously listening in to at least half of Mark’s conversation. “He was Italian too, but not named after anyone famous in the movies.”

“Did you hear that?” asked Mark.

“Johnny Morricone?” Bud asked.

“Yeah, Italian, but not related to anyone in the movie business.”

“You think so, eh?”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“There’s a famous composer of movie music named Ennio Morricone. He did the music for the Clint Eastwood movie, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

Mark suddenly had a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. “So you think they’re all using phoney names?”

“Chances are good.”

“And you think we’ve been hauling something ...” How should he put it? “... not entirely legal.”

“It’s leaning that way.”

Mark wasn’t convinced. Or at least he hoped that wasn’t the case.

“You mind if I make a few more phone calls.”

“Knock yourself out, Bud,” Mark said. “Let me know if you learn anything. Otherwise, see you in a few days.”

They’d been slicing through the northern California mountains for a while, and Jimmy seemed to be enjoying the twisting up-and-down of the highway. Watching him, Mark saw raw excitement on Jimmy’s face, and it reminded him of himself on those few first trips through the Rocky Mountains, where the challenge of driving was only matched by the beauty of the scenery rolling past your windows. As they crossed over into Oregon, the beauty of the landscape continued unchanged as majestic mountains and magnificent forests made it hard to keep one’s eyes on the road.

“Always watch where you’re going,” Mark reminded Jimmy when he caught the younger man staring into his mirror. “We’ll stop in a bit, and you can take all the time you want to admire the scenery.”

Jimmy just shook his head. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“You remember that Peterbilt I backed into on the way down?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s behind us again.”

Mark didn’t believe it, so he took a look in his mirror. Sure enough, there was the older-model Peterbilt with its one broken light and flame-shrouded cowl bearing down on them like some angry fire-breathing demon.

“Do you think he’s just going this way?” Jimmy asked hopefully. “Like he had a load into San Francisco, and now he’s headed north just like us?”

It was possible, Mark thought, but unlikely. Sure, there were only a few possible routes for semis to take going north and south, but the chances that this truck just happened to be behind them

again were a little too thin. "I don't think so," Mark said. "I think he's looking for us."

"Should I outrun him?" Jimmy asked, already pressing hard on the accelerator.

"Easy. We can't outrun him forever. Sooner or later we're going to have to stop and he'll catch up to us."

"Then what are we going to do?"

There was fear in Jimmy's voice that Mark would have thought funny if he wasn't a bit unsettled himself.

"We're going to find out what he wants."

"I'm not stopping."

Mark grabbed the CB and turned up the volume on the radio. Then he switched to Channel 19 and began hailing the truck behind them.

"Hey there, Road Killer, you got your ears on?"

They waited for a response, but there was none.

"I say, Road Killer heading north on I-5, you listenin' in?"

Static. Then, "This is Road Killer. That you, Mother Load?"

"That's affirmative."

Mark waited for the man to say something more. When he didn't, Mark spoke up. "Uh, listen Road Killer, we couldn't help but notice you coming up behind us going south and again headed north. We can't help but think you're following us."

"That's 10-4. I am."

Jimmy looked over at Mark, a hint of fear in his eyes.

"Can I ask why?"

"I'm looking for the young man driving that rig."

Jimmy's expression of fear leaped into a look of sheer terror.

"For what reason?"

"I want to talk to him."

Jimmy was shaking his head and mouthing the word "No" over and over again.

Mark took his finger off the mike. "You're going to have to face up to this eventually."

Jimmy sighed, then tossed his head back as if he'd resolved himself to his fate.

Mark clicked on his CB. "Sure, if talkin's all you want to do."

"That's right."

"We'll be stopping for some grub in the next five miles. That good for you?"

“10-4, the Wolf Creek truck stop’s up ahead.”

As if on cue, a sign for the Wolf Creek stop appeared on the roadside, advertising “Grill, Deli & Fuel.”

“We’ll see you there, then,” said Mark. “Over and out.”

“10-4.”

Mark cradled the mike and looked over at Jimmy. The young man appeared pale, his skin taking on a greenish hue. “Relax,” Mark said. “All he wants to do is talk.”

“Sure, but he sounds like the kind of guy that does all his talking with his fists.”

Bud checked through his list of contacts once more, this time looking for a shipper in California who might know something about this guy named Frankie De Niro.

But before he’d made it halfway through his list, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Is this Bud?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“My name’s Jerome, I’m a driver ... ”

“Sorry Jerome, I don’t have any loads for new drivers right now.”

“That’s not why I’m calling,” the man said. “I was talking to Bart, my regular shipper, and he said you were calling around asking about a guy named Bruno Scorsese.”

Bud sat up in his chair and held the phone closer to his ear.

“That’s right.”

“Stay away from him. That’s my advice to you.”

“You’ve driven for him?”

“Him and one of his buddies, Frankie De Niro ... if that’s his real name.”

“Did they stiff you for a load? Threaten you?”

“No, nothing like that. They pay up and all their paperwork’s in order. But they’re organized crime through and through, that’s why they pay cash. I did a load for Bruno from Victoria to San Francisco. It was supposed to be hockey pucks, which should have been my first clue. What the hell are they going to do with a trailer load of hockey pucks in San Francisco?”

Bud didn’t have an answer, so he asked a question. “What was on the truck?”

“Hockey pucks. Lots of them, but in a couple of the boxes were big plastic bags filled with *psilocybe cubensis*.”

“What?”

“You know, magic mushrooms.”

“Oh,” Bud said. “So what’d you do about it?”

“I delivered the load to Frankie, got paid and told him I already had a load out of Los Angeles headed for Toronto.”

“He offered you a load on the way back?”

“Yeah, ceramic tiles from Mexico headed for Kamloops.”

Bud felt a shiver run down his spine. “Really?”

“People I’ve talked to say that’s the story he uses when he runs guns into Canada.”

Bud gasped. “Thanks, that’s good to know.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you so interested in these guys?”

Bud considered telling the guy a story, but since he’d done Bud a favour by calling and warning him about these operators, it wouldn’t hurt to tell him the truth. “One of my guys is driving for this De Niro character ... ceramic tiles to Kamloops, just like you said.”

The guy on the other end of the line let out a low whistle. “Sorry to say this, but I think your driver might be in over his head.”

Bud wondered about that but concluded that Mark Dalton wasn’t in over his head on this one. Instead, he was right in his element. “Maybe” was all Bud said.

“Well, good luck to you.”

“Thanks.”

Bud hung up and considered his next move. He should call Mark to let him know what was going on, but then he remembered the conversation he’d had with his sister before he sent Jimmy on the road with Mark. He’d promised her that he’d look out for the boy. With that in mind, he decided to call the authorities first and fill Mark in later.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number for the Canadian Border Services Agency.

Jimmy drove Mother Load around the Wolf Creek lot until he found a big empty space he could drive straight into and park. He let the engine idle to cool it down, but more than a cool-down, he was putting off shutting it down because once the engine was off, it meant he’d have to get out of the truck and face what was coming to him.

And what was coming was a monster of a truck driver whose family crest seemed to be the death’s head surrounded by the flames

of hell.

“Relax,” Mark said. “What’s the worst he can do, ask you for more money?”

“That wouldn’t be so bad,” Jimmy said, his eyes scanning Mother Load’s bank of gauges for the fourth time. “I could handle that.”

“C’mon,” Mark said. “Turn the engine off and see what he wants.”

Jimmy let out a sigh, then turned the ignition switch off. Mother Load’s diesel rattled to a halt, and what was left was a silence that for Jimmy had to be the loneliest sound in the world.

“What are you worried about, really?” Mark was doing his best to sound positive. “There’s two of us and only one of him.”

“I’ve never been in a fight before in my life,” admitted Jimmy.

The flaming Peterbilt pulled up alongside them, and its parking brake let out a sharp hiss like a spitting cobra preparing to strike.

“He doesn’t know that. Just don’t let your fear show. You admitted your mistake, and you made your best effort to make it right. This guy’s got nothing to complain about.”

The other truck shut down, and now the silence seemed even more ominous.

“Let’s go!” Mark said. “This isn’t going to go away on its own.”

They got out of the truck.

As they came around the front of Mother Load, Mark caught sight of the driver. He had to be in his late fifties, early sixties, but he wasn’t letting his age affect the way he dressed. He wore the kind of heavy cowboy boots that had turned-up toes and were crowned with silver caps. His legs were wiry and covered in skin-tight denim. He had a black T-shirt on, accented by a black-leather vest, which left his arms exposed to show off his once-muscular but now withered arms and the tattoos that ran from wrist to elbow. He had a grey beard, and if his hair was gray too, it was hidden beneath a black doo-rag. There were earrings in his ears — a ring on the left and a stud on the right — and his eyes were hidden behind a pair of wraparound sunglasses. But for all of the man’s menacing features, there was one thing that seemed strangely out of place.

As they came together between the trucks, Mark couldn’t help but notice that the man was smiling.

“Boy,” he said, taking off his sunglasses to reveal a pair of warm and friendly eyes. “I had a hard time catching up to you guys.”

“So you were following us,” Mark said, more like a question than a statement.

“Of course I was,” the man said with an ear-to-ear grin. “I nearly caught you heading south, but you took off on me.”

Mark was pleased with the man’s demeanour, and one look at Jimmy revealed that the young man was relieved to learn that this driver was little more than a sheep in wolf’s clothing.

“Uh, why are you trying to catch us?” Jimmy asked, just a hint of fear lingering in his voice.

“Someone at the Seven Feathers told me you were looking for me because you’d backed into my truck.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Jimmy said. “We tried looking for you but couldn’t find you, so I left a note and money for the damage in your truck. Isn’t it enough?”

The man shook his head, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the \$150 Jimmy had given him. “It’s too much.”

“What?” Jimmy asked.

“You didn’t back into my truck. I broke that light when I started out on this trip, and I’m waiting to get back home to fix it.”

“I didn’t break your light?” Jimmy still couldn’t believe it.

“No,” he said, handing the money over to Jimmy. “You must have hit something else, like a garbage can or something.”

Mark reached out and took the fifty he’d lent Jimmy, leaving Jimmy with the hundred.

“It’s hard enough to make money in this business without paying for things you didn’t do,” said the old-timer.

Mark was pleasantly surprised by the way this had turned out, but there was still one question he needed answered. “If you were following us, why didn’t you just catch us and ask us to pull over?”

“I thought about keeping pace with you speed demons, but that takes up too much fuel. If we met up, great. But there was no way I was going to drive like a fool just to give you back \$150. I mean, if I never caught you, what’s the worst that would have happened? I’d be \$150 richer, and you’d be that much poorer because you drove too fast and used up too much fuel. Turned out though, that you were driving smart, so I just kept to my usual smart way of driving and before I knew it, we met up again. See, I’ve been driving a truck a long time, and one of the reasons for that is I don’t drive too fast or too crazy. Slow and steady wins the race ... and it also puts money in my pocket.”

“What’s your idling percentage?” Mark wanted to know.

“Four percent, right now. I’ve been down to three a few times, but never over five. See, it’s not the money you make that matters in this business, it’s the money you keep.”

Mark smiled, having said the very same thing earlier in the trip. “My sentiments exactly.”

Jimmy shook his head, no doubt remembering that Mark had said the very same thing on the trip south.

Mark liked this guy, a lot. He’d obviously been in the business for years and was likely a wealth of knowledge about how to earn a living, and more, in trucking. Best of all, he could explain it in terms that people — especially Jimmy — could understand. Mark wasn’t about to let the opportunity to learn from an old-timer pass them by.

“My name’s Mark, by the way,” he said, extending his hand. “And this is Jimmy.”

“Karl,” he said, shaking his hand.

“Well, Karl, I was wondering if you’d like to join us for dinner. Seeing as Jimmy just came into some unexpected money, it’ll be on him.”

“That’s an offer I can’t refuse.”

“After you,” Mark said, gesturing toward the restaurant.

Jimmy glanced at Mark with a look that said “Thanks a lot!”

Mark just smiled. “Trust me,” he said. “If you want to be an owner-operator, this will be the best \$100 you’ll ever invest in your business.”

Inside Mother Load, Mark’s cellphone sat on the dashboard, ringing and ringing and ringing.

CHAPTER

9

“ I’ve been driving for twenty years now,” Karl said in between bites of his steak. “And I’ve made money in every one of them.”

“Even in your first years just starting out?” Jimmy asked.

Karl shrugged. “Maybe I’m not remembering so well, but it didn’t seem as hard to run the business back then. Fuel was cheaper, there were a lot fewer regulations, crossing the border was easier, and there always seemed to be a load going somewhere.”

“Not so anymore,” said Mark.

“Exactly. Loads are tougher to come by — and by that I mean loads with big mileage at a good rate. And now terrorism has tightened up the border, so there’s a lot less traffic going north and south. Of course, everyone’s gone green, so there are a bunch of new laws about how you hafta run your truck. And let me tell you, green doesn’t mean money in your pocket. Sure, trucks are running cleaner — way cleaner — than they used to, but every new emission control system introduces a fuel penalty. Not only that, but trucks are costing more every year because of the demand for more eco-efficiency.” He said the last word as if he’d just learned it the day before and he didn’t want to mispronounce it.

“The rising price of fuel doesn’t help either.”

Karl stabbed at his French fries and then shoved a forkful of them into his mouth. “You had to get me started on that, didn’t you?” he smiled.

“Sorry,” said Mark.

“See, government wants you to drive more efficiently to make the whole industry more eco-friendly ... ” He said the word like

they were new as well, “... and they have all the means to make it happen. The problem is that not everyone in the industry is with the program.”

“What do you mean?” Jimmy asked.

“Well, when a shipper gives a driver a load, what are they more likely to ask the driver, ‘How efficiently can you get the load there?’ or ‘How fast can you get it there?’ Like it or not, most drivers still think we get paid by the mile, not by how well we do our job.”

Jimmy asked, “But we do get paid by the mile, don’t we?”

Mark had an idea where he was going with this.

“Sure, we get paid by the number of miles or kilometres we drive, but that’s not how we really earn our money. See, trucking is a business like any other, and that means it has to be run like a business. So if you want to make more money, you have to either increase revenue or decrease expenses. For example, putting less idling time on your engine is an easy way to cut out expenses and use less fuel. Every hour you don’t idle saves four litres of fuel. But past that — and this is the part drivers don’t always think about — less idling means less engine hours, and that can save you as much as two oil changes per year. That’s something in the neighbourhood of \$500. I don’t know about you boys, but there are a lot of things I could do with \$500.”

“I can think of a few,” said Mark.

“Me too.”

“And the other thing that gets overlooked is maintenance, plain and simple. That truck out there is fifteen years old, and it still runs as good as the year I bought it, and you want to know why?”

“Maintenance?” asked Jimmy.

“That’s right,” Karl said. “Think of our military. In some cases they’re using equipment that’s ten, twenty, even thirty years old. And that’s all because of maintenance. In the army, when something’s scheduled for service on a certain day, it’s serviced on that day, not next week or next month when they can get around to it. See, it’s cheaper to maintain a part than buy a new one. And grease, well, that’s the cheapest tool in the box when it comes to keeping your truck on the road.”

“How many miles do you have on your truck?” Jimmy asked.

“Coming up to a million, and I know she’s got a few hundred thousand left in her still.”

“Really?” Jimmy was intrigued.

Mark had finished his meal, but he didn't mind sitting around waiting for Jimmy to finish asking questions. While it was hard to change the attitudes of older drivers, it was sometimes just as hard to get young drivers to listen to a voice of experience and reason. Jimmy was getting a lesson here that would take him years to learn on his own.

Mark sat back in his chair, asked a passing waitress for a coffee and listened to Jimmy and Karl talk more shop.

"Well, that turned out differently from what I expected," Jimmy said, as they headed back to Mother Load after a pleasant dinner in Karl's company.

"He had a lot of good advice to share," said Mark. "I even learned a few things."

"You?"

"Hey," Mark said, "that's another thing they proved on Mythbusters ... you really can teach an old dog new tricks."

When they got to Mother Load, Jimmy started the circle check while Mark checked his watch and then looked up at the late afternoon sky. They had about six hours to go before the border with maybe two or three hours of daylight left. They both had plenty of available driving hours left, but while Mark wanted to be behind the wheel at the border, he didn't want to drive the whole six hours to get there. If he could get Jimmy to drive a few more hours, then he could take over just before they entered Canada. Then it would be a day's drive into Kamloops, and this whole American side trip would be over.

"It's all good," Jimmy said after completing the circle check.

"You drive for a while," Mark told him. "I'm going to get some sleep."

"Sure, okay." Jimmy climbed up behind the wheel.

Mark got in the passenger's side and climbed into the sleeper to get his bunk ready. The truck was parked away from the other rigs in the lot, and Jimmy would be able to drive straight out of their spot without backing up.

Mark watched Jimmy pull out of the lot and waited until they were back on the highway before he took off his shoes and readied himself for bed.

"You okay?" he asked.

"No worries," Jimmy answered.

Instinctively, Mark took a look in the rear-view mirrors to make sure everything was fine. And that's when he saw something strange.

Behind them were two vehicles, both of them black. The first was a car. A big sedan, probably a Crown Victoria ... the kind of car used by most police forces. And behind the Crown Vic was a full-sized van. While there was nothing strange about being followed by a car and a van on an Interstate highway, these two cars following at an almost even distance apart didn't sit right with Mark.

"You see that?" he asked.

"See what?"

"That. In the mirrors."

Jimmy looked left and right. "What am I looking at?"

"A car and a van."

"What's wrong with that?"

"They're both black."

"You know, back in the day of the Model-T, Ford offered their customers the choice of any colour they wanted as long as it was black."

"I'm serious. It looks like we're being followed by the police."

Jimmy looked again. "I don't see anything."

Mark checked the mirrors again, but this time there was nothing behind them.

"Maybe you should get some sleep," suggested Jimmy.

Although the vehicles weren't there any more, Mark wasn't convinced they weren't being followed. Still, if he pressed the matter, Jimmy would likely think he was being paranoid. "Okay, I'm turning in, but if you see anything suspicious don't hesitate to wake me up. Alright?"

"Yeah, sure."

Mark climbed beneath the sheets and set his head down on the pillow. Just before he dozed off, he thought he heard the sound of a helicopter flying overhead.

A helicopter, he thought. Now he was being silly.

Besides, if I'm asleep, I must be dreaming.

CHAPTER

10

The line was seven or eight vehicles deep, but with multiple booths open for business, the wait time at the border wasn't going to delay them very long.

"We sure picked the right line this time," Jimmy said as yet another truck in front of them was waved through. "I don't think they can get this line through fast enough."

Mark didn't respond, but he did think it was odd that the four trucks in front of them had gone through with hardly a flash of their brake lights while just a single truck in the lane next to them had been allowed entry into Canada. These lines moved randomly, and there was no way to predict which one was going to move faster than the other, but the speed at which their line was being processed was curious at best.

Before they knew it, the truck ahead of them crossed into Canada and Mark began inching his way up to the booth.

"Identification and paperwork, please," the Canadian Border Services Agency officer said.

Mark handed the woman both his and Jimmy's passports.

Without even looking at any of Mark's documentation, she said, "Pull over to the area on the right ... and wait."

"Is there a problem?" Mark asked.

"Just pull over there and wait," she instructed. Then she immediately left the booth with their papers and was replaced by another officer, this one a male.

"What did you do to upset her?" Jimmy asked.

"Nothing," Mark said, putting Mother Load in gear and pulling

over to the side. "I just handed her our stuff and ..." He sighed as the realization came over him. "They must have been waiting for us."

"That's not good, is it?"

"Well, I don't think they want to give us a prize."

Mark came to a stop in the secondary inspection area and set the parking brake. Before he even had a chance to shut down the engine, there was a border services officer at his window.

At both their windows.

"Turn it off and get out!" said the man.

"You too!" shouted the one on Jimmy's side of the truck.

"What's going on?" Mark asked.

"Just do it!"

Behind the first officer were two more, one of them holding a rifle. Mark shut down Mother Load and kept his hands up. He turned slowly to get the door, but before he could reach it the door was opened from the outside.

"Come with me," said the man.

Jimmy was receiving similar instructions.

"And leave your keys!"

"Yes, sir," Mark said, handing his keys to one of the other officers.

"Follow me!"

Mark was led across the parking lot and into a building on the Canadian side of the border. Parked out in front were several vehicles marked with Washington state and U.S. government licence plates. Mark didn't like the looks of this one bit.

They led him into a conference room where three men and one woman, all law enforcement officers of one sort or another, seemed to be waiting for him. Mark recognized one of the male officers but just barely, now that he was in a uniform and shirtsleeves covered his tattooed arms. It was the old-timer who'd tracked them down at the Wolf Creek truck stop. Obviously the guy had been following them their whole time in the U.S. He'd probably had no choice but to make contact with them after Mark had called the man over the radio. Clearly the officer had plenty of experience driving a truck, and his undercover work had been nothing short of convincing.

Mark nodded in the man's direction, and he returned the gesture saying, "Good to see you again."

A quick glance around the rest of the room revealed that Jimmy was nowhere to be seen. Mark figured he was being led into another room somewhere else in the building. "This is big," he said under his

breath. "Really big."

"Have a seat, Mr. Dalton," one of the officers said. He was an older man but still rather dangerous looking. He probably didn't see much action any more, but you could just tell that he'd seen his share back in the day. "Can we get you anything?"

"What's going on?" Mark asked.

"Mr. Dalton, my name is Agent Dobson of the Canadian Border Services Agency."

Mark nodded.

"And I'll be asking the questions here."

Mark said nothing. Obviously they wanted him to answer questions, so he'd wait until they asked him one before he said anything more.

"What are you carrying?"

"Ceramic tiles from Mexico."

"You picked the load up from where?"

"A warehouse in San Francisco."

"And you're heading where?"

"Kamloops," Mark answered, looking at each of the officers in the room. "But the paperwork's good. Why are you asking me all these questions?"

"That's a question, Mr. Dalton."

"I can't help it," Mark said. "I need to know what's going on."

The agent ignored Mark's plea. "Do you know a shipper named Bud?"

"Yes, of course. I haul loads for him all the time."

"Except not this time."

"No, not this time."

"Well, Bud called us to tell us you'd be crossing the border."

"What?" Mark said. "I knew he wasn't thrilled I was finding my own loads, but he didn't have to call the cops on me."

"But he did, Mr. Dalton. In fact, he's done you a huge favour."

"How's that?"

The agent sighed. "That's another question."

Mark sighed as well, reminding himself he was not in control here. "Sorry."

Jimmy sat in a hard plastic chair in a stark white room with a bright white light above him. There were three other men in the room, all of them wearing some kind of law enforcement uniform.

“Who gave you the load you took into the States?”

“A man named Bruno,” Jimmy answered. “Bruno Scorsese.”

“Scorsese?”

“Yeah, like the movie director, but they’re not related.” Jimmy looked at each of the officers in turn. They all seemed so serious and so intense that all Jimmy could think was that something bad had happened somewhere. But what?

“What were you hauling for Mr. Scorsese?”

“As far as I know, it was carpet. That’s what all the paperwork said, and it was all in order, wasn’t it?”

“And when you got to San Francisco, who’d you get your load from?”

“Frankie,” Jimmy said, “Frankie De Niro.”

“Really,” the officer said. “And what are you bringing back into Canada?”

“Ceramic tiles. Made in Mexico.”

The officer studied the paperwork for their load for several moments, then looked at Jimmy again.

“It’s all in order, isn’t it?” Jimmy asked.

The officer ignored Jimmy’s question and asked one of his own. “You know a dispatcher named Bud?”

“Of course. He’s my uncle.”

“Well, he gave us a call and suggested it might be a good idea if we stopped you at the border.”

Jimmy’s heart dropped into his stomach. “My uncle called the cops on me?”

The door opened and Jimmy entered, followed by three officers, each one in a slightly different uniform. They told Jimmy to take the seat next to Mark, and then once the door was closed, one of the officers who’d come in with Jimmy started talking.

“You picked up a load from Bruno Scorsese going into the U.S. Then you got a load coming back from Frankie De Niro ... Didn’t that set off some alarm bells inside either of your heads?”

“What?” Mark said. “So they’re both Italian.”

Somebody in the room laughed.

“Can it!” said the officer. “It’s not funny.” He zeroed in on Mark. “Bruno Scorsese and Frankie De Niro are aliases.” He reached into a manila envelope and dropped black-and-white mug shots of the two men onto the table in front of Mark. “These two men have also

gone by the names Johnny Pesci, Johnny Liotta, Sal Pacino, Johnny De Palma, Johnny Coppola and Harlan Brando. In addition to being movie fans, they just also happen to run one of the biggest smuggling rings in North America.”

“Smuggling,” Mark said under his breath. He had little trouble believing it. All the signs were there: the shady arrangements, the strange names, the empty warehouses, payment in cash. Mark had suspected something wasn’t right for a while, but had done his best to ignore it for Jimmy’s sake. The kid was so thrilled that they’d snagged a load into the States; he’d be crushed to learn that the load wasn’t on the level. To be honest, Mark was also guilty of turning a blind eye to this whole U.S. trek. That’s because if he had suspected the load was illegal in any way, he would have had to report it to the authorities. And that would have caused them all sorts of problems, like delays due to the investigation, the loss of the load and a big payday, and all sorts of future lost time testifying in court. It was easier just to ignore the reality and hope they delivered the load before anyone found out or before something went wrong.

Too late!

Something had gone wrong.

“Yeah, smuggling, braniac,” the officer said. “Drugs, guns, electronics, booze, you name it. They even send truckloads of humans across the border every now and then.”

“Geez,” said Jimmy.

Mark wondered what had been in his truck heading south and what was in his truck right now. He turned to Jimmy. “I told you taking loads across the border was a bad idea.”

“You got that right,” the officer said. “You guys just delivered fifty pounds of *psilocybe cubensis*!”

“What’s that?” Jimmy asked.

“Magic mushrooms,” Mark answered.

“That’s right,” continued the officer, “and now you’ve got sixteen handguns stashed inside your boxes of ceramic tiles.”

That made sense, thought Mark. The guns could be hidden in the boxes without any noticeable difference in weight to any of them. But there was something else that didn’t make sense. “If you guys know so much about these guys, why don’t you just arrest them?”

“There’s no point in arresting them if we can’t get a conviction in court. See, we have all the information but not enough evidence to put them away.”

Mark stared into the officer's eyes. There was a strange glint in them, as if there was a big "but" on the way. Along with that, Mark had an idea where this was all going, and he wanted no part of it. "Well, you caught us. Well done, guys. We'll just turn the load over to you and be on our way, then."

"Not so fast," said the officer. "There are some problems with that plan of yours. Sure, you could walk right now, but then you'd be facing smuggling charges for the drugs and the guns, which would make it pretty difficult for you to cross the border again in your lifetime. Not a good situation for a truck driver."

"You wouldn't do that."

"I might." He paused then, half a grin joining the glint in his eyes. "Or ..."

Okay, thought Mark, it's not a "but," it's an "or." Either way, he wasn't looking forward to it. Even so, he had to ask, "Or what?"

CHAPTER



“ We don’t want you to do anything major,” the officer said. “All we need you to do is make the delivery as if nothing’s wrong, and then get the shipper to admit that he’s operating a smuggling ring.”

“That’s all?” Mark asked a bit sarcastically. “You want me to get a career criminal to confess to me. I’m just a truck driver, you know.”

The officer smiled. “We spent a long time on the phone with Bud,” he said. “He told us a lot about you ... about how you’ve helped the police a few times, solved a couple of murders, even returned a runaway girl to her family.”

That was all true, but this had the air of something really dangerous. These were the kind of criminals who wouldn’t hesitate to kill you to keep their business interests alive. “This is a little more dangerous than I’m used to,” said Mark.

“I can appreciate that,” the officer said. “But we’ll be with you all the way. The second it looks as if things are going south or you’re in the least bit of danger ... ” He looked around the room at the other officers. “We’ll all be in there in seconds.”

“And how are you going to know when I’m in trouble?”

“You’ll both be wearing wires. They’re new and state-of-the-art and very difficult to detect in a pat-down search.”

Mark glanced over at Jimmy. The boy’s face had taken on an ashen colour. He’d so desperately wanted to take a trip to the U.S., and now he looked like he wished he’d never been born. “I’ll wear a wire for you,” Mark said, “but I don’t want Jimmy sticking his neck out like that. He goes in with nothing, and if he gets in trouble, or they want to split us up, I’ll use a safe word to call you guys in.”

The officer in front of Mark looked at his colleague by the door, presumably to check if that arrangement was acceptable. The other officer nodded, and the man's focus returned to Mark.

They'd be going through with it, Mark realized. He wished Jimmy didn't have to be a part of this, but if Mark showed up at the warehouse without Jimmy, Bruno might think something was wrong. Furthermore, Jimmy was what made Mark seem so harmless. How could he be a threat when he had a wet-behind-the-ears kid like Jimmy tagging along with him? "So what do you want me to get from this guy when we meet?"

"Get him talking. Ask him about his name and be curious about whether or not it really is his name. Ask him about his past loads and his plans for the future. About his shop and where all his workers are ... like I said, get him talking."

"You want me to get him to admit that he's smuggling guns and drugs, too?" Mark asked.

A couple of the officers in the room chuckled.

"If it's not too much to ask."

"And you want all this the next time I see him?" Mark asked. "Or do you want me to take a few more loads to build up his confidence in me and Jimmy?"

"That'll be your call. If you think it's going that way, by all means, run with it."

Mark nodded. "All right, we'll do it."

"Great," the officer said, getting up from his chair.

In seconds, the room was a whirl of motion as the officers set about their specific tasks to get Mark and Jimmy back on the road before they spent a suspicious amount of time at the border.

In the middle of all the organized mayhem, Mark turned to Jimmy and said, "So, you wanted a load into the U.S. How do you like it so far?"

Jimmy didn't have an answer.

"Domestic loads don't look so bad now, do they?"

"No they don't," Jimmy managed to say.

"Well then, be careful what you wish for, Jimmy," Mark said. "You just might get it."

The "wire" was just that, a small thin piece of filament that Mark could barely feel on his body once the device was put into place. However, the transmitter was an entirely different matter. It was big

and boxy, and it felt awkward where they had placed it, taped to his abdomen just under the beltline. It was probably the safest place for it if he was ever subject to a pat-down search, but knowing that didn't make Mark feel any better. He could feel it there against his body every time he moved. He'd do his best to forget about it, but he couldn't be sure Jimmy would do the same.

"How's that feel?" the technician asked when he finished suiting Mark up.

"It'll do," said Mark.

"Do I need to know any radio code," Jimmy asked, "like 10-4, and over and out?"

The technician smiled and shook his head. "All we need you to do is talk like you normally would."

"Then get ready for an earful," Mark said. "Talking's what he does best."

"And we need to decide on that safe word you were talking about, in case something goes wrong or you want to call it off."

"How about Toronto Maple Leafs?"

"That'll do."

"Testing," Jimmy said, leaning toward Mark and speaking louder than usual. "Testing, one, two. Toronto Maple Leafs."

"It's working," the technician said. "They've been listening and recording our whole conversation while we were setting up."

Behind them someone played back the recording they'd made of Jimmy. "Testing, one, two. Toronto Maple Leafs."

"Then there's nothing left to do but wish us luck," said Mark.

"Good luck."

CHAPTER

12

Mark would be doing all the driving from here on in. Sure, there was plenty of time before they hit Kamloops, but Jimmy seemed a bit too nervous to be behind the wheel right now. In addition, they were being followed by several unmarked government vehicles, and Mark wanted to make sure they didn't lose them.

"We can go faster than this," Jimmy said. "Look at that Kenworth, he's blowing by us."

Mark checked his revs and his speed and made a slight adjustment, slowing down to get both numbers in Mother Load's sweet zone. "I'm not going to drive any differently now than I would on any other trip," Mark said. "If we're hauling what the government agents said we're hauling, then Bruno Scorsese will be there waiting for us, whether we arrive this afternoon or Tuesday morning."

"I just want to get there," said Jimmy.

"The suspense is killing you, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry, but right now we're driving a load, and that means I'm conducting business ... and good business sense means watching the bottom line. We're helping the Feds, but I didn't ever hear them say they were helping us with our fuel costs or anything like that. I've still got to make my money on this load and that means driving smart."

Jimmy just stared at Mark.

"What? What is it?"

"You."

"What about me?"

"Well, on the way out west, I was the one who was all over you

about driving more fuel efficiently, and now you're the one giving me lectures about it."

"Maybe I saw the light."

"Or maybe you had a good teacher."

"Maybe, but more than anything, I've been thinking about the nature of this business. It's not geared toward fuel efficiency and never was. When people began moving things by truck, fuel was cheap and time was money. These days it's the other way around, but the industry model hasn't changed to take that into consideration."

"What do you mean?"

"We get paid by the mile or kilometre. The faster you get someplace, the sooner you get paid. Fuel incentives for drivers are good, but I've met more than a few drivers who thought fuel incentives were just another way for companies to scam money from them."

Jimmy shrugged. "I guess some drivers have been around too long and are too used to the old ways to change."

Mark couldn't argue with that. He'd been one of those old guys, but he was on board now. Once everything was put into dollars and cents, he could see that saving fuel was the key to making money. "I changed."

"Yeah, but you're Mark Dalton."

Mark didn't know what that was supposed to mean, but he decided to take it as a compliment.

After a while, Jimmy bounced in his seat a few times and asked, "How much further is it?"

"Relax. We've still got a long way to go."

"I can't help it," Jimmy said. "This is so exciting ... real cloak-and-dagger stuff."

"Just be yourself and you'll be fine."

"That's easy for you to say, you've done this kind of thing before."

"Fair enough," Mark said. "Then let me do most of the talking. If you get stuck or don't know how to answer one of Bruno's questions, start talking about fuel-efficient driving practices."

"How's that going to help?"

"It won't, but it'll make him think you're either harmless or crazy."

When they pulled up to the warehouse on Tagish Street in Kamloops, Bruno Scorsese was standing at the front door of the shop

waiting for them. The gate into the rear of the shop was open. Mark slowed and took a look in his rear-view mirrors. Two unmarked vehicles — a black van and a dark blue sedan — came up behind him and drove on past as he made the turn into the warehouse.

As Mark pulled around the back of the building, the rear door to the warehouse opened up allowing them to drive right inside.

“What service,” said Jimmy.

“He sure wants us out of sight in a hurry.”

As soon as they were inside the warehouse, the door began coming down behind them, almost as if they were in the middle of some covert operation, ... which of course they were. “This is it,” Mark said. “No turning back now.”

“It feels like we’re in a movie,” said Jimmy.

It did, thought Mark, but no one was going to yell “Cut!” when things didn’t go according to plan. “Just remember it’s all real. If he pulls a gun, it’ll have real bullets in it.”

“A gun?” Jimmy said. Then after a deep breath, he reminded himself, “I can do this.”

Looking at the boy, Mark wasn’t sure whether Jimmy was telling Mark or trying to convince himself. Either way, there was nothing that could be done to prepare him for what was about to happen.

“You’re back,” Bruno Scorsese said as he approached Mother Load.

Mark said nothing in response. Instead he let Mother Load’s engine idle a while longer so it would cool down properly. Sure, it gave him some time to think, but there was no point in doing anything differently now that they were undercover. If he changed his routine now, Bruno would surely know something was up.

When Mark was satisfied that Mother Load was sufficiently cooled down, he turned off the engine and climbed down from the cab.

“You guys made great time,” Bruno said, slapping Mark hard on the back. “Did you have any trouble at the border?”

Mark was about to say “No” when he felt the transmitter under his clothes shift. Bruno’s hard slap on the back had jostled the machine, knocking it loose, and now he could feel the tape slowly coming away from his skin, inch by inch, away from his waistband and down the top of his leg.

“No, no trouble at all,” Jimmy said. “We came right through without a hitch.”

Mark put his hands on his belt in an attempt to stop the slide of the recorder.

Meanwhile, Jimmy kept talking.

“What kind of tiles are these, anyways?” Jimmy asked. “You would think that we could make pretty good tiles here in Canada, eh? Or maybe they’re so much cheaper coming from Mexico that we just can’t match the price?”

Mark was grateful that Jimmy had filled in while he’d been preoccupied with the transmitter, but Jimmy just didn’t know when to stop. Small talk was one thing, but Jimmy was prattling on and on ...

“Do you sell a lot of these tiles?” Jimmy continued. “I imagine it would be hard to get rid of so many tiles, but I guess when you think of how many houses there are ... it’s not that much at all. Do you guys have a lot of these loads into the U.S.?”

Bruno stared at Mark with a curious look on his face. “What’s with this guy?”

“It was his first trip to the States,” Mark said, finally in control of the runaway transmitter. “He met a girl down there, and he’s eager to go back.”

Bruno smiled as if he understood and appreciated the pull a pretty young woman could have on a man. “Nice,” he said. “This guy looks like he’s still in high school, but he’s a real player, huh.”

“An all-star,” Mark said. Then he turned to Jimmy and said, “Now shut up and listen to the grown-ups talk.”

Jimmy nodded and pressed his lips together as if he knew he’d been talking out of turn.

“Right,” Bruno said. “You got the paperwork?”

Mark handed the manila envelope to Bruno. “It’s all there.” Then remembering to keep things normal and day-to-day, he asked, “So when do I get paid?”

“Relax. You’ll get your money in a few minutes.”

Just then the door from the warehouse to the office opened, and a large man appeared in the doorway. He was dressed in black, with a leather jacket, dark glasses and a shock of thick black hair combed straight back in a style that likely hadn’t changed since high school.

“This is an associate of mine,” Bruno said. “My business partner, actually. Mario Leone.”

Mark looked Mario over and came to the conclusion that his business was purely muscle. There was a bulge in his jacket, and Mark

had to assume the man was carrying a gun, which was not surprising considering the cargo they'd just smuggled across the border.

Even Jimmy must have noticed the weapon because he started up with the stupid questions again.

"You want us to help you unload the truck?" Jimmy offered. "We've got some time and ..."

"No, we can handle it, thanks."

This was a bad idea, Mark thought. A very bad idea. It would have been tricky enough to do this on his own, but doing it with Jimmy was proving to be impossible. The kid was just too nervous.

"Okay," Jimmy said, showing no signs of shutting up or slowing down. "I just thought if there were four of us doing the work, it would go faster than it would with just two."

"Aren't you thoughtful," Bruno said. "So many questions and so eager to get the load off the truck." He turned to Mario. "Search him for a wire, will ya?"

Mark felt as if he'd been hit in the gut with a cement fist.

"Put your hands up on the wall," Mario told Jimmy.

Jimmy turned around and put his hands up.

Mario did a pat-down search, quickly and efficiently, like he'd done them hundreds of times before. "Nothing," he said. "He's clean."

Mark waited for them to turn their attention to him. He was sweating now, and he could feel his body getting moist under his clothes. The last bits of tape holding the transmitter in place were slipping.

"Don't mind him. He's just a stupid kid," Mark said. "Still wet behind the ears." Mark took a moment to think up something that would explain Jimmy's behaviour. "To be honest," he said at last, "he thinks there might be something illegal on the load. You know, like booze or something, and if there was he was hoping he might score a case. You know, kid's stuff."

"Is that right?" Bruno asked. "That's why you're asking all the questions?"

Jimmy was at a loss for words. He was nodding, but nothing was coming out of his mouth. Finally, he said, "No." Then quickly, "Yes, yes, that's exactly it. Is there booze on the truck?"

Bruno looked at Mark. "Where did you get this guy?"

"I owed his uncle a favour," said Mark.

Bruno nodded in understanding. "I've got relatives like that, too." "I train him to drive; he teaches me how to save fuel."

“That’s right,” Jimmy said. “If I can get him to save 20 bucks on a single trip out west, doing all the little things that reduce fuel consumption, then maybe he can save a few thousand over the course of the year.”

Bruno just laughed. “These guys are crazy,” he said. “Let’s get them paid so they can get the hell out of here.”

Mark felt the transmitter slip again and this time he had to put a hand against his zipper to keep it from falling right out his pant leg. “Man, that was a long trip,” he said. “Where’s the washroom?”

“Right over there!”

Mark headed in that direction, crouched over with his knees pressed together like he really had to go. He wasn’t keen on leaving Jimmy alone with the two thugs, but he was confident the boy would keep talking about fuel efficiency long enough to convince them he was an idiot.

“What I really want to do is get him to invest in all the new Shorepower options,” Jimmy was saying. “It doesn’t cost all that much to set up, but you can save like \$2 per hour over idling the truck just for heat and power. And that doesn’t even take into account the wear and tear on the engine.”

Mark took a look behind him.

The two men were doing their best to ignore Jimmy.

Well, at least that part was working out, he thought.

Mark closed the bathroom door behind him and took a deep, deep breath. It was obvious they weren’t going to get these two men to admit anything about their illegal activities today. Maybe in a week or two, after Bruno was more comfortable with them and had taken them into his confidence, he would open up a bit, but today he was were suspicious and edgy. Mark supposed that a load of guns might do that to a person.

He turned on the cold water and let it run to drown out any sounds that could be heard outside the washroom. Then he pulled up his shirt and undid his pants to take a look at the wire taped to his body. Most of the tape had come off his skin because of all the sweating he’d been doing. He’d done his best to keep cool, but Jimmy’s talking just made things tenser than they had to be.

Mark gathered the loose tape in his hands and began trying to stick it all back to his body but without much luck. The tape was damp, and all of its adhesive qualities were gone. Even worse, the

more Mark fiddled with the tape, the more of it came away from his body until ... The transmitter fell away from his body and into the toilet.

It hit with a splash and was beneath the water before Mark even realized what had happened.

“Damn it!” he said under his breath.

He reached down and pulled the transmitter out of the water. Even though it was still intact, the water dripping out from inside the transmitter’s casing told Mark that the device was out of commission.

And suddenly, their link to the outside world, the government — the cavalry — was gone. They were on their own.

Mark decided that if the transmitter wasn’t working, it was better not to have it on him at all, so he tossed the thing into the garbage can, making sure it was well hidden by the garbage already in there. With any luck, a cleaner would empty out the trash in a day or two, and no one would ever know it had ever been there.

He flushed the toilet and opened the door.

Everyone’s eyes were on him as he stood in the doorway. “Better!” he said, smiling.

“The way you load your truck can also affect fuel economy,” Jimmy was saying, still babbling on about fuel efficiency.

To his credit, Mark thought, at least the boy was doing what he’d been told.

“... because if you have an unbalanced load, that will affect your fuel economy, too. You know, having to make the engine work harder and putting extra and uneven stresses on the trailer that could cost you money down the road.”

“Is this guy nuts or what?” Bruno asked.

“Maybe,” Mark said. “I’ve had to listen to this stuff the whole trip.”

Mark had hoped that Bruno would see the humour in the situation, but the man wasn’t laughing. Instead he was stern-faced, as if considering everything that had happened and trying to piece it all together.

“I don’t like this,” he said. “I don’t like this at all. He’s talking like a fool and you gotta run to the bathroom. I’ve known a lot of screwy truckers in my time, but none as crazy as you two. Mario, search this guy too.”

Mark was relieved. At least this way, they’d find nothing and have to conclude that they were on the level.

Jimmy, however, obviously wasn't feeling as confident as Mark. Sweat had pasted his hair down against his skull, and the colour of his face was somewhere between grey and white. But worst of all, he suddenly stopped talking about fuel efficiency and began invoking their agreed-upon safe word.

"I know Toronto hasn't won a Stanley Cup since 1967, but they're rebuilding, and the current Toronto Maple Leafs are nothing like the old Toronto Maple Leafs."

Mark turned around and put his hands up against the wall in preparation for his pat-down search.

"What is wrong with this guy?" Bruno asked, clearly annoyed.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Mark said as he was being searched. "He's bi-polar. That's why his uncle asked me to train him ... he doesn't do well around people."

Jimmy had given up on stringing sentences together and was now just shouting.

"Toronto Maple Leafs! Toronto Maple Leafs!"

"And he's got a bit of Tourette's Syndrome, too," Mark added.

"He's clean," Mario announced.

Jimmy suddenly went silent. Stunned.

Bruno looked at Jimmy for the longest time, shifting his gaze over to Mark just once. "That's it," he said. "I can't deal with you guys, you're too crazy for me. I want you out, now."

"Does this mean we won't be getting any more loads from you?" Jimmy asked.

Mario snickered.

"Can you believe this guy?" Bruno said, shaking his head. "No! No more loads from me. I need stable drivers I can depend on. With you two guys, I'd probably get a call from some hick town asking me to bail you out of jail and pay a fine just so I can get my load back on the road. I don't need that hassle. I need guys who pick up their loads, drive them to their destination and drop them off ... while they keep their mouths shut. You obviously can't do that, and I can't risk using you again. Understand?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Jimmy.

"I get it," said Mark.

"Good. Now drop the trailer, and get the hell out of my warehouse before I get angry."

Mark didn't move. "I'd be more than happy to do that," Mark said, "after I get paid." Sure it was a good idea to get out now, but

Mark wasn't going to leave without his money. It had cost him time and money to drive up from San Francisco, and he wasn't about to eat the expenses, certainly not for a thug like Bruno Scorsese.

"I got to hand it to you," Bruno said. "You've got patience working with this kid, and you got guts standing up to me. The first one is admirable, but the second one is just stupid."

Suddenly there was a gun in Bruno's hand.

Mark looked over and Mario had one out, too.

"You either leave now," Bruno said. "Or you don't leave ... at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jimmy asked.

"So it's not just an act," Bruno said. "You really are that dumb."

"He's threatening to kill us, Jimmy," said Mark.

"Oh" was all Jimmy could muster.

CHAPTER

13

Thumps and scratches.

The agents in the black van around the corner adjusted the volume slightly so that the noise coming from Mark's wire wouldn't hurt their ears.

So far the driver, Mark Dalton, and his sidekick, Jimmy, hadn't gotten Bruno Scorsese to admit a thing. If they had time and a lot more visits to make Bruno comfortable with these two, then maybe they'd be able to get information on the entire smuggling operation, but today it seemed like all these two were going to get was caught.

Rushing water.

Dalton had excused himself to go the bathroom, and he was either doing his business or he'd turned on the tap. Probably the latter.

Scratches again. Another thump, louder this time.

A moment of silence.

A very loud splash!

Then nothing.

One of the agents pulled the headphones away from his ears and asked, "What the hell happened?"

"Is it a malfunction?" asked the agent at the front of the van who was looking out the windshield at the shop.

"I can't say it's not possible," answered the first. "We told him our equipment is all top-of-the-line, but it's not foolproof."

"Maybe he shut it off," suggested the third agent in the van who was supervising the whole operation. "You know, ditched it because he thought they might search him, too."

"Maybe we should move in before something bad happens."

“Not just yet,” said the supervisor. “After what that dispatcher told us, I looked into this Mark Dalton character, and the word is, he can handle himself pretty well.”

“Oh yeah, how well?”

“Let’s see, he did some undercover work before to help catch some truck hijackers, once in the Toronto area and once in Mexico, if you can believe it. He’s solved not one, but two murders, saved a young girl from a bunch of thugs at the side of the road, got a runaway girl back with her parents, and hes delivered a baby in the back seat of a car.”

“Wow!” said the agent.

“Yeah, wow!” echoed the supervisor.

“He should be working for us.”

“Maybe I’ll ask him,” the supervisor said, “if he lives through this.”

There was a moment of silence during which the agent on the controls tried to regain contact with Mark’s recording device. When there was no response, he asked, “Well, the older guy might be all right, but what about that kid he’s got with him?”

The supervisor thought about it a moment, then said, “We’ll give them five more minutes, and then we’ll move in.”

Mark considered Bruno’s threat and decided it was for real. Although he’d only met the man twice, he had no trouble imagining Bruno Scorsese placing the barrel of his gun behind Mark’s ear and pulling the trigger. And he’d probably do it with a smile on his face. But despite the threat, Mark wasn’t too keen on leaving without his money. He’d delivered the load on time and in good condition — which was the core service of his business — and if he’d kept his end of the bargain, then Bruno should as well. If Mark were on his own, he’d insist he be paid and refuse to leave until he got his money.

If he were on his own.

But Jimmy was with him, and he’d promised Bud he’d take care of the boy. Refusing to leave without payment would be putting Jimmy in harm’s way, and he obviously couldn’t do that. But realistically, what were the chances that Mark and Jimmy could leave the warehouse with both of their lives and Mother Load?

Slim, at best, he thought.

So what should he do? The border agents could break down the door and rush in with their guns drawn at any moment, but he couldn’t count on that. They just as easily might wait for Mark and

Jimmy to return to see what, if any, information they had on Bruno and decide what to do from there.

No, Mark was on his own, and he had to start acting as if that were the case. If they were going to get out of this alive, Mark would have to outsmart them.

Beat them at their own game.

If only he were dealing from a position of strength.

And then, as if by magic, just thinking about the possibility gave him an idea.

“Look,” he said, “you and I both know that you’re totally capable of killing us and stealing my truck. Hell, you’re probably pretty good at it, you’ve done it so many times before.”

There was a knowing smirk on Bruno’s face.

Seeing that, Mark knew he was talking their language now.

“Sure, so go ahead and kill me, but if you do, you’ll never get your hands on the guns that were on the load.”

“What?”

It was Mark’s turn to laugh. “Yeah, I know you think we’re just a couple of mooks, but I assure you we’re not as dumb as you think.”

“You play poker?” Bruno asked, waving his gun around.

“Because you’ve got a good bluff.” He pointed his gun at the rear of the trailer. “The seal’s still on the door, and it matches all the paperwork.”

That much was true, but Mark didn’t let anything show on his face. After all, a good bluffer doesn’t give anything away to his opponent until the hand is won or lost, and sometimes not even then.

“All right, I’m curious. Let’s just see if you took the guns out or not.”

There it was: an admission from Bruno that he knew there were guns on the load. Too bad it wasn’t being recorded or heard by anyone else.

“Mario,” Bruno called out. “Open it up! And watch him.”

Mario took a multi-tool from his waistband and cut the seal on the trailer doors. Then he opened the first door so it was standing ninety degrees to the rear of the trailer. He stood back and let Bruno climb up into the trailer. Then he turned to keep an eye on Mark, just as he’d been instructed.

Mark’s whole body tensed, ready to move.

“Yeah, you’re full of it,” said Bruno from inside the trailer.

Mario took his eyes off Mark to look inside the trailer.

“The guns are ...”

Mark rushed forward, hit the trailer door with both hands and sent it swinging closed.

At first the door swung slowly on its hinges, but Mark kept pushing for all he was worth.

Before the door closed, it caught Mario in the chest, sandwiching him between the door and the steel rear deck of the trailer. On contact, the man let out a strange sort of OOF! sound that almost drowned out the snap and crackle of his breaking ribs.

Mark pulled back on the trailer door for a second, allowing Bruno to crumple to the floor.

Then he slammed the door shut once again, locking it tight before Bruno had a chance to escape.

It was over in a matter of seconds.

Mario twitched on the floor and let out a moan.

Seeing the movement, Jimmy tackled Mario with all his weight, probably breaking a few more ribs and taking out what little fight he had left in him.

“Let me outta here!” Bruno screamed from inside the trailer. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

Mark begged to differ. “No, I think I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

“Mario,” Bruno shouted. “Take him out!”

Jimmy tightened his hold on Mario, adjusting his weight to pin the man’s body to the floor. Then he wrenched the man’s arm behind his back for good measure.

Mario grunted in pain.

“Mario’s busy right now!” said Mark.

“I know people, Dalton,” Bruno said. “I’ll make sure you pay for this. You and that idiot, both.”

“Yada, yada, yada,” said Mark.

Bruno screamed in frustration, and then gunshots rang out inside the trailer.

Bullet holes appeared in the rear door.

Mark ducked down, then moved away from behind the trailer just to be safe.

And then, finally, the doors to the office burst open, and border agents streamed into the warehouse, guns raised.

“Well, I know people too,” Mark said, “and unlike yours, mine are here right now.”

Another scream from inside the trailer.

“Relax,” Mark said. “I’ll introduce you.”

CHAPTER

14

Finding Bruno Scorsese locked in the trailer with the guns he'd just smuggled into Canada was more than enough for the Feds to put the man away for a long, long time. The Canadian Border Services Agency folks were grateful for Mark and Jimmy's help and put them up in a hotel overnight to ensure they would have as much time as they needed to get their statements and other information about the case in order. They would both have to return to Kamloops in a few months to testify at Bruno's trial, but there would be plenty of time to arrange that later.

Right now they were very interested in getting home.

Bud had gotten them a load to Toronto. When they got there, a load to Moncton would be waiting for them, so Mark could drop Jimmy off and they could both get back to their lives: Mark driving his truck and Jimmy trying to get his life and career started.

"You ever been to the Northwest Territories?" Jimmy asked.

Mark thought about it. He'd been pretty far north but never that far. "Nope," he said. "And I'm not looking to. We are heading home, no border crossing, no side trips, no adventure, no nothing."

"I hear you," Jimmy nodded. But a moment later he turned toward Mark and added, "It was fun though, wasn't it?"

Mark's mouth slowly curled into a smile. "It was one of the best times I've ever had."

"I knew it."

"But that's enough adventure for a while. I want to get you home, but I'm in no real hurry. We'll take our time and burn only as much fuel as we have to."

“That sounds like a plan,” said Jimmy.

“Besides, I’ve learned over the years that I don’t have to go looking for adventures,” Mark said. “They always find me.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bram Stoker, Silver Birch and Aurora Award winner **Edo van Belkom** is the author of more than 30 books and 200 short stories in the mystery, fantasy, science fiction and horror genres. His ongoing adventure serial “Mark Dalton: Owner-operator” debuted in the pages of *Truck News* in June 1999 and has been appearing monthly in the trucking industry trade magazine ever since. Two collections of Dalton stories — *Highway Robbery* and *Reefer Madness* — have appeared in audio-book format from Graphic Audio. In 2005, the first Mark Dalton novel, *Mark Dalton: SmartDriver*, was published by Natural Resources Canada’s Office of Energy Efficiency. Other novels and collections include *Blood Road*, *Scream Queen*, *Martyrs*, *Teeth* and *Death Drives a Semi*. Born in Toronto in 1962, Edo has worked at all sorts of writing jobs, from newspaper reporter to speech writer for a big-city mayor. He’s driven trucks and buses and been a security guard in a large truck yard. He lives in Brampton, Ontario, with his wife and son. His Web site can be found at www.vanbelkom.com.

After coaching Bud's nephew, Jimmy, on a cross-country drive that included stolen cars, hijacking, kidnapping, road rage and attempted murder, Mark Dalton was looking forward to an uneventful drive home and some well-earned time off. But on their way home, Mother Load breaks down and they're left stranded until Jimmy gets them a load into California. And although they still try to drive with fuel efficiency in mind, it's not so easy to do in a different country where things are strange and the rules have changed. On top of that, their trip south quickly turns into another adventure, this time featuring drugs, guns and organized crime.

"MARK DALTON is a modern hero — righteous but complex, smart but compassionate. These are 'road' novels in the best sense, the truck driving background a unique and fascinating world in itself. Great writing, great suspense."

—

— Ed Gorman, Co-editor,
*THE WORLD'S FINEST MYSTERY
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