

# Athabasca



Alistair MacLean

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*Athabasca*

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## PROLOGUE

This book is not primarily *about* oil, but is based on oil and the means whereby oil is recovered from the earth, so it may be of some interest and help to look briefly at these phenomena.

What oil is, and how it is formed in the first place, no one quite seems to know. The technical books and treatises on this subject are legion—I am aware that, personally, I haven't seen a fraction of them—and they are largely, so I am assured, in close agreement—except when they come to what one would have thought was a point of considerable interest: how, precisely, does oil *become* oil? They appear to be as many divergent theories about this as there are about the origins of life. Confronted with complexities, the well-advised layman takes refuge in over-simplification—which is what I now do, as I can do no other.

Only two elements were needed for the formation of oil—rock, and the incredibly abundant plants and primitive living organisms that teemed in rivers, lakes and seas as far back as perhaps a billion years ago. Hence the term fossil fuels.

The Biblical references to the rock of ages give rise to misconceptions about the nature and permanency of rock. Rock—the material of which the earth's crust is made—is neither eternal nor indestructible. Nor is it even unchanging. On the contrary, it is in a state of constant change, movement and flux, and it is salutary to remind ourselves that there was a time when no rock existed. Even today there is a singular lack of agreement among geologists, geo-physicists and astronomers as to how the earth came into being; but there is a measure of agreement that there was a primary incandescent and gaseous state, followed by a molten state, neither of which was conducive to the formation of anything, rock included. It is erroneous to suppose that rock has been, is and ever shall be.

Yet we are not concerned here with the ultimate origins of rock, but rock as we have it today. It is admittedly, difficult to observe this process of flux, because a minor change may take ten million years, a major change a hundred million.

Rock is constantly being destroyed and rebuilt. In the destructive process weather is the major factor; in the rebuilding, the force of gravity.

Five main weather elements act upon rock. Frost and ice fracture rock. It can be gradually eroded by airborne dust. The action of the seas, whether through the constant movement of waves and tides or the pounding of heavy storm waves, remorselessly wears away the coastlines. Rivers are immense powerful destructive agencies—one has but to look at the Grand Canyon to appreciate their enormous power; and such rocks as escape all these influences are worn away over the aeons by the effect of rain.

Whatever the cause of erosion, the end result is the same: the rock is reduced to its tiniest possible constituents—rock particles or, simply, dust. Rain and melting snow carry this dust down to the tiniest rivulets and the mightiest rivers, which in turn transport it to lakes, inland seas and the coastal regions of the oceans. Dust, however fine and powdery, is still heavier than water, and whenever the water becomes sufficiently still, it will gradually sink to the bottom, not only in lakes and seas but also in the sluggish lower reaches of rivers and, where flood conditions exist, inland in the form of silt.

And so, over unimaginably long reaches of time, whole mountain ranges are carried down to the seas and in the process, through the effects of gravity, new rock is born as layer after layer of dust accumulates on the bottom, building up to a depth of ten, a hundred, perhaps even a thousand feet, the lowermost layers being gradually compacted by the immense and steadily-increasing pressures from above, until the particles fuse together and re-form as new rock.

It is in the intermediate and final processes of this new rock formation that oil comes into being. Those lakes and seas of hundreds of millions of years ago were almost choked by water plants and the most primitive forms of aquatic life. On dying, they sank to the bottom of the lakes and seas along with the settling dust particles and were gradually buried deep under the endless layers of more dust and more aquatic and plant life that slowly accumulated above them. The passing of millions of years and the steadily increasing pressures from above gradually changed the decayed vegetation and dead aquatic life into oil.

Described thus simply and quickly, the process sounds reasonable enough. But this is where the grey and disputatious area arises. The conditions necessary for the formation of oil are known: the cause of the metamorphosis is not. It seems probable that some form of chemical catalyst is involved but this catalyst has not been isolated. The first purely synthetic oil, as distinct from secondary synthetic oils such as those derived from coal, has yet to be produced. We just have to accept that oil is oil, that it is there, bound up in rock strata in fairly well-defined areas throughout the world but always on the sites of ancient seas and lakes, some of which are now continental land, some buried deep under the encroachment of new oceans.

Had the oil remained intermingled with those deeply-buried rock strata, and were the earth a stable place, that oil would have been irrecoverable. But our planet is a highly unstable place. There is no such thing as a stable continent securely anchored to the core of the earth. The continents rest on the so-called tectonic plates which, in turn, float on the molten magma below, with neither anchor nor rudder, free to wander in whichever haphazard fashion they will. This they unquestionably do: they are much given to banging into each other, grinding alongside each other, overriding or dipping under each other in a wholly unpredictable fashion and, in general, resembling rocks in the demonstration of their fundamental instability. As this banging and clashing takes place over periods of tens of hundreds of millions of years, it is not readily apparent to us except in the form of earthquakes, which generally occur where two tectonic plates are in contention.

The collision of two such plates engenders incredible pressures, and two of the effects of such pressures are of particular concern here. In the first place the huge compressive forces involved tend to squeeze the oil from the rock strata in which it is embedded and to disperse it in whichever direction the pressure permits—up, down or sideways. Secondly, a collision buckles or folds the rock strata themselves, the upper strata being forced upwards to form mountain ranges—the northern movement of the Indian tectonic plate created the Himalayas—and the lower strata buckling to create what are virtually subterranean mountains, folding the layered strata into massive domes and arches.

It is at this point, insofar as oil recovery is concerned, that the nature of the rocks themselves becomes of importance. The rock can be porous or non-porous, the porous rock—such as gypsum—permitting liquids, such as oil, to pass through them, while the non-porous—such as granite—does not. In the case of porous rock the oil, influenced by those compressive forces, will seep upwards through the rock until the distributive pressure eases, when it will come to rest at or very close to the surface of the earth. In the case of non-porous rock, the oil will become trapped in a dome or arch, and in spite of the great pressures from below can escape neither sideways nor upwards but must remain where it is.

In this latter case what are regarded as conventional methods are used in the recovery of oil. Geologists locate a dome, and a hole is drilled. With reasonable luck they hit an oil dome and not a solid one, and their problems are over—the powerful subterranean pressures normally drive the oil to the surface.

The recovery of seepage oil which has passed upwards through porous rock presents a quite different and far more formidable problem, the answer to which was not found until as late as 1960. Even then it was only a partial answer. The trouble, of course, is that this surface seepage oil does not collect in pools, but is inextricably intermixed with foreign matter such as sand and clay from which it has to be abstracted and refined.

It is, in fact, a solid and has to be mined as such; and although this solidified oil may go as deep as six thousand feet, only the first two hundred feet, in the limits of present-day knowledge and techniques, are accessible, and that only by surface mining. Conventional mining methods—the sinking of vertical shafts and the driving of horizontal galleries—would be hopelessly inadequate, and they would provide only the tiniest fraction of the raw material required to make the extraction process commercially viable. The latest oil extraction plant, which went into operation only in the summer of 1978, requires 10,000 tons of raw material every *hour*.

Two excellent examples of the two different methods of oil recovery are to be found in the far north-west of North America. The conventional method of deep drilling is well exemplified by the Prudhoe Bay oilfield on the Arctic shore of northern Alaska; its latter-day counterpart, the surface mining of oil, is to be found—and, indeed, it is the only place in the world where it can be found—the tar sands of Athabasca.

“This,” said George Dermott, “is no place for us.” He eased his considerable bulk back from the dining-table and regarded the remains of several enormous lamb chops with disfavour. “Jim Brack expects his field operatives to be lean, fit and athletic. Are we lean, fit and athletic?”

“There are desserts,” Donald Mackenzie said. Like Dermott he was a large and comfortable man with a rugged, weatherbeaten face, a little larger and a little less comfortable. Observers often took him and his partner for a pair of retired heavyweight boxers. “I can see cakes, cookies and a wide variety of pastries,” he went on. “You read their food brochure? Says that the average man requires at least five thousand calories a day to cope with Arctic conditions. But we, George, are not average men. Six thousand would do better in a pinch. Nearer seven would be safer, I’d say. Chocolate mousse and double cream?”

“He had a notice about it on the staff bulletin board,” Dermott said wryly. “Heavy black border, for some reason. Signed, too.”

“Senior operatives don’t look at staff boards,” Mackenzie sniffed. He heaved his 220 pounds erect and headed purposefully for the food counter. There was no doubt that B.P./Sohio did extremely well by their staff. Here at Prudhoe Bay, on the bitter rim of the Arctic Ocean in midwinter, the spacious, light and airy dining-room, with multi-coloured pastel walls back-dropping the recurrent five-pointed star motif, was maintained at a pleasantly fresh 72 degrees by the air-conditioned central heating. The temperature difference between the dining-room and the outside world was 105°F. The range of excellently-cooked food was astonishing.

“Don’t exactly starve themselves up here,” he said as he returned with a mousse for each of them and a pitcher of heavy cream. “I wonder what any of the old Alaskan sourdoughs would have made of it.”

The first reaction of a prospector or trapper of yesteryear would have been that he was suffering from hallucinations. All in all, it was hard to say what feature he would have found the most astonishing. Eighty per cent of the items on the menu would have been unknown to him. But he would have been still more amazed by the forty-foot swimming-pool and the glassed-in garden, with its pine trees, birches, plants and profusion of flowers, that abutted on the dining-room.

“God knows what the old boy would have thought,” said Dermott. “You might ask *him*, though.” He indicated a man heading in their direction. “Jack London would have recognised this one right away.”

Mackenzie said: “More the Robert Service type, I’d say.”

The newcomer certainly wasn’t of current vintage. He wore heavy felt boots, moleskin trousers and an incredibly faded mackinaw, which went well enough with the equally faded patches on the sleeves. A pair of sealskin gloves was suspended from his neck, and he carried a coonskin cap in his right hand. His hair was long and white and parted in the middle. He had a slightly hooked nose and clear blue eyes with deeply entrenched crow’s feet, which could have been caused by too much sun, too much snow or a too highly developed sense of humour. The rest of his face was obscured by a magnificent grizzled beard and moustache, both of which were at that moment rimed by droplets of ice. The yellow hard hat swinging from his left hand struck a jarring note. He stopped at their table and from the momentary flash of white teeth it could be assumed that he was smiling.

“Mr Dermott? Mr Mackenzie?” He offered his hand. “Finlayson. John Finlayson.”

Dermott said: "Mr Finlayson. Field operations manager's office?"

"I *am* the field operations manager." He pulled out a chair, sat, sighed and removed some ice particles from his beard. "Yes, yes, I know. Hard to believe." He smiled again, gestured at his clothing. "Most people think I've been riding the rods. You know, hobo on the box-cars. God knows why. Nearest railroad track's a long, long way from Prudhoe Bay. Like Tahiti and grass skirts. You know, gone native. Too many years on the North Slope." His oddly staccato manner of speech was indeed suggestive of a person whose contact with civilisation was, at best, intermittent. "Sorry I couldn't make it. Meet you, I mean. Deadhorse."

Mackenzie said: "Deadhorse?"

"Airstrip. A little trouble at one of the gathering centres. Happens all the time. Sub-zero temperatures play hell with the molecular structure of steel. Being well taken care of, I hope?"

"No complaints." Dermott smiled. "Not that we require much care. There the food counter, here Mackenzie. The watering hole and the camel." Dermott checked himself: he was beginning to talk like Finlayson. "Well, one little complaint, perhaps. Too many items on the lunch menu, too large helping of any item. My colleague's waist-line—"

"Your colleague's waist-line can take care of itself," Mackenzie said comfortably. "But I do have a complaint, Mr Finlayson."

"I can imagine." Another momentary flash of teeth, and Finlayson was on his feet. "Let's hear it in my office. Just a few steps." He walked across the dining-hall, stopped outside a door and indicated another door to the left. "Master operations control centre. The heart of Prudhoe Bay—or the western half of it, at least. All the computerized process control facilities for the supervision of the field operations."

Dermott said: "An enterprising lad with a satchelful of grenades could have himself quite a time there."

"Five seconds, and he could close down the entire oilfield. Come all the way from Houston just to cheer me up? This way."

He led them through the outer door, then through an inner one to a small office. Desks, chairs and filing cabinets, all in metal, all in battleship grey. He gestured them to sit and smiled at Mackenzie. "As the French say, a meal without wine is like a day without sunshine."

"It's this Texas dust," Mackenzie said. "Sticks in the gullet like no other dust. Laughs at water."

Finlayson made a sweeping motion with his hand. "Some big rigs out there. Damned expensive and damned difficult to handle. It's pitch dark, say, forty below and you're tired—you're always tired up here. Don't forget we work twelve hours a day, seven days a week. A couple of Scotches on top of that, and you've written off a million dollars' worth of equipment. Or you damage the pipeline. Or you kill yourself. Or, worst of all, you kill some of your mates. Comparatively, they had it easy in the prohibition days—bulk smuggling from Canada, bathtub gin, illicit stills by the thousand. Rather different on the North Slope here—get caught smuggling in a teaspoonful of liquor, and that's it. No argument, no court of appeal. Out. But there's no problem—no one is going to risk eight hundred dollars a week for ten cents' worth of bourbon."

Mackenzie said: "When's the next flight out to Anchorage?"

Finlayson smiled. "All is not lost, Mr Mackenzie." He unlocked a filing cabinet, produced a bottle of Scotch and two glasses and poured with a generous hand. "Welcome to the North Slope gentlemen."



“I was having visions,” said Mackenzie, “of travellers stranded in an Alpine blizzard and a Bernard lolloping towards them with the usual restorative. You’re not a drinking man?”

“Certainly. One week in five when I rejoin my family in Anchorage. This is strictly for visiting V.I.P.s. One would assume you qualify under that heading?” Thoughtfully, he mopped melting ice from his beard. “Though frankly, I never heard of your organisation until a couple of days ago.”

“Think of us as desert roses,” Mackenzie said. “Born to blush and bloom unseen. I think I’ve got that wrong, but the desert bit is appropriate enough. That’s where we seem to spend most of our time. He nodded towards the window. “A desert doesn’t have to be made of sand. I suppose this qualifies as an Arctic desert.”

“I think of it that way myself. But what do you do in those deserts? Your function, I mean.”

“Our function?” Dermott considered. “Oddly enough, I’d say our function is to reduce our worthy employer, Jim Brady, to a state of bankruptcy.”

“Jim Brady? I thought his initial was A.”

“His mother was English. She christened him Algernon. Wouldn’t *you* object? He’s always known as Jim. Anyway, there are only three people in the world any good at extinguishing oil-field fires, particularly gusher fires, and all three are Texas-based. Jim Brady’s one of the three.

“It used to be commonly accepted that there are just three causes of such oil fires: spontaneous combustion, which should never happen but does; the human factor, i.e. sheer carelessness; and mechanical failure. After twenty-five years in the business Brady recognised that there was a fourth and more sinister element involved, that would come broadly speaking under the heading of industrial sabotage.”

“Who would engage in sabotage? What would the motivation be?”

“Well we can rule out the most obvious—rivalry among the big oil companies. It doesn’t exist. The notion of cut-throat competition exists only in the sensational press and among the more feeble-minded of the public. To be a fly on the wall at a closed meeting of the oil lobby in Washington is to understand once and for all the meaning of the expression ‘two minds with but a single thought, two hearts that beat as one’. Multiplied by twenty, of course. Let Exxon put up the price of gas by a penny today, and Gulf, Shell, B.P., Elf, Agip and all the others will do the same tomorrow. Or even take Prudhoe Bay here. The classic example, surely, of co-operation—umpteenth companies working hand-in-glove for the mutual benefit of all concerned: benefit of all the oil companies, that is. The State of Alaska and the general public might adopt a rather different and more jaundiced viewpoint.

“So we rule out business rivalries. This leaves another kind of energy. Power. International power politics; Say Country X could seriously weaken enemy Country Y by slowing down its oil revenue. That’s one obvious scenario. Then there’s *internal* power politics. Suppose disaffected elements in an oil-rich dictatorship see a means of demonstrating their dissatisfaction against a regime that clasps its ill-gotten gains to its mercenary bosom or, at best, distributes some measure of the largesse to its nearest and dearest, while ensuring that the peasantry remains in the properly medieval state of poverty. Starvation does nicely as motivation; this kind of set-up leaves room for personal revenge, the settling of old scores, the working off of old grudges.

“And don’t forget the pyromaniac who sees in oil a ludicrously easy target and the source of love and flames. In short, there’s room for practically everything, and the more bizarre and unimaginable, the more likely to happen. A case in point.”

He nodded at Mackenzie. “Donald and I have just returned from the Gulf. The local security men and the police were baffled by an outbreak of small fires—small, so-called, but with damage totalling

two million dollars. Clearly the work of an arsonist. We tracked him down, apprehended him, and punished him. We gave him a bow and arrow.”

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Finlayson looked at them as if their Scotch had taken hold too quickly.

“Eleven-year-old son of the British consul. He had a powerful Webley air pistol. Webley make the traditional ammunition for this—hollow, concave lead pellets. They do *not* make pellets of hardened steel, which give off a splendid spark when they strike ferrous metal. This lad had a plentiful supply obtained from a local Arab boy who had a similar pistol and used those illegal pellets for hunting desert vermin. Incidentally, the Arab boy’s old man, a prince of the blood royal, owned the oilfield in question. The English boy’s arrows have rubber tips.”

“I’m sure there’s a moral there somewhere.”

“Sure, there’s a lesson: the unpredictable is always with you. Our industrial sabotage division—that’s Jim Brady’s term for it—was formed six years ago. There are fourteen of us in it. At first it was as a purely investigative agency. We went to a place after the deed had been done and the fire put out—as often as not it was Jim who put it out—and tried to find out who had done it, why, and what his *modus operandi* had been. Frankly, we had very limited success: usually the horse had gone, and all we were doing was locking the empty stable door.

“Now the emphasis has changed—we try to lock the damned door in such a fashion that no-one can open it. In other words, prevention: the maximum tightening of both mechanical and human security. The response to this service has been remarkable—we’re now the most profitable side of Jim’s operations. By far. Capping off runaway wells, putting fires out, can’t hold a candle, if you’ll pardon the expression, to our security work. Such is the demand for our services that we could triple our division and still not cope with all the calls being made upon us.”

“Well, why don’t you? Triple the business, I mean.”

“Trained personnel,” Mackenzie said. “Just not there. More accurately, there are next to no experienced operatives and there’s an almost total dearth of people qualified to be trained for the job. The combination of qualifications is difficult to come by. You have to have an investigative mind, and that in turn is based on an inborn instinct for detection—the Sherlock Holmes genes, shall we say. You’ve either got it or not: it can’t be inculcated. You have to have an eye and a nose for security, an *obsession*, almost—and this can only come from field experience; you have to have a pretty detailed knowledge of the oil industry world-wide: and, above all, you have to be an oilman.”

“And you gentlemen are oilmen.” It was a statement, not a question.

“All our working lives,” Dermott said. “We’ve both been field operations managers.”

“If your services are in such demand, how come we should be so lucky as to jump to the head of the queue?”

Dermott said: “As far as we know this is the first time that any oil company has received notification of *intent* to sabotage. First real chance we’ve had to try out our preventive medicine. We’re just slightly puzzled on one point, Mr Finlayson. You say you never heard of us until a couple of days ago. How come that we’re here, then? I mean, we knew of this three days ago when we arrived back from the Mid East. We spent a day resting up, another day studying the layout and security measures of the Alaskan pipeline and—”

“You did that, eh? Isn’t it classified information?”

Dermott was patient. “We could have sent for it immediately on receiving the request for assistance. We didn’t have to. The information, Mr Finlayson, is not classified. It’s in the public

domain. Big companies tend to be incredibly careless about such matters. Whether to reassure the public or burnish their own image by taking thoroughgoing precautions, they not only release large chunks of information about their activities but positively bombard the public with them. The information, of course, comes in disparate and apparently unrelated lumps: it requires only a moderately intelligent fella to piece them all together.

“Not that those big companies, such as Alyeska, who built your pipeline, have much to reproach themselves about. They don’t even begin to operate in the same league of indiscretion as the all-time champs, the U.S. Government. Take the classic example of the de-classification of the secret of the atom bomb. When the Russians got the bomb, the Government thought there was no point in being secretive any more and proceeded to tell all. You want to know how to make an atom bomb? Just send a pittance to the A.E.C. in Washington and you’ll have the necessary information by return mail. That this information could be used by Americans against Americans apparently never occurred to the towering intellects of Capitol Hill and the Pentagon, who seem to have been under the impression that the American criminal classes voluntarily retired *en masse* on the day of declassification.”

Finlayson raised a defensive hand. “Hold. Enough. I accept that you haven’t infiltrated Prudhoe Bay with a battalion of spies. Answer’s simple. When I received this unpleasant letter—it was sent to me, not to our H.Q. in Anchorage—I talked to the general manager, Alaska. We both agreed that it was almost certainly a hoax. Still, I regret to say that many Alaskans aren’t all that kindly disposed towards us. We also agreed that if it was *not* a hoax, it could be something very serious indeed. People like us, although we’re well enough up the ladder in our own fields, don’t take final decisions on the safety and future of a ten-billion-dollar investment. So we notified the grand panjandrums. Your directive came from London. Informing me of their decision must have come as an afterthought.”

“Head offices being what they are,” Dermott said. “Got this threatening note here?”

Finlayson retrieved a single sheet of notepaper from a drawer and passed it across.

“‘My dear Mr Finlayson’,” Dermott read. “Well, that’s civil enough. ‘I have to inform you that you will be incurring a slight spillage of oil in the near future. Not much, I assure you, just sufficient to convince you that we can interrupt oil flow whenever and wherever we please. Please notify ARCO.’”

Dermott shoved the letter across to Mackenzie. “Understandably unsigned. No demands. If this is genuine, it’s intended as a softening-up demonstration in preparation for the big threat and big demand that will follow. A morale-sapper, if you will, designed to scare the pants off you.”

Finlayson’s gaze was on the middle distance. “I’m not so sure he hasn’t done that already.”

“You notified ARCO?”

“Yup. Oilfield’s split more or less half-and-half. We run the western sector. ARCO—Atlantic Richfield, Exxon, some smaller groups—they run the eastern sector.”

“What’s their reaction?”

“Like mine. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.”

“Your security chief. What’s his reaction?”

“Downright pessimistic. It’s his baby, after all. If I were in his shoes I’d feel the same way. He’s convinced of the genuineness of this threat.”

“Me too,” Dermott said. “This came in an envelope? Ah, thank you.” He read the address. “‘Mr John Finlayson, B.Sc, A.M.I.M.E.’. Not only punctilious, but they’ve done their homework on you. ‘B.P./Sohio, Prudhoe Bay, Alaska’. Postmarked Edmonton, Alberta. That mean anything to you?”

“Nary a thing. I have neither friends nor acquaintances there, and certainly no business contacts.”

“Your security chief’s reaction?”

“Same as mine. Zero.”

“What’s his name?”

“Bronowski. Sam Bronowski.”

“Let’s have him in, shall we?”

“You’ll have to wait, I’m afraid. He’s down in Fairbanks. Back tonight, if the weather holds up. Depends on visibility.”

“Blizzard season?”

“We don’t have one. Precipitation on the North Slope is very low, maybe six inches in a winter. High winds are the bugaboo. They blow up the surface snow so that the air can be completely opaque for thirty or forty feet above the ground. Just before Christmas a few years ago a Hercules, normally the safest of aircraft, tried to land in those conditions. Didn’t make it. Two of the crew of four killed. Pilots have become a bit leery since—if a Hercules can buy it, any aircraft can. These high winds and the surface snowstorms they generate—that snow can be driving along at 70 miles an hour—are the bane of our existence up here. That’s why this operations centre is built on pilings seven feet above ground—let the snow blow right underneath. Otherwise we’d end the winter season buried under massive drift. The pilings, of course, also virtually eliminate heat transfer to the permafrost, but that’s secondary.”

“What’s Bronowski doing in Fairbanks?”

“Stiffening the thin red line. Hiring extra security guards for Fairbanks.”

“How does he set about that?”

“Approach varies, I suppose. Really Bronowski’s department, Mr Dermott. He has *carte blanche* on those matters. I suggest you ask him on his return.”

“Oh, come on. You’re his boss. He’s a subordinate. Bosses keep tabs on their subordinates. Roughly, how does he recruit?”

“Well. He’s probably built up a list of people whom he’s personally contacted and who might be available in a state of emergency. I’m honestly not sure about this. I may be his boss, but when I delegate responsibility I do just that. I do know that he approaches the chief of police and asks for suitable recommendations. He may or may not have put an ad. in the *All-Alaska Weekly*—that’s published in Fairbanks.” Finlayson thought briefly. “I wouldn’t say he’s deliberately close-mouthed about this. I suppose when you’ve been a security man all your life you naturally don’t let your left hand know what the right hand’s doing.”

“What kind of men does he recruit?”

“Almost all ex-cops—you know, ex-State troopers.”

“But not trained security men?”

“As such, no, although I’d have thought security would have come as second nature to a State trooper.” Finlayson smiled. “I imagine Sam’s principal criterion is whether the man can shoot straight.”

“Security’s a mental thing, not physical. You said ‘almost all’.”

“He’s brought in two first-class security agents from outside. One’s stationed at Fairbanks, the other at Valdez.”

“Who says they’re first class?”

“Sam. He hand-picked them.” Finlayson rubbed his drying beard in what could have been a gesture of irritation. “You know, Mr Dermott, friendly, even genial you may be, but I have the odd impression that I’m being third-degreed.”

“Rubbish. If that were happening, you’d know all about it, because I’d be asking you questions about yourself. I’ve no intention of doing so, now or in the future.”

“You wouldn’t be having a dossier on me, would you?”

“Tuesday, September 5, 1939, was the day and date you entered your secondary school in Dundee, Scotland.”

“Jesus!”

“What’s so sensitive about the Fairbanks area? Why strengthen your defences there particularly?”

Finlayson shifted in his seat. “No hard and fast reason, really.”

“Never mind whether it’s hard and fast. The reason?”

Finlayson drew in his breath as if he were about to sigh, then seemed to change his mind. “Bit silly, really. You know how whisperings can generate a hoodoo. People on the line are a bit scared of the pipeline sector. You’ll know that the pipeline has three mountain ranges to traverse on its 800-mile run south to the terminal at Valdez. So, pump stations, twelve in all. Pump Station No. 8 is close to Fairbanks. It blew up in the summer of ’77. Completely destroyed.”

“Fatalities?”

“Yes.”

“Explanations given for this blow-up?”

“Of course.”

“Satisfactory?”

“The pipeline construction company—Alyeska—were satisfied.”

“But not everyone?”

“The public was sceptical. State and Federal agencies withheld comment.”

“What reason did Alyeska give?”

“Mechanical and electrical malfunction.”

“Do *you* believe that?”

“I wasn’t there.”

“The explanation was generally accepted?”

“The explanation was widely disbelieved.”

“Sabotage, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. I was here at the time. I’ve never even seen Pump Station No. 8. Been rebuilt, of course.”

Dermott sighed. “This is where I should be showing some slight traces of exasperation. Don’t believe in committing yourself, do you, Mr Finlayson? Still, you’d probably make a good security agent. I don’t suppose you’d like to venture an opinion as to whether there was a cover-up or not?”

“My opinion hardly matters. What matters, I suppose, is that the Alaskan press was damned certain there was, and said so loud and clear. The fact that the papers appeared unconcerned about the possibility of libel action could be regarded as significant. They would have welcomed a public

enquiry: one assumes that Alyeska would not have.”

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“Why were the newspapers stirred up—or is that an unnecessary question?”

“What incensed the press was that they were prevented for many hours from reaching the scene of the accident. What doubly incensed them was that they were prevented not by peace officers of the State but by Alyeska’s private guards, who, incredibly, took it upon themselves to close State roads. Even their local PR man agreed that this amounted to illegal restraint.”

“Anybody sue?”

“No court action resulted.”

“Why?”

When Finlayson shrugged, Dermott went on: “Could it have been because Alyeska is the biggest employer in the State, because the lifeblood of so many companies depends on their contracts with Alyeska? In other words, big money talking big?”

“Possibly.”

“Any minute now I’ll be signing you up for Jim Brady. What *did* the press say?”

“Because they’d been prevented for a whole day from getting to the scene of the accident, they believed Alyeska employees had been working feverishly during that time to clean up and minimize the effects of the accident, to remove the evidence of a major spillage and to conceal the fact that the fail-safe system had failed dangerously. Alyeska had also—the press said—covered up the worst effects of the fire damage.”

“Might they also have removed or covered up incriminating evidence pointing to sabotage?”

“No guessing games for me.”

“All right. Do you or Bronowski know of any disaffected elements in Fairbanks?”

“Depends what you mean by disaffected. If you mean environmentalists opposed to the construction of the pipeline, yes. Hundreds, and very strongly opposed.”

“But they’re open about it, I assume—always give their full names and addresses when writing the papers.”

“Yes.”

“Besides, environmentalists tend to be sensitive and nonviolent people who work within the confines of the law.”

“About any other disaffected types, I wouldn’t know. There are fifteen thousand people in Fairbanks, and it would be optimistic to expect they’re all as pure as the driven snow.”

“What did Bronowski think of the incident?”

“He wasn’t there.”

“That wasn’t what I asked...”

“He was in New York at the time. He hadn’t even joined the company then.”

“A relative newcomer, then?”

“Yes. In your book, I suppose that automatically makes him a villain. If you wish to go ahead and waste your time investigating his antecedents, by all means do so, but I could save you time and effort by telling you that we had him checked, double-checked and triple-checked by three separate topflight agencies. The New York Police Department gave him a clean bill of health. His record and that of his company are—were—impeccable.”

“I don’t doubt it. What were his qualifications, and what was his company?”

“One and the same thing, really. He headed up one of the biggest and arguably the best security agencies in New York. Before that he was a cop.”

“What did his company specialise in?”

“Nothing but the best. Guards, mainly. Additional guards for a handful of the biggest banks when their own security forces were under-staffed by holidays or illness. Guarding the homes of the richest people in Manhattan and Long Island to prevent the ungodly making off with the guests’ jewellery when large-scale social functions were being held. His third speciality was providing security for exhibitions of precious gems and paintings. If you could ever persuade the Dutch to lend you Rembrandt’s ‘Night Watch’ for a couple of months, Bronowski would be the man you’d send for.”

“What would induce a man to leave all that and come to this end of the world?”

“He doesn’t say. He doesn’t have to. Homesickness. More specifically, his wife’s homesickness. She lives in Anchorage. He flies down there every weekend.”

“I thought you were supposed to do a full four weeks up here before you got time off.”

“Doesn’t apply to Bronowski—only to those whose permanent job is here. This is his nominal base but the whole line is his responsibility. For instance, if there’s trouble in Valdez, he’s a damn sight nearer it in his wife’s flat in Anchorage than he would be if he were up here. And he’s very mobile, like our Sam. Owns and flies his own Comanche. We pay his fuel, that’s all.”

“He’s not without the odd penny to his name?”

“I should say not. He doesn’t really need this job, but he can’t bear to be inactive. Money? He retains the controlling interest in his New York firm.”

“No conflict of interests?”

“How the hell could there be a conflict of interests? He’s never even been out of the State since he arrived here over a year ago.”

“A trustworthy lad, it would seem. Damn few of them around these days.” Dermott looked at Mackenzie. “Donald?”

“Yes?” Mackenzie picked up the unsigned letter from Edmonton. “F.B.I. seen this?”

“Of course not. What’s it got to do with the F.B.I.?”

“It might have an awful lot to do with them, and soon. I know Alaskans think that this is a nation apart, that this is your own special and private fiefdom up here, and that you refer to us unfortunately as the lower 48, but you’re still part of the United States. When the oil from here arrives at Valdez it’s shipped to one of the west-coast states. Any interruption in oil transfer between Prudhoe Bay and, say, California, would be regarded as an unlawful interference with inter-state commerce and would automatically bring in the F.B.I.”

“Well, it hasn’t happened yet. Besides, what can the F.B.I. do? They know nothing of oil or pipeline security. Look after the pipeline? They couldn’t even look after themselves. We’d just spend most of our time trying to thaw out the few of them that didn’t freeze to death during their first ten minutes here. They could only survive under cover, so what could they do there? Take over our computer terminals and master communications and alarm detection stations at Prudhoe Bay, Fairbanks and Valdez? We have highly trained specialists to monitor over three thousand sources of alarm information. Asking the F.B.I. to do that would be like asking a blind man to read Sanskrit. Inside or out, they’d only be in the way and a useless burden to all concerned.”

“Alaska State Troopers could survive. I guess they’d survive where even some of your own men couldn’t. Have you been in touch with them? Have you notified the State authorities in Juneau?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t love us. Oh, sure, if there was physical trouble, violence, they’d move in immediately. Until then, they’d rather not know. I can’t say I blame them. And before you ask me why I’ll tell you. For good or bad we’ve inherited the Alyeska mantle. Alyeska built the pipeline and they run it; but we use it. I’m afraid there’s a wide grey area of non-discrimination here. In most people’s eyes they were the pipeline, we *are* pipeline.”

Finlayson reflected on his next words. “It’s hard not to feel a bit sorry for Alyeska. They were pretty cruelly pilloried. Sure, they bore the responsibility for a remarkable amount of waste, and incurred vast cost over-runs, but they did complete an impossible job in impossible conditions and what’s more, brought it in on schedule. Best construction company in North America at the time. Brilliant engineering and brilliant engineers—but the brilliance stopped short of their PR people, who might as well have been operating in downtown Manhattan for all they knew about Alaskans. The job should have been to sell the pipeline to the people: all they succeeded in doing was turning a large section of the population solidly against the line and the construction company.”

He shook his head. “You had to be truly gifted to get it as wrong as they did. They sought to protect the good name of Alyeska, but all they did, by blatant cover-ups—it was alleged—and by deliberate lying, was to bring whatever good name there was into total disrepute.”

Finlayson reached into a drawer, took out two sheets of paper and gave them to Dermott and Mackenzie. “Photostats of a classic example of the way they handle those under contract to them. One would assume they learnt their trade in one of the more repressive police states. Read it. You’ll find it instructive. You’ll also understand how by simple thought-transference we’re not in line for much public sympathy.”

The two men read the Photostats.

Alyeska Pipeline Service Company Supplement No. 20

Pipeline and Roads

Revision No. 1

Job Specification

April 1, 1974

Page 2004

C. IN NO EVENT SHALL CONTRACTOR OR ITS PERSONNEL REPORT A LEAK OR AN OIL SPILL TO ANY GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. Such reporting shall be the sole responsibility of ALYESKA. CONTRACTOR shall emphasise this to all its supervisory personnel and employees.

D. Further IN NO EVENT SHALL CONTRACTOR OR ITS PERSONNEL DISCUSS, REPORT, OR COMMUNICATE IN ANY WAY WITH NEWS MEDIA whether the news media be radio, television, newspapers or periodicals. Any such communication by CONTRACTOR shall be deemed to be a material breach of CONTRACT by CONTRACTOR. All contacts with news media regarding leaks or oil spills shall be made by Alyeska. If news media people contact CONTRACTOR or CONTRACTOR’S personnel they shall refer news media to Alyeska without further discussing, reporting or communicating. CONTRACTOR shall emphasise the aforementioned ALYESKA news media requirements to all its supervisory personnel and employees.

Dermott rested the Photostat on his knee. “An *American* wrote this?”



“An American of foreign extraction,” Mackenzie said “who obviously trained under Goebbels.”

“A charming directive,” Dermott said. “Hush-up, cover-up or lose your contract. Toe the line or you’re fired. A shining example of American democracy at its finest. Well, well.” He glanced briefly at the paper, then at Finlayson. “How did you get hold of this? Classified information, surely?”

“Oddly enough, no. What you would call the public domain. Editorial page, *All-Alaska Weekly*, June 22, 1977. I don’t question it was classified. How the paper got hold of it, I don’t know.”

“Nice to see a little paper going against the might of a giant company and getting off with it. Restores one’s faith in something or other.”

Finlayson picked up another Photostat. “The same editorial also made a despairing reference to the ‘horrendous negative impact of the pipeline on us’. That’s as true now as it was then. We’ve inherited this horrendous negative impact, and we’re still suffering from it. So there it is. I’m not saying we’re entirely friendless, or that the authorities wouldn’t move in quickly if there were any overt violation of the law. But, because votes are important, those in charge of our destinies rule from behind: they sense the wind of public opinion, then enact acceptable legislation and adopt correspondingly safe attitudes. Whatever happens, they’re not going to antagonise those who keep them in power. They are not, with the public’s eye on both them and us, going to come and hold our hands because of an anonymous threat by some anonymous crackpot.”

Mackenzie said: “So it amounts to this: until actual sabotage occurs, you can expect no outside help. So far as preventative measures are concerned, you’re dependent solely upon Bronowski and his security teams. In effect, you’re on your own.”

“It’s an unhappy thought, but there it is.”

Dermott stood up and walked back and forth. “Accepting this threat as real, who’s behind it and what does he want? Not a crackpot, that’s sure. If it were, say, some environmentalist running amok, he’d go ahead and do his damndest without any prior warning. No, could be with a view to extortion or blackmail, which do not have to be the same thing: extortion would be for money, blackmail could have many different purposes in mind. Stopping the flow of oil is unlikely to be the primary purpose, more likely, it’ll be a stoppage for another and more important purpose. Money, politics—local or international—power, misguided idealism, genuine idealism or just crackpot irresponsibility. Well, I’m afraid speculation will have to wait on developments. Meantime, Mr Finlayson, I’d like to see Bronowski as soon as possible.”

“I told you, he has business to finish. He’ll be flying up in a few hours.”

“Ask him to fly up now, please.”

“Sorry. Bronowski’s his own man. Overall, he’s answerable to me, but not in field operations. He’d walk out if I tried to usurp his authority. Unless he had the power to act independently, he’d be effectively hamstrung. You don’t hire a dog and bark yourself.”

“I don’t think you quite understand. Mr Mackenzie and I have not only been promised total cooperation: we’ve been empowered to direct security measures if, in our judgment, such extreme measures are dictated by circumstances.”

Finlayson’s Yukon beard still masked his expression, but there was no mistaking the disbelief in his voice. “You mean, take over from Bronowski?”

“If, again in our judgment, he’s good enough, we just sit by the sidelines and advise. If not, we will exercise the authority invested in us.”

“Invested in whom? This is preposterous. I will not, I cannot permit it. You walk in here and

imagine—no, no way. I have received no such directive.”

“Then I suggest you seek such a directive, or confirmation of it, immediately.”

“From whom?”

“The grand panjandrams, as you call them.”

“London?” Dermott said nothing. “That’s for Mr Black.”

Dermott remained silent.

“General manager, Alaska.”

Dermott nodded at the three telephones on Finlayson’s desk. “He’s as far away as one of those.”

“He’s out of State. He’s visiting our offices in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles. At what times and in what order I don’t know. I do know he’ll be back in Anchorage at noon tomorrow.”

“Are you telling me that is the soonest you can—or will—contact him?”

“Yes.”

“You could phone those offices.”

“I’ve told you, I don’t know where he’d be. He could be at some other place altogether. Like as not he’s in the air.”

“You could try, couldn’t you?” Finlayson remained silent and Dermott spoke again. “You could call London direct.”

“You don’t know much about the hierarchy in oil companies, do you?”

“No. But I know this.” Now Dermott’s customary geniality was gone. “You’re a considerable disappointment, Finlayson. You are, or very well may be, in serious trouble. In the circumstances, one does not expect an executive in top management to resort to stiff outrage and wounded pride. You’ve got your priorities wrong, my friend—the good of the company comes first, not your feelings protecting your ass.”

Finlayson’s eyes showed no expression. Mackenzie was staring at the ceiling as if he had found something of absorbing interest there: Dermott, he had learned over the years, was a past-master at penning an adversary into a corner. The victim either surrendered or placed himself in an impossible situation of which Dermott would take ruthless advantage. If he couldn’t get co-operation, he would settle for nothing less than domination.

Dermott went on: “I have made three requests, all of which I regard as perfectly reasonable, and you have refused all three. You persist in your refusals?”

“Yes, I do.”

Dermott said: “Well, Donald, what are my options?”

“There are none.” Mackenzie sounded sad. “Only the inevitable.”

“Yes.” Dermott looked at Finlayson coldly. “You have a radio microwave band to Valdez that links up with the continental exchanges.” He pushed a card towards Finlayson. “Or would you refuse me permission to talk to my head office in Houston?”

Finlayson said nothing. He took the card, lifted the phone and talked to the switchboard. After three minutes’ silence, which only Finlayson seemed to find uncomfortable, the phone rang. Finlayson listened briefly then handed over the phone.

Dermott said: “Brady Enterprises? Mr Brady please, Dermott.” There was a pause, then: “Good afternoon, Jim.”

“Well, well, George.” Brady’s strong carrying voice was clearly audible in the office. “Prudhoe Bay, is it? Coincidence, coincidence. I was just on the point of phoning you.”

“Well. My report, Jim. News, rather. There’s nothing to report.”

“And I have news for you. Mine first, it’s more important. Open line?”

“One moment.” Dermott looked at Finlayson. “What security classification does your switchboard operator have?”

“None. Jesus, she’s only a telephone girl.”

“As you rightly observe, Jesus! Heaven help the trans-Alaskan pipeline.” He pulled out a notebook and pencil and addressed the phone. “Sorry, Jim. Open. Go ahead.”

In a clear, precise voice Brady began to recite a seemingly meaningless jumble of letters and figures which Dermott noted down in neatly printed script. After about two minutes Brady paused and said: “Repeat?”

“No thanks.”

“You have something to say?”

“Just this. Field manager here unco-operative, unreasonable and obstructive. I don’t think we can profitably operate here. Permission to pull out.”

There was only a brief pause before Brady said clearly: “Permission granted.” There came the click of a replaced receiver and Dermott rose to his feet.

Finlayson was already on his. “Mr Dermott—”

Dermott looked down at him icily and spoke in a voice as cold as winter: “Give my love to London Mr Finlayson. If you’re ever there.”

Thirteen hundred miles south-east of Prudhoe Bay, at ten p.m., Brady's men met Jay Shore in the bar of the Peter Pond Hotel in Fort McMurray. Among those qualified to pass judgment on such matters it was readily agreed that as an engineering construction manager Shore had no peer in Canada. His face was dark, saturnine, almost piratical—which was rather an unfair trick for nature to play on him since that same nature had made him easy-going, companionable, humorous and cheerful.

Not that he felt in the least humorous and cheerful at that moment. Nor did the man who sat beside him, Bill Reynolds, Sanmobil's operations manager, a rubicund and normally smiling man to whom nature had given precisely the kind of diabolical mind that Shore appeared to have but didn't.

Bill Reynolds looked across the table to Dermott and Mackenzie, whom he and Shore had met thirty seconds previously, and said: "You make fast time, gentlemen. Remarkable service, if one may say so."

"We try," Dermott said comfortably. "We do our best."

"Scotch?" asked Mackenzie.

"Thanks." Reynolds nodded. "Twin jet—is that it?"

"Right."

"A shade expensive, a man would think."

"Gets you around." Dermott smiled.

"Head Office—that's Edmonton—told us you might take up to four days. We didn't expect you in four hours." Reynolds eyed Dermott speculatively over his newly-poured glass. "I'm afraid we don't know much about you."

"Fair enough. We probably know even less about you."

"Not oilmen, then?"

"Of course. But drilling oilmen. We're not familiar with mining the stuff."

"And your full-time job's security?"

"That's right."

"So there's no need to ask what you were doing up on the North Slope?"

"Right again."

"How long were you up there?"

"Two hours."

"Two hours! You mean you can lick a security—"

"We licked nothing. We left."

"May one ask why?"

"Operations manager was...unhelpful, let's say."

"Me and my big mouth."

"Meaning?"

“I’m the operations manager here. But I get the message.”

Dermott said pleasantly: “No message. You asked a question, I answered.”

“And you decided to walk out—”

“We have a backlog of cases all over the world, and no time to waste trying to help those who won’t help themselves. Let’s not get off on the wrong foot, gentlemen: your company expects Mackenzie and myself to do the questioning while you do the answering. When was this threat received?”

Shore said: “Ten o’clock this morning.”

“You have it with you?”

“Not exactly. It came by phone.”

“Where from?”

“Anchorage. International call.”

“Who took the message?”

“I did. Bill here was with me, listening in. Caller gave us his message twice. Word for word he said, ‘I have to inform you that Sanmobil will be incurring a slight interruption in oil production in the near future. Not much, I assure you, just sufficient to convince you that we can interrupt oil flow whenever and wherever we please.’ That was all.”

“No demands?”

“No—surprisingly.”

“Don’t worry. The demands will come when the big threat does. Would you recognise this voice again?”

“Would I recognise the voices of a million other Canadians who talk exactly as he does? You take this threat seriously?”

“I do. We take most things seriously. How good is security at the plant?”

“Well—fair enough for normal circumstances. I suppose.”

“These promise to be highly abnormal circumstances. How many guards?”

“Twenty-four, under Terry Brinckman. He knows what he’s doing.”

“I don’t doubt it. Guard dogs?”

“None. The usual police dogs—Alsations, Dobermans, boxers—can’t survive in these extreme conditions. Huskies can, of course, but they make lousy watch-dogs—they’re more interested in fighting each other than looking for intruders.”

“Electric fences?”

Shore rolled his eyes upwards and looked sorrowful. “You want to equip the environmentalists with a gallows right on the site? Why, if even the meanest old wolf were to singe its mangy hide...”

“Okay, okay. I suppose it’s pointless to ask about electronic beams, sensor devices and the like?”

“Pointless is right.”

Mackenzie said: “How big is this plant site?”

Reynolds looked unhappy. “About eight thousand acres.”

“Eight thousand acres.” Mackenzie’s voice was all doom. “What kind of perimeter would that make for?”

“Fourteen miles.”

“Yes. We have a problem here,” Mackenzie said. “I take it your security duties are twofold: the guarding of vital installations in the plant itself and patrolling the perimeter to keep intruders out?”

Reynolds nodded. “The guards are in three shifts, eight men per shift.”

“Eight men, without any protective aids at all, to guard the plant itself and at the same time patrol fourteen miles of perimeter in the blackness of a winter night.”

Shore was defensive. “Ours is a 24-hour operation. The plant is brilliantly lit day and night.”

“But the perimeter isn’t. A blind man could drive a coach and four—hell, why go on? A couple of army regiments might help, although I doubt even that. As I say, a problem.”

“Not only that,” Dermott said. “All the brilliant illumination in the world isn’t of the slightest help. Not when you’ve got hundreds of workers on each of the three shifts a day.”

“Meaning?”

“Subversives.”

“Subversives! Less than two per cent of the work-force are non-Canadians.”

“There’s been a royal decree abolishing Canadian criminals? When you hire, you investigate backgrounds?”

“Well, not intensive questioning, third degree, lie-detector tests or any of that rubbish. Try that and you’d never hire anyone. We check on previous experience, qualifications, recommendations, and most important, criminal records.”

“That’s the least important. Really clever criminals never *have* criminal records.” Dermott looked like a man who had been about to sigh, explode, curse, or quit, but had changed his mind. “Well—it’s late. Tomorrow, Mr Mackenzie and I would like to talk to your Terry Brinckman and look over the plant.”

“If we have a car here at ten o’clock—”

“How about seven o’clock? Yes, seven will be fine.” Dermott and Mackenzie watched the two men go, looked at each other, emptied their glasses, signalled the barman, then looked out through the windows of the Peter Pond Hotel, named after the first white man ever to see the Tar Sands.

Pond went down the Athabasca River by canoe almost exactly two hundred years before. He did not take too much interest in the sands, it appears, but ten years later the much more famous explorer Alexander MacKenzie was intrigued by the sticky substance oozing from outcrops high above the river, and wrote: “The bitumen is in a fluid state, and when mixed with gum, or the resinous substance collected from the spruce fir, serves to gum the Indians’ canoes. In its heated state it emits a smell like that of sea-coal.”

Oddly, the significance of the words “sea-coal” wasn’t appreciated for more than a hundred years. Nobody realised that the two 18th-century explorers had stumbled across one of the world’s largest reservoirs of fossil fuels. But had they not so stumbled, there would have been no Peter Pond Hotel where it is today nor, indeed, the township beyond its windows.

Even in the mid-nineteen-sixties Fort McMurray was little more than a rough, primitive frontier outpost, with a population of only thirteen hundred and streets covered with dust, mud or slush according to season. By now, though still a frontier town, it had become a frontier town with a difference. Treasuring its past, but with an eye to the future, it was the epitome of a boom-town and, in terms of burgeoning population, the fastest-expanding township in Canada. Where there were thirteen hundred citizens fourteen years earlier, there were thirteen thousand. Schools, hotels, banks, hospitals

churches, super-markets and, above all, hundreds of new houses were or were being built. A wonder of wonders, the streets were paved. This seeming miracle stems from one factor and one factor only: Fort McMurray sits squarely in the heart of the Athabasca Tar Sands, the biggest such known deposits in the world.

It had been snowing heavily earlier in the evening and had still not completely stopped. Everything—houses, streets, car-tops, trees—was under a smoothly unbroken cover of white. Hundreds of lights shone hospitably through the gently falling flakes. The scene would have gladdened the eye and heart of a Christmas postcard artist. Some such thought had occurred to Mackenzie.

“Santa Claus should be here tonight.”

“Indeed.” Dermott sounded morose. “Especially if he brought along some of that peace on earth and goodwill to all men. What did you make of that telephone message to Sanmobil?”

“Same thing you did. Practically identical to the letter Finlayson received up in Prudhoe Bay. Obviously the work of the same man or group of men.”

“And what do you make of the fact that Alaskan oil people got a threatening message from Alberta while the Albertan oil interests received the same threat from Alaska?”

“Nothing—except that both threats had the same origin. That call from Anchorage. For a certainty from a public call-box. Untraceable.”

“Probably. Not certainly. I don’t know if you can dial direct from Anchorage to here. I don’t think so, but we can find out. If not, the telephone operator will have a record. There’s a chance that we might locate the phone.”

Mackenzie briefly surveyed Fort McMurray through the base of his glass and said: “That’ll be a big help.”

“It might be a small help. Two ways. That call came in at ten this morning. That’s 6 a.m. Anchorage time. Who except a nut—or some night-shift worker—is going to be out in the black and freezing streets of Anchorage at that hour? That sort of odd behaviour, I suggest, isn’t likely to go unnoticed.”

“If there’s anyone there to notice.”

“State Troopers in a patrol car. Taxi driver. Snow-plough driver. Mailman on the way to work. You’d be surprised the number of people who go about their lawful occasions in the dark watches of the night.”

“I would not be surprised.” Mackenzie spoke with some feeling. “We’ve done it often enough on this damned job of ours. Two ways, you said. What’s the second way?”

“If we locate this pay-phone, we have the police who have the post office remove the coin box and give it to their fingerprint boys. The chances are good that the person who made the call to Fort McMurray used more high-denomination coins than anyone else who went into the pay-box that day—or night. Get two or three large coins with the same prints, and that’s our man.”

“Objection. Coins are handled by many people. You’ll get prints, all right, a plethora, shall we say, of fingerprints.”

“Objection overruled. It’s established that on a metal surface the overlay, the last person to touch such a surface, leaves the dominant print. By the same token, we’d print the area round the dial. People don’t dial in fur mittens. Then we’d check with criminal records. The prints may be on file. If they are, we’ll get the man and ask him all sorts of interesting questions.”

“You do have a devious mind, George. Low cunning, but albeit a mind. First catch your man, though.”

“If we get a description or prints with history, it shouldn’t be too difficult. If he’s gone to ground, ~~would be different. But there’s no reason why he should think he has to take cover. Might be awkward~~ for him anyway: may well be a pillar of the Anchorage business and social communities.”

“I’ll bet the other Anchorage pillars would love to hear you say that. They’d have the same opinion of you as our friend, John Finlayson, has now. What are we going to do about Finlayson, anyway? *Rapprochement* doesn’t seem advisable: it’s essential. With the tie-up so obvious—”

“Let him stew in his own juice for a while. I don’t mean that the way it sounds. But just let him worry a while in Prudhoe Bay until we’re ready. He’s a good man, intelligent, honest. He reacted precisely the way you or I would have if a couple of interlopers had tried to take over. The longer we stay away, the more certainly we’re guaranteed his co-operation when we get back. Jim Brady may have been the bearer of bad news, but that call of his couldn’t have come at a more opportune time. Gave us the perfect excuse to make off. Speaking of Jim—”

“I’ve been thinking that I don’t much like any of this. Presentiments. My Scottish forebears, or I presume. You know that Prudhoe Bay and this place here contain well over half the oil reserves of North America. It’s an awful lot of oil. A man wouldn’t want anything to happen to them.”

“You haven’t worried about such things before. An investigator is supposed to be cold, clinical, detached.”

“That’s about other people’s oil. This is *our* oil. Massive responsibilities. Awesome decisions at the highest levels.”

“We were talking of Jim Brady.”

“I still am.”

“You think we should have him up here?”

“I do.”

“So do I. Must be why I raised the subject. Let’s go call him.”



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