

Death Below Zero

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Chapter One

What first gave me pause about coking up was seeing Allen get down on his hands and knees to lick the rug. He simply wouldn't concede that our cocaine stash could be absolutely gone. I watched in fascination as his tongue darted delicate little strokes, zeroing in on the exact spot where the spilled powder of an earlier hour had dusted the floor. I was vastly surprised to catch myself wondering if I really wanted another bump. Once we had a toot session going, I had always wanted another hit, and another after that, then more later on. A few friends had turned into nose hounds, screwing themselves up, getting hopelessly paranoid about their high. One even destroyed the membrane lining of his nose and after that set about exploring how to smoke the stuff, but I felt personally immune to any danger from cocaine. It was just thrills, an exquisite rush, even if each hit was less potent and yet more wildly demanded than the one before.

That winter Prudhoe had constant cocaine with plenty more down along the pipeline. The construction camps were hard and strange places, with a lot of cash floating around and Arctic bozos going nuts in the corners. And, there was always the relentless and painful cold. A stray cocaine binge was one of those crazy ways to stay sane, but at that moment I could see myself licking the rug and I didn't like the image.

Back about three or four a.m., when it seemed that there would be toot forever, Jack had bungled an exuberant move and dumped a mirror-load on the floor. At the time the three of us had scooped up the spill, whiffed it and carried on, free-falling through acres of cocaine, enjoying the absolute hell out of the night. By about six, the supply was going invisible on us and that seventy below zero chill factor lurking outside began to infiltrate my mood.

There didn't seem much point in trying for breakfast. The crew bus would be taking off too soon and we weren't quite done with the dancing powder. We scraped the final lines together, did them, and then started getting inspired about how to come up with that one last hit before going out to deal with the daily blizzard.

We picked every single, tiny white flake out of the grungy rug in that Construction Camp Two room, chopped all of them into powder and whiffed away. Seemed quite natural to me at the time, perhaps even charming to indulge in any desperation that kept the cocaine flying. Then, Allen announced that we could dissolve what we'd missed and retrieve it with an eye dropper. In a second he'd splashed some water on the rug and had dropped down into position, licking around to locate the heart of the spill.

Jack was leaning over him, intently staring. After a few strokes Allen called for the dropper. As I handed it to him, I considered that tearing up a night with cocaine might become less than pure, radiant fun. I'd always enjoyed the powdery frenzy and the extremities it encouraged in me, but this time, I was torn between laughing at Allen's manic improvisation and a sense the earlier excitements were spoiling.

Those thoughts were new to me. I pushed them away, assumed that the next snort would be a kick and squirted up an eye-dropper shot. Kerblamo. A low-grade high, only a thin and wavering rush compared to the first thrills hours before, but I liked it.

Crappy roadflex—letting the party go on like that, jam up on time to hit the bus. The last threads of linger time were finally gone and we had to split. Jack grabbed his outdoor gear and ran for the front door. I dashed down the hall toward my room, feeling great and persuading myself that I deserved a touch of celebration, even if it did have a ruggy aftertaste. The Pipeline had come along to rescue me from Arctic poverty and I didn't see any problem with holding on to a manual labor job that paid me fifteen hundred a week. I already knew how to deal with the weather, the rednecks and the work, so I figured I could carouse one night since I didn't have to pay attention to much, except trying to get laid in a camp almost devoid of women.

I went left at the main hallway, charged another thirty yards and leaned into a hard right at A Wing. I burned twenty seconds in my room gathering down coveralls, down coat, duffel bag and boots. The front door was a no-go by then. The Randolph-Lightner crew bus had surely pulled out. I ran down to the far end of A Wing, butted the door open and stepped outside. An immensely cold, bitter

wind raked snow off the ground. The chill cut through my jeans and flannel shirt like they were cheesecloth.

I didn't leave any skin behind barefooting it down the metal steps covered with nice warm ice. The bus was churning around the corner with its lights on. I waved and ran for it. The bus slowed. Cocaine flashes were surging through me and I found myself laughing at how close I was cutting it. My feet were freezing as I pounded across the parking lot, but the cold was not a concern, just thrilling, and something more to laugh at. My laughter threshold always did get perilously low behind a load of toot and I had definitely managed to forget about my passing cocaine unease.

I hurried past the path of the bus and stood there as Phil Dalira braked it down. He opened the door and I climbed aboard into a heat wave. The crew was laughing and hooting at my barefoot arrival. Not Phil. He was pissed.

"You're lucky I stopped. Barriss is ticked off at guys being late, holding up the whole crew," he lectured seriously in a deep, smooth voice, interpreting the world as did our hard case superintendent.

Phil was in his late thirties, five-ten and strong, with dark hair, a bushy moustache and excessive vanity. He was the Randolph-Lightner Teamster foreman and resident salesman. He also had a pompous side that made me feel like irritating him. I gave him my best Laborer's smile from behind my armload of Arctic gear and said, "Get it straight at least, Phil, I'm on the bus so I'm not late. Besides, I was the one who had to wait on you. I was actually standing still before you got the bus stopped."

More laughs from the crew, but Phil was not amused. He took off with a jerk as I did a sideways shuffle down the aisle. Phil tried to throw me by slamming into second and tromping on it. I kept my balance and had my way eased by a spontaneous outburst of proletarian justice.

"Smooth it out, Bussie. You're spilling my coffee."

"Fucking Zero," another sneered, "probably got his driver's license mail order."

Phil relaxed and eased off the gas. He was fairly attentive to protest. I stepped over a guy lying across the aisle asleep on adjoining seats and walked on back.

Huey caught my eye as I was shuffling past him. He gave me a very hot look. His rough, pudgy face was clenched as his dark, close-set eyes glowered at me through black horn-rimmed glasses. He wasn't bright. Reading the newspaper was an Olympic event for the guy.

I was surprised. I hadn't had any run-ins with him my first two days on the job. We'd hardly spoken. He operated the crane. I humped it on the insulation crew. As far as I could tell his anger came from nowhere. I ignored it and slid into an empty seat.

The uproar over my arrival died down and then flared up again in a new form, this time as disgust with the elements. I got confirmation on bad weather news. My seatmate told me that the weather board had the temperature at minus thirty-one and the wind at fourteen mph, which put the chill factor down to minus seventy-one. I dragged clothes out of my duffel bag to get ready.

Lovely cocaine flashes allured me, but I subjugated my mind and threw it below decks to row my body into two sets of cotton long johns. Most people at Prudhoe wore wool, but my skin long ago declared itself in a state of permanent revolution against that substance as a result of certain medieval tortures I endured as a child. Cotton was warm enough. Besides, the idea was to get several layers between the flesh and the frost.

"This week's your last shot at the heavy money," Phil yelled back over his shoulder, out-shouting the roar of the engine to tout his primary hustle. "If you want in on the Denali Checkpool, you gotta sign on by Friday."

Phil cocked his head up toward the inside mirror and looked over the crew. He smiled his crooked smile, his left cheek climbing higher than his right.

"I'm telling ya, someone as disgusting as one of you Laborers is gonna retire Friday night."

"Get off it," Jack shouted over the engine roar. "Who wants to blow a thou on a checkpool?"

"Doyle?" Phil said, asking for confirmation.

"You don't need to get your money down," Doyle told him with imperial condescension. "I'm already going to win enough to become an entirely different person. How much are they holding for me now, Phil?"

"Seventy-two thousand as of last night, rising fast. Only it's all gonna be mine. That's why I want you worthless Laborers to sign up, because I got more luck than the Pipeline's gonna have leaks."

Checkpools were common. Every payday somebody like Phil would collect twenties. They'd get three or four thousand dollars together and whoever had the paycheck with the best poker hand would win it. But this one was different. It cost a thousand bucks to get in and they were shooting for a hundred players. With five thousand deranged workers at Prudhoe, that plan looked realistic. I was brewing a sarcastic remark about how checkpools had been fiddled before,

but about then the cocaine overdrive mellowed out into a glow and I kept quiet to savor it.

The checkpool talk faded away into a whiskey deal, Phil selling at twenty-five bucks a fifth. I pulled on two pairs of socks and shoved dry felt insoles and liners into my Sorels. The year before had been my inaugural session with the Laborers, Local 942 of the International Hod Carriers, Building and Common Laborers' Union of America, with the emphasis on common. Praise the local brother. Since the entrance requirements were a strong back or a quick tongue, we got all sorts.

Union work had reversed my long-term trend of increasing debt. Reversal didn't mean I had broken through the waterline, however. When I took the dispatch from the Hall the Friday before the temperature was two above at Prudhoe Bay and I was broke. March wasn't the complete middle of winter, even at the extreme northern edge of North America. I went with the cold weather boots I already had, Sorels. Then the temperature buried itself and I was wishing I'd hit someone up for the hundred to get bunny boots. Sorels were good, but at the far end of the thermometer, bunnies were the only boots you wanted. They were big, white, bulbous rubber things and they were ultimo warm. Everyone else on the bus wore them. Phil himself wore bunnies and he didn't need to because he was a prima donna Teamster who rode around in vehicles all day. I was going on second-best gear. That was dumb.

The rest of the way over to where we were slapping on insulation, I completed my metamorphosis into Arctic worker by getting into a down vest, down coveralls and heavy down coat. My rigorous double standard regarding wool was flexible enough to allow me wool liners inside my leather mitten shells and two wool stocking caps under my coat's down hood.

The cigarette smokers had asserted total domination over the air shed in the bus. Apparently they were trying for unconditional surrender from the few remaining oxygen molecules. When the bus stopped I was ready to get outside, no matter what the weather was. I headed down the aisle feeling foolishly happy behind my cocaine high and the fact that I was working on the highest-paid construction job in historical time.

That mood changed in an instant. Huey was in his seat fiddling with his gear as I went past. He stepped into the aisle right behind me and I felt his presence immediately. Alarms rang inside me. I knew he wanted to smash me.

Huey was about forty. He was a big man, a very big man. I heard that he'd walked on with the Colts out of army football and had stuck until the last cut. He was the sort of guy who thrived on getting the boss' permission to pound on

irregular persons. My shoulders wanted to tense and rise. I relaxed them and held my air low, cocking my head back to track him as I walked down the aisle. At the door, I stepped off the bus and turned around in the same movement. Huey got off. His eyes were burning at me. His face looked set in cement, but he didn't move on me. He just glared and stalked past. From that moment on, I paid attention to where Huey was at all times. That saved my ass, but it got to my mood.

The glow evaporated and its place was taken by a very particular old sour feeling that I had a lot of experience with. This feeling accompanied a memory of the day they ripped up my private eye ticket. Together, that got me rankled about doing this damn construction work as economic penance. And then I was wondering what exactly was so much fun about tooting up white powder and watching a friend lick the rug. I went off to stash my gear in a wary and changeable frame of mind.

Two empty eight-foot by eight-foot insulation crates twenty feet long were bolted onto a steel skid, one on either end, with a generator mounted in between. The one in front was a work room. The rear crate was the warm-up shack. I tossed my duffel bag in there, then unreeled the air lines and walked them around to the front of the skid.

The other guys on the line crew were carrying the pneumatic tools out of the work shack. We went down the bank to the two oil lines coming from the wells on E Pad toward Gathering Center Two. The pipes ran on steel supports which rose two feet out of the frozen tundra. I whipped the hoses across the pipes and climbed over.

We snapped the hoses onto the air tools and started crimping down the insulation section left over from the day before. Jack went along the seam first, knocking it into place with a rubber mallet. He moved so well in the narrow space between the oil lines that you'd never suspect he'd had his left leg half blown off by incoming fire at Danang. Paddy followed him with the clamper and Doyle finished the seam with the button punch. Those two were very Irish.

Paddy was the oldest guy on the job. Late fifties. He had silvery hair. His face showed heavy mileage and the love of whiskey. He had a hinky, jerky walk, but he was out there with the younger guys. Doyle was thirty, tall and thin, with a wry sense of humor. He had a beard and long dark hair, but he didn't like it when Paddy said he was working with anarchists on all sides. Me, I was the rookie on the crew and they had me coming along behind banding the sections together and taking off the belts. The wind was ripping out of the northeast,

cutting across my face from the left. I cocked my head away from it, tucked in my chin and cranked that bander.

The North Slope stretched across a flat plain from the polar icecap eighty miles south to the Brooks Range. We were getting a dozen hours of daylight, only at that latitude the sun barely got above the horizon, shining no brighter than a full moon through the thick white haze of ice fog. Cold, dense air supported the zillions of tiny ice crystals stripped off the ground by the wind. When you looked at the sun the ice crystals blowing by glinted like sparks thrown off a huge grinder into the whiteness. The ice fog thickness cut visibility down to fifty yards. Beyond that, the ice fog merged with the ground into an obscure, impenetrable white.

Up on the road two other Laborers dragged the next insulation section out of the work shack, three hundred pounds of awkward load. They horsed it onto the sawhorses between the skid and the crane, rigged it with straps to the hook, and Huey boomed the section down to us. One of the shack crew guys had the load on a tag line or the wind would have swirled it away.

I watched Huey carefully. Cranes are dangerous even when you get along with the operator. Huey swung the section in a tight arc and never put it over our heads. His control was excellent as he lowered it gently onto the pipes ahead of us. We unriggered and he returned the boom to hover over the sawhorses. He didn't have anything to do until the next section was ready. He sat there in his heated cab and watched us.

We got that section on and the next and the next and the next as we worked our way along E line twenty feet at a time. The work was as repetitive as any assembly line, but I was determined to enjoy it because after all boredom is a self-inflicted failing. Our pace hindered conversation, but we managed a constant flow of abuse directed toward Randolph-Lightner. You can never have too many bitches against the company you work for. Running down the full indictment daily helped with the cold.

The foreman, Theo, was decent and we said little about the man. We did a lot with Barriss and the timekeeper came under fire frequently, of course. Nobody knew him, but nobody needed to. Go onto any construction site and you'll find all the workers hate the timekeeper, convinced the little spider is sitting in a warm office figuring ways to short their pay.

The dominant, ever recurring complaint, however, was about the trashy insulation material we had to work with. I learned that, back in prehistory before I came on the job, there had been far lighter insulation to install. The present stuff looked exactly like it, was also manufactured by Arctic Wrap and came out

of the same Arctic Wrap crates, but the foam was screwed up. It was twenty-five pounds apiece heavier and that extra hundred pounds a section made it very awkward to handle down on the line. Heavy as it was, we were putting on seven or eight hundred feet a day.

Whenever we finished off a section before the shack crew had the next one ready, we dropped the tools in the snow and copped a short break. We checked each other's face for the gray spots that mean frostbite is close, then gathered into a tight group, our backs to the wind like so many musk oxen, and talked about things.

"You think this is hittin' it," Paddy said in the slightly mocking tone of an old timer. "We were getting a thousand feet a day until last week."

"Don't even listen to that," Doyle said. "A thousand with the regular is easier than seven hundred with this crap."

"Right," Jack added. "It's worse now with the man around all the time and that Arctic Wrap fool birddogging us."

"Never before lunch, you can be sure," Doyle said and they all laughed.

"You mean that indoor hero who never gets out of the truck, always waves Theo over to him?" I asked. "I thought he was with Randolph-Lightner somehow."

"No. He just drives one of their pickups. He's some kind of phony engineer Arctic Wrap has up here to see how we put on their insulation," Jack explained.

"What's his name?"

"Wayne Tyson," Doyle answered. "He only talks to bosses. He comes on sounding like Mr. Science, but he trips over words and doesn't really make sense. A joke."

Huey boomed another section down to us and talk turned to grunts as we strained to get it in place. My high had completely evaporated into the cold, but staying awake after pulling an all-nighter was no trouble. The chill factor saw to that. That, and tracking Huey's crane work. Watching him swing the boom back slowed me a count in belting down the section. Paddy misinterpreted that as easing back on the throttle.

"You best stay right on it," he counseled gently, turning his craggy face into the wind to speak to me. "I don't tell any man his business, but Barriss is a fast one with a pink slip. He's gone through a lot of men on this show."

I snapped to and thanked him so he wouldn't feel embarrassed at advising me.

Suddenly plenty of conversational momentum appeared and we were all talking as we worked, speaking up to be heard over the wind and the kachunk, kachunk, kachunk of the air tools.

“Barriss ran off three Labes from the other crew last week,” Jack said angrily. “For nothing,” he added, deliberately knocking a dent in the insulation for emphasis.

“Didn’t a thousand feet a day keep Barriss happy?” I asked. “I heard Green hardly gets that on their insulation show and they’ve got better material to work with.”

“Two thousand feet a day wouldn’t make Barriss happy,” Jack said, whapping another dent into the metal, “because Barriss can’t be happy.”

“Barriss is always around you know,” Paddy said slyly, “even when he isn’t.”

“Theo?” I asked.

“Theo’s all right,” Doyle said. “He wants the footage, but he never yells. It’s Huey he means.”

“Yeah, Huey,” Paddy confirmed. “He sits in that crane all day and watches.”

I could see Doyle decide the time had come to bring up a certain point concerning me. “Say, didn’t you used to be a private eye?”

It felt like he’d kicked me in the stomach. I never got over how hard that “used to be” always hit me.

“One of my past lives, Doyle.”

“What happened in that Arthur case? The *Tribune* said Lou Devery was a friend of yours and you deliberately screwed up the cops’ arrest, somehow got them to violate his rights to blow the prosecution.”

“It played the other way around. Devery was no friend of mine.”

Doyle had more questions, but he saw how much the subject got to me, so he let it go.

The crew fell silent. We kept putting on the insulation, with the rhythmic kachunk of the air tools counterpointing the howl of the wind. Gradually my good spirits returned and I had a nice moment when Jack made a cryptic joke about the rug.

Then Theo appeared on the road and waved me up the bank. That was odd because we were right in the middle of banding on a section.

Theo was a stocky Dutchman, about five-ten, with a quiet, dour manner. Everyone’s nose ran in the cold, but Theo was the only guy on the crew who didn’t wipe it off. He was old school, pre-pipeline, and didn’t like anything to interrupt him on the job. He ran things effectively and got along with everyone.

“Barriss wants to talk to you,” he told me.

“What’s it about?”

“Didn’t say. He had that pink slip look so I told him you were a good hand and I didn’t want to lose you.”

“Thanks.”

Theo almost smiled, motioning me past the crane to Barriss’ green Ford pickup with the Randolph–Lightner logo on its doors. My breath had frozen my stocking cap to my beard, like always. Walking to the pickup, I slid the cap forward over my head and then squeezed my beard with my hand to melt the ice, so I could pull it off.

Barriss had a big barrel chest, short dark hair and mean brown eyes. He was tall and walked with a swagger. Somehow he managed to sit with one too. A thin white scar ran along his jaw toward his right ear, pulling tight as he managed an icy smile when I climbed in.

He shoved it in gear and took off without a word. After two hundred yards, he pulled up beside an unopened crate sitting in the snow a few feet off the road. Barriss got a clipboard off the seat, flicked over a couple pages and ran a thick, knobby finger down a column of figures.

I was curious. Extracting company secrets was second nature. I hoped to stir something to build a rumor on, a little one maybe, for the boys to laugh at on break, but Barriss was being careful. He shot me a glance to make sure I wasn’t looking over his shoulder. I faced straight forward and observed the countryside, which was done in all colors of the spectrum, from white to less white to more white. I got to thinking how unusual the situation was. A superintendent, a nonunion man, was driving a union worker around, namely me. Very defiant of the Teamsters. The labor contract called this a manhaul and Teamsters did all manhauls, the pipeline being a highly union job.

I kept my head facing forward but, being basically snoopy, I pulled my eyes down over to the left to see what was available. I could see a half page of typed memo or letter with two columns of numbers under it. Maybe a dozen numbers in each column. I couldn’t make it out, except three words typed in capitals, “DO NOT INSTALL.”

“Get a bar,” Barriss said in a flat, rough voice, pointing his thumb at the bed. “I want to inspect that crate.”

Considering the junk we were working with, that seemed a good idea. I zipped up and got out.

The three–eighths inch plywood skin was excessively nailed to the crate and had become brittle from the cold. I tried to pop a whole sheet off the end, but it tore every place I got the bar under it. Usually we’d knock a hole in an end wall,

chain up the crate framework and rip the whole works off with Theo's pickup. I didn't even suggest that. I did it the hard way, piece by piece.

When I had it open, Barriss got out holding the clipboard. He was wearing a green parka over brown slacks and leather boots. He didn't look comfortable out in the wind. He jerked his head toward the truck for me to wait there. I got back in and looked around, but mostly just the usual stuff was there — Thermos, flashlight, tape measure, Buck knife, Polaroid camera and assorted boss paraphernalia. And, an AM radio. Pipeline trucks always had a CB, but an AM radio was unusual. I turned it on and ran the needle to 680. KBRW came in from Barrow a couple hundred miles across the Slope. They were playing The Stones. "Jumping Jack Flash." Those Eskimos went for solid rock. I leaned back and felt warm as the music throbbed on.

The door opened with a rush of cold air. Barriss flicked off the radio as he got in. I remembered someone saying that Prudwad Bay's a penal colony on an asteroid. Barriss turned around and drove back through the ice fog to the show. He stopped the truck and finally looked over at me. Not even the icy smile. Just a frozen look and hostile eyes.

"Scanlon didn't forget about you, Rezkel. You're lucky you got this job. The one day in a week he didn't read the list of new bodies, you slipped through. He told me about you."

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

"He didn't like the way you crowded him on that Arthur case."

"That's too bad for Scanlon. What's it got to do with you?"

"I'm warning you. Don't mess with me."

"You see me doing anything other than work on this job?"

"No, but if I do, I'm not seeing it twice."

We sat there staring. My job suddenly seemed founded on quicksand. I wasn't canned yet, so I broke eye contact. I got out into a razor blade wind and slammed the door.

As I walked back toward the skid, Phil jammed the nozzle into the fuel truck pump and came storming past me. He jerked open the pickup door and shouted at Barriss, "God damn it, that's a manhaul. You trying to get me in shit with the Hall?"

Phil got in and they argued, stabbing fingers at one another. Phil had a point, being the Teamster foreman, but I was surprised that he jumped on Barriss so strong and so open, and that Barriss looked to be taking it.

Theo held up his fists and twisted them apart like he was breaking a stick. The line crew instantly threw down their tools and we all headed for the warm-

up shack. Doyle fell into step with me. He pointed back at Phil and Barriss, and then shook his head with a smile.

“Barriss hates everyone. He even got mad at the R-L front office boss, guy named Scanlon. Over Phil. Shouted at him, ‘If he didn’t get it from you, who did he get it from? Naturally, we all figured it was the clap.’”

Theo had his green Randolph-Lightner pickup parked behind the skid. He took his breaks there so the office could reach him on the radio. The rest of us piled into the warm-up shack. First man in turned on the space heater and shut down the deafening pounding of the compressor chugging in the back. Last one in wired the door shut against the wind.

I took off my coat and sat down on the bench. I unzipped the chest and legs of my down overalls, then took off my Sorels. Nobody bothered to take off their bunny boots. My liners pulled out easily, but the insoles were frozen. Felt sucked up sweat like a magnet. I peeled the insoles out and put the whole works off to the side of the space heater to dry. A direct blast would have fried them. That monster had the size and power of a five hundred pound bomb. It was either full on or off, nothing else. The shack was already up to ninety-five degrees and stinking of diesel. Ninety-five above was better than thirty below, so we left it on and unfolded the layers of our clothing like tropical flowers.

I changed both pairs of socks and stuck my feet up on a tar bucket. I hadn’t gotten my Thermos filled, much less had breakfast or made a lunch. Very slack, very cocaine. Jack gave me a cup of hot water from his Thermos. I reached a teabag out of my duffel bag. Maté Orange Spice. I leaned back against the plywood and at that moment considered break had begun.

Huey was on the opposite bench, next to Doyle and Paddy. Usually he blathered on about heavy equipment in a dim way, telling us how he remembered the sound of every rig he’d ever operated and other dreary stories. A quasidodo. But that day he was quietly lusting through a skin magazine.

“What did Barriss want with a low-caste Laborer like you?” Doyle asked me.

“Read me my rights. Told me not to make him mad.”

“What’s he got against you? You’re doin’ your job.”

“Me and Barriss, we got mutual friends it turns out.”

The conversation flowed on. We were only rope-pullers hauling rock for the Big Oil Pyramid, but we were getting Pharaoh’s pay scale. Only job I’ve ever seen where the workers made more than the bosses. It was sweet to listen to the boys piss and moan about the strain of the eighty grand tax bracket.

Raps sounded on the door. Jack got up and unwired it. Phil Dalira came in with a swirl of minus-thirty air, scowling.

“Close the door, Zero,” somebody yelled.

Teamsters were Zeros, a flexible term that might refer to anything—morality, intelligence or job effort. In Phil’s case it wasn’t the last two. He wired the door shut. When he turned around again he had three-quarters of a smile in place.

“I got a fifth for you, Paddy. Come by the room after work.”

“Last chance to get in the Denali, right?” Jack asked.

“Wrong. Last chance is Friday afternoon,” Phil said, relaxing.

Catching snickers in response to his sales pitch was familiar to him. He straightened up in the cockpit and flew on through the flak. He put his right foot up on a bucket of silver paint and tapped a clipboard on his knee.

“Here’re seventy-two guys already who aren’t wiseasses. They’re the ones with the play for real money.”

“Let me see that,” Jack said and held out his hand for the clipboard.

“Hey, Phil, how do we know this Denali is straight?” Paddy asked. “What if some Carpenter has the front office wired and gets five aces on his check?”

“Listen, that’s not a problem. I told you people this already,” Phil assured us wearily in his soothing voice. “It’s like any other checkpool, but we’re going to use cards too. You get five cards dealt to you to start with. The you add the cards to the last three numbers off the serial number on your paycheck and the cents off what you actually got paid, in order like, and that’s your hand. If you got a four on your check and you’re dealt a nine, that’s thirteen. You use the three. And so on for your five cards. Best poker hand wins like usual. See, someone else shuffles, cuts and deals for you. That way nobody pulls nothing.”

I listened along, automatically interested because cards were involved and I liked playing cards. I was OK at bridge. I liked poker too much.

When Jack finished looking at the list, I took the clipboard. The top pages were a long list of names, companies and union affiliations for the workers in the Denali Checkpool. I thumbed over the page. Timesheets and stray papers. Why am I doing this, I asked myself. Snoopflex. I checked Phil. He was rattling on, not paying attention to the clipboard. I scrunched down on the bench and flicked through the sheets.

“What about face cards?” someone asked.

“Face cards don’t count. You get dealt another card.”

I found it toward the bottom. A letter from Arctic Wrap to Randolph-Lightner, copies to Barner Oil and its management contractor, Harkell Associates. Phil was preoccupied so I did a quick read. One page had a riff about excessive water content in an early production run and insulation crates mistakenly shipped to Prudhoe Bay. Yeah, real mistakenly, I thought. “DO NOT

INSTALL” in caps. I ran down the list of crate numbers and bingo, there was Arctic Wrap crate number sixty-three, the very crate we were working out of.

I felt something so I looked over at the other bench. Huey was staring right at me. Then Phil turned toward me. He was about to catch me ransacking his papers. I had hold of the clipboard near the top. I handed it to Phil upside down so all the pages flopped down. His eyes started down toward the pages, suspicion trying to build in them. I covered by saying, “I didn’t see Barriss’ name.”

“Fuck no,” he snapped, “and we ain’t letting no fucking superintendents in.”

Theo blew the horn on his truck. Break was over. On that job we got fifteen minutes and that didn’t mean sixteen minutes. Going from plus ninety-five back out into the minus-seventy factor was a jolt to the body. If you survived such jolts, it made you very healthy.

We slapped on insulation the rest of the day. The wind died down some toward noon and then came back worse than ever in the late afternoon. The bosses came and went. We put sections on the line and all was routine until the third time we moved the skid.

The shack crew stowed their gear and the line crew walked the air hoses ahead. It was my turn to rig. I got the tow cable out, then stood on the ice in front of the skid. I held the cable with my right hand and signaled Huey forward with my left. He brought the twenty-ton Pettibone crane up and stopped before I signaled him to, a few feet from the skid. I caught his eye and held up my left fist to keep him stopped. His left cheek was twitching in a funny way I hadn’t seen before.

I stretched out the cable. It wouldn’t reach the tow hook on the front of the crane. I straightened the fingers of my left hand and motioned Huey forward, rubbing my thumb and fingers together to tell him to take it slow. That was the standard signal. I made sure he saw it.

The Pettibone started moving. I signaled and watched the hook. Suddenly the crane jerked forward. A yellow wall of steel closed on me. I stepped back and began to give the fist sign for him to stop. Then it was too close for anything but jumping. I dropped the cable and leaped over the front skid step into the shack. The crane banged into the skid right after me and knocked it back a foot. No way it would have killed me, only taken off a leg or so. An image of Barriss flashed into my mind.

I gave Huey the finger and screamed a dozen things at him. He was smiling as he backed up the crane. The whole crew came running up. Theo burst around the corner of the skid.

Huey opened the door of his cab and leaned out. His cheek was no longer twitching. He had the least bit of contrition on his coarse features.

“Gee Theo, I’m sorry. My foot slipped on the pedal.”

Huey looked at me and shrugged.

Doyle slammed the cable onto the hook.

I caught up with Theo walking back to his pickup.

“Huey has a decent touch with that Pettibone. You ever see him do anything like that before?”

“No. First bad mistake I ever saw him make.”