

Chapter 1

Going through the canyon on the way up to Loon Lake, Peter Gregory had to turn hard to avoid a dilapidated truck rocketing down the narrow road. Hardly a glance at the driver was enough to convince him that the kid was from one of the small ranches clinging to a bare living in the upper reaches of the valley. He thought the young guy grinned at him as he shot by, which did nothing to improve Peter's mood.

Forty minutes earlier, as he passed 100 Mile House on the Cariboo Road, his pager went off. It showed the Beaver's number, but Peter decided to wait until he got to Clinton before responding. Twenty-five minutes later he pulled into the parking lot of the Cariboo Motel, a handsome log structure, and asked the slick-looking blonde behind the desk where the phone was. She considered him.

"You stayed here about a week ago didn't you?"

"I did." She'd been interested in him then, too.

"You're a Mountie, I remember. Have you come to get your man?"

Or..." she paused, "woman?"

"Whatever," he answered blandly.

"Oh dear," she muttered. "One of those." She pointed down the hall.

Superintendent Albert Newcombe answered after the second ring.

“Where are you?”

“Clinton,” Peter said. “I’m on the way down. Should be there by...”

“No, you’re not coming back yet. Below Clinton you’ll turn left and proceed up to Loon Lake. To be precise, Loon Lake Lodge.”

As usual the voice of the Super rasped like a wood chisel in his ear. No wonder he was nicknamed the Beaver. He looked as well as sounded as though he were chewing wood.

“You’re going to let me do a bit of fishing? I’d really appreciate that....”

For a moment, there was silence and heavy breathing as the Beaver attempted to absorb Peter’s joke.

“Fishing be damned. There’s been a homicide up at Loon Lake. Man by the name of Jackson Curtis: a U.S. citizen who’s worth a hell of a lot of money and even more political influence. It won’t do to have the Corporal from Clinton handle it alone. I’m phoning him in about two minutes to tell him you’re on the way. In addition, Sergeant Ross is coming up to give you a hand. He can’t get away till tomorrow though. Okay?”

“Got that. Do you want to hear how things went up at Quesnel?”

“When you get back. I expect you to clear up this Loon Lake thing pretty fast. This is a sizzler, Peter. I got the word on it straight through the Commissioner in Ottawa, and he got it from the U.S. Ambassador who’d heard from two very upset U.S. Senators. Somebody up there must have got on the phone first thing.”

“Do you have any background on this man Curtis?”

“Not yet. Sergeant Ross will fill you in on that. Evidently Curtis is a big toad in the Republican lake and his death is already hitting the news. Anyway, get up there and phone me tonight. I told the Commissioner that you were our top investigator. Don’t make me into a liar.”

The trouble with Superintendent Albert Newcombe, Peter reflected as he emerged from the canyon, was that he had no sense of humour. He simply lost the human dimension that persists even in the face of homicide. The laconic comments of police investigating a killing had surprised Peter early in his career but he soon came to understand why it was necessary, why it was sometimes the only way to deal with the horror, the only way to prevent it climbing onto your back.

The case up in Quesnel, for instance. Four youths had surrounded an older man and beaten him to death with pieces of 2 by 4 and a baseball bat. Long after he was dead they went on beating him, until his head was a faceless pulp. And why? When at last Peter got two of them to confess, they said that the old fart liked to fool with young guys. “That geek got what was coming to him,” one said with an air of satisfaction, even righteousness. “Well, you sure made that clear to him,” was Peter’s dry response. He remembered the blank look on the boy’s face as Peter’s irony failed to register. They were all juveniles, so none of them would get much of a sentence.

Now, though, Peter knew as he continued the climb up through the sagebrush and ponderosa pine, he wasn't as able to handle the presence of death as he had been. It was the bleak emptiness, not so much the dramatics of the blood and guts, which had got to him ever since the night seven months ago when Cathy succumbed to cancer. Her passing had left an unbridgeable hole in his life. Was it self-pity, he wondered? Maybe. Partly. But then, even self-pity can be justified sometimes. Or at least understood.

Peter shook himself free from those thoughts. Now he was descending towards the lake, and memories of when he used to come up here as a youth of eighteen or nineteen washed through him. Great times, with friends like Phil Fontaine, Charlie Coombs, and Tom Broderick. They'd slept out on the lakeside, eating rainbow trout for breakfast and dinner, and in the fall hunting mule deer on the south side.

Suddenly, he saw the lake below held in the magic of that blue-green colour he would always remember.

The lodge was made of logs painted dark brown and it stood on a gentle slope rising from the lake, the largest of a cluster of buildings. As he started down towards it, Peter could hear a woman's voice coming from one of the cabins, and it did not sound like a woman in grief.

Corporal Ted Hill of the Clinton Detachment hurried around the corner of the lodge.

“Inspector Gregory?” His glance lingered on Peter’s left foot. “There are two of us here. Constable Turner’s up at Cabin 5 looking after things owned by the deceased. The body’s down on the float. I guess you’ll want to look at that first,” the corporal said, glancing away.

Hill was young for a corporal, not more than twenty-six or seven. He walked with a straight back, and wore his R.C.M.P. patrol uniform with the forage cap as though he were modeling it. Peter guessed that in Ted Hill’s mind it wasn’t right for a Mountie to limp, even slightly. Peter didn’t think it was right either, but he could do nothing to replace the big and second toes of his left foot that were frozen beyond recall in an Arctic blizzard.

The floating dock formed a T made up of six sections chained together, with numbered places for the eight aluminum boats and two plywood kit-built boats. Six of the aluminum boats had Yamaha outboards .

Peter and Ted Hill made their way toward a shapeless bundle on the upper T of the dock. A small older man stood a few feet to one side, staring out across the lake. He turned to watch the two officers approaching, returning Peter’s nod with a brief downward incline of his head.

“And who are you, sir?”

“Name’s Blake Moran. I own the ranch at the other end. Mrs. Dunning—she’s the wife of the proprietor here—phoned me and told me what happened, so I came over. Thought someone might need some help.”

He spoke quietly and had large greyish green eyes. There was a tuft of white beard on his chin.

“Did you know the dead man?”

Moran did not answer immediately.

“I guess somebody was being stupid and fired a scare shot at Curtis, only he hit him instead.”

“So you think it was accidental?”

“Would there be a reason for anybody killing him?” Moran asked, looking straight at Peter with his large eyes. Then he added: “He was a very wealthy man and probably had his enemies, but they’d be back in the States, not up here.”

“Which part of the South are you from?”

“I’ll be damned if you didn’t hear my Virginia accent. I thought it was long gone. Especially since I’ve lived in this part of the world much of my life.”

“Always ranching?”

“Well, I had a stint at sea—six years merchant marine during the war. Otherwise, yes.”

“You have a family, Mr. Moran?”

“No sir, I have not.”

“How’s the ranching business?”

Moran smiled and looked away. His teeth, like his hair, were slightly yellow.

“The cattle like it alright. The fact is I have a ranch but don’t do any ranching anymore. Getting too old, I guess.”

“You’re a close friend of the Dunning’s?”

“Fairly close, I guess you’d say.”

He looked off down the lake. Clearly, he wanted to leave. A light breeze had sprung up and little waves chopped at the side of the boat. Peter felt an uneasiness, but decided it was more his own than Moran’s.

“If you have anything more to tell me,” Peter said, “I’ll be here tomorrow—probably longer....”

Moran climbed easily into his boat and untied the bowline. “I don’t think I can be of much help,” he said, briefly looking at the bundle on the dock. “Not as far as Jackson’s concerned.” He pulled the starting cord and the six-horse engine spluttered into life.

Peter watched the old man, wind whipping the whitish locks of his hair, as he started down the lake. He did not look back.

Why did Mrs. Dunning phone Moran to tell him about Curtis, Peter wondered.

The body lay huddled under a plastic sheet. Folding it back, Peter studied the dead man’s face. Grizzled grey hair covered the head, and the skin of the face was leathery, with the mouth pulled down in a disapproving grimace, like one who had just heard bad news. A fly began to buzz eagerly over the caked blood, and Peter waved it away. The bullet had struck slightly above and ahead of the right ear, making a neat hole. The wound of exit was a little lower and larger.

“Jackson Curtis and his younger partner, James Bartlett...” intoned the Corporal, reading out of his notebook, “were trolling for trout about five miles down the lake off the north shore when a person unknown fired a shot from the south side of the lake, hitting Jackson Curtis in the head. James Bartlett stated that death was instantaneous.”

“How were they positioned in the boat at the time of the shooting?”

“Curtis was at the motor end, steering, and Bartlett was on the middle seat facing forward.”

“You said they were five miles down—was that five miles from here, or from the west end of the lake?”

Corporal Hill looked a little embarrassed. “From here.”

“How far were they from the south side?”

“Looking at the map, I’d estimate....”

“Didn’t you go down there?”

Corporal Hill gave him a wary look. “I thought I should wait for you, sir.”

“Go on.”

“From the map I’d estimate it was about four hundred yards across.”

“From the south to the north shore, or to their boat?”

“I was thinking from shore to shore.” Then he added, a little lamely, “He didn’t tell me how far out from shore they were.”

“What time was the shot fired?”

“7:45 a.m., give or take a little.”

“So Bartlett rushed back here.”

“Yes, full out.” Peter waited, and Hill added: “He got here shortly after 8:00 a.m.”

“There were no more shots?”

“Not one.” The corporal paused, watching Peter, then added: “If it was deliberate, you’d think the killer would have tried to get Bartlett, too.”

“You think it was deliberate?”

Hill considered this. “Well, over the years we’ve had three or four of these cases, including other lakes, where someone is trolling along and gets a shot fired at him from shore, though nobody’s been hit up to now. That happened on different occasions over on Shuswap Lake, as you probably know.” He waited for confirmation, but received none. “And so in this case, the gunman fired in the general direction of the boat, probably just to scare the person in the boat—only it struck home.”

“With precision,” Peter added. After a moment, he straightened up. “Where’s the boat?”

Hill pointed to the nearest twelve-foot runabout. Peter knelt on the dock and peered at the film of blood slowly drying near the middle seat.

Peter looked up. “Who came with you?”

“Constable Turner.”

“Okay. The identification team from Kamloops will be here very soon. They’re bringing the medic, Sam Pachau, with them.”

“I’ve heard of him—an old guy.”

Peter stared at him. “He’s not that old, maybe fifty-five. They might need your help, and Turner’s, to put this stiff in the van, as well as the boat on top if they think they need it. Meantime, keep everyone off the dock. I’m not happy about Moran being here.”

“He was here before I arrived, sir,” Corporal Hill answered stiffly.

On the way up to Cabin 5, Peter saw someone working at a bench in one of the sheds, and walked over to the doorway. Inside was a solid-looking man in his early forties with dark, thinning hair. He was filing a saw.

“You’re the proprietor, Ed Dunning? My name’s Peter Gregory, R.C.M.P.”

The other man turned slowly. “I heard you were coming.” He was tense, trying to be at ease.

“Who’s here right now, Mr. Dunning?”

“Guests?”

“Everybody.”

“There’s my wife, Fern. She’s usually in the kitchen. I have a son, Tim...” He looked glum.

“What age?”

“Eighteen. Then there’s my stepdaughter. Her name’s Pat. She’s twenty and almost as useless as Tim around the place. Oh, she messes around in the kitchen now and then. And there’s Kurt Koenig. He’s been building cabins for me. Right now he’s working on Cabin 6.”

“How old is he?”

“Early forties. A good worker like most of those Germans.”

“Where did you hear about him?”

“I put an ad in the newspaper. He answered it.”

“How long has he been up here?”

“Nearly three years. He said he came up here because he likes the country life.” Then he added, with a quick look at Gregory. “Or so he said.”

“Do you know anything else about him?”

Dunning hesitated: “No.” A half-truth at best, Gregory thought.

“Who else?”

“The guests. There’s Helen Curtis, Jackson’s wife. The Curtis’ were in the lodge’s big room, number 1. There are only two more in the lodge. Curtis’s junior partner, Jim Bartlett, was and still is in room 2.”

“You said he and Jackson Curtis were partners ?”

“An investment business in Chicago. Jim’s dad and Curtis were the original partners. Jim joined the firm as a junior partner, but when his dad died he moved into top place alongside Curtis.”

“Did you know Bartlett Senior?”

“Yeah, but not as well as I got to know Jackson Curtis. They used to come up here together years back.”

“That would be when?”

“Oh, twelve years ago. We had only the lodge then, no cabins, and only four boats. They always came up in August. Then Jackson’s first wife,

Nancy, passed away, and a few years later he married Helen.” He paused and looked past Peter’s head. “She’s younger.”

“How much younger?”

“I’d say Curtis was in his late fifties. Helen Curtis couldn’t be more than thirty-six or thirty-seven.”

“And did they continue to come up here?”

“Not for a few years.”

“I’m sure you missed him.”

Dunning frowned.

“I mean,” Peter added, “he would have been a good customer.”

“He was the best customer I ever had. But he wasn’t the same as he was before Nancy Curtis died. Helen was different.” He glanced meaningfully at Gregory. “Anyway, she didn’t get along with old man Bartlett, and he stopped coming. Later, I heard he’d died.”

“You said Helen was different. In what way?”

Dunning shifted uneasily. “I guess you’d say that she’d been around.” For a moment he looked straight at Peter. “I think you know what the fuck I mean.”

“You mean she’s a slut.”

“But with brains and class.”

Peter decided to let that go for the moment. “What about Jim Bartlett?”

“I couldn’t tell you much about him. Only that he went to some college and did a stint in the Marines. He was an officer. The first time I met him was last year when he came up with Curtis and Helen.”

“Did they come up this early last year?”

“That was another change that happened when Curtis brought Helen up here. She didn’t like the mosquitoes. So they took to coming in late May or early June for the fishing, and then again in the fall for a week’s hunting.”

“So did Bartlett come up with them last spring?”

“Yeah, and in the fall, too.”

“Has the hunting been good?”

Dunning seemed surprised by the question. “Not too bad.”

“Did Helen Curtis go hunting?”

“Sure she did. She liked it.”

“And you do the guiding?”

“Not as a rule. I hire a man who really knows this country. If there’s a set of antlers within miles, he’ll find it.”

“Where does he live?”

“Up in the hills.”

“His name?”

Dunning hesitated: “He’s an Indian named Vincent, John Vincent.”

Peter showed no surprise.

“He lives with his old dad, name of Paul, who’s pretty well out of it. If you’re thinking,” Dunning added, “that it was Vincent who took a pot shot at Curtis, I don’t agree.”

“Why not?”

“Why do a thing like that? Curtis paid him good money. About the only money he ever got.”

“Why did they come so early this year?”

“I think they had the idea the fishing would be better. Curtis was a real fanatic when it came to fishing. Not that he went every day, but when he did he went out in the morning early, good or bad weather. And then, too, at this time of year they’d be pretty sure of having the place to themselves.”

“Was the lake calm this morning?”

“Not a ripple at six when I got up.”

“And Jim Bartlett, he likes fishing, too?”

“Not the way Curtis did.”

“Bartlett was the first to tell you about the shooting?”

“Actually, it was Pat. She was on the dock when the boat came in.”

“Then you went down to the dock and helped Bartlett lift the body out of the boat.”

“Yup.” He was eyeing Peter carefully.”

“And what did Bartlett tell you about the shooting?”

“They were trolling down off Soame’s Creek when the shot came. Bartlett said it was about 7:40 or :45. And he came right back in a hurry thinking the crazy bugger might take a shot at him, too.”

“How long would it take Bartlett to get here if he was going flat out?”

“Oh, 15-20 minutes.”

“Has business been pretty good, Mr. Dunning?”

Ed Dunning briefly studied Peter, shifting his weight.

“Better. Every year it’s a little better.”

“I gather there’s no one else camping along this lakeshore?”

“Not until June, as a rule. Sometimes weekend people camp out on the lake. But I haven’t noticed any so far this year. There’s no facilities.”

“No one else has any lake property? No cabin, or anything?”

“Besides me, only Mabel Donahue.”

“Who is she?”

“She has a cottage about two miles along. Never know when she’s going to pop in or out. Likes to wander around with a paint box. She’s, you know,” he dismissed her with a shrug, “one of those born-again types. Fucking crazy. Oh, I nearly forgot. There’s a guy by the name of Tom Broderick occupies a cabin down the road...”

“Did you say Tom Broderick?”

“Sure did....know the man?”

“Years ago. He lived in Kamloops.”

“Still does. He comes up maybe one or two days every couple of weeks to do some fishing or hunting.”

“How would you describe him?”

“Sandy hair, blue eyes, built like a brick shit house.”

Peter grinned. “That’s the guy! Is he up here now?”

“That I don’t know. Could be.”

“Well, I’ll sure check that out. Now, let’s see....oh yeah....is Blake Moran a friend of yours?”

Dunning’s eyes narrowed. “A friend, no. Just a neighbour.”

“You must have known him for many years. He was ranching at the far end of the lake when you first came here.”

“I just said he was a neighbour, that’s all.”

“Your wife phoned him right away to tell him about Curtis.”

Dunning’s look darkened.

“Is that a crime, too?”

He looked at the scene beyond, and the silence grew awkward.

“If you want my opinion,” said Dunning abruptly, “nobody shot to kill Jackson Curtis. Nobody with any sense would shoot to kill someone across all that water. That’s just the point. We’ve got a few loopy people wandering around the Cariboo. One of them came into this area, let go a round for the hell of it, and it hit poor fucking Curtis.”

Corporal Hill had more or less said the same thing, Peter thought.

Walking around the corner of the lodge on the way to Cabin 5, Peter felt again the clean wind of twenty years ago, but only for a moment.

A girl was sitting on the front steps of the lodge.

“Hi, Mr. Mountie.”

“Hello, Pat.”

She laughed a little nervously. “You know my name. I guess he told you. I saw you talking to him.” She nodded in the direction Peter had come.

“Well?”

“Don’t you want to talk to me, too?” she asked, squinting up at him. She was a thin little girl with her blouse partly undone and wide greenish eyes that might have been attractive on someone else.

“You’re not so bad looking for a Mountie, almost human. I like those brown eyes. Maybe I could tell you something if you asked me.”

“Everyone says it was an accident. Do you think so?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t he tell you about the other shot that was fired from the south shore?” She looked at him sideways.

“Go on.”

“It was fired at Jim Bartlett’s boat three days ago when he was out fishing alone. My stepfather patched over the holes, but you could find them easy. Right below the gunwale.” She rose to her feet and cocked her head up at him, mockingly.

“I could tell you about a lot of things that have gone on around here, but you’ll have to ask me.”

She smiled sweetly and walked the way he had come, brushing against him as she passed, trying to swing her thin young hips. But her walk was rather flat-footed and awkward.

While he’d been talking to the girl, the Identification van arrived. He’d waved to the driver and pointed down to the dock.

Now he followed, thinking about Pat and the sly look on her face. Why had she told him about the shot fired through the other boat?

Sam Pachau was standing beside Corporal Hill who was staring intently at a young woman with dark glasses shoved up on her head. She was kneeling over the body, camera at her eye. There was a flash.

“Meet Kim Kowalchuk,” Sam said, “our newest and best. Kim this is Inspector Peter Gregory.”

She looked up and nodded. No wonder Hill stared at her, Peter thought. She had chestnut hair and hazel eyes.

“It’s too bad,” she said, “this guy wasn’t left in the boat.” She moved around to the other side of the body, preparing for another shot.

Sam touched Peter’s arm, and they moved closer to the boat.

“Kim’s right. Do you know who hauled him onto the dock?”

“His fishing pal, Jim Bartlett.”

“Funny. Anyway, this doesn’t look too complicated to me. The bullet entered the right side of the head and took a slightly downward slope, exiting just above the left jaw. From the size of the exit wound I’d say the bullet was a soft-point type, probably a Spitzer. He fell to the left but hit the motor handle and collapsed in the bottom of the boat. There’s not much blood but you see some up near the middle seat. Kim will take what swabs she can and take measurements. Sorry, we have only one ID person. Ed Tatum was called out to an assault scene at Cache Creek.”

“Let’s hope you find some bullet fragments.”

“Maybe. But don’t get your hopes up. The bullet would have been pretty intact when it hit the water. Anyway, you’ll have my report in no time.” He wore glasses and had a greyish mustache. He smiled. “Then you’ll know what he had for breakfast.”

“He didn’t get to eat any breakfast, Sam.”

“Hell of a way to go.”

Peter was only a few paces from the cabins that formed a semi-circle beyond the lodge when he saw a slight movement from a curtain framing one of the double doors of the lodge. He wheeled back, climbed the wide stairs to the verandah that ran the width of the building, and walked across to the open door, shoving aside the curtain. The room was large and inhabited only by some ancient furniture, including an old grandfather clock that ticked away monotonously. From the paneled walls, two mounted

heads of moose and a single mottled elk stared down glassily. On the floor the hide of a large brown bear stretched out its tattered legs, and its mouth yawned to reveal flesh-ripping teeth, but one tooth was cracked and there was dust on the plastic tongue.