

Chapter 2

Peter was examining the contents of Jackson Curtis' billfold when Helen Curtis strode into Cabin 5.

"I want my husband's things back."

She was wearing jeans and a man's shirt. Thick brown hair fell below her shoulders. Her eyes were light brown, almost hazel, and her mouth was full and well formed. She did not look thirty-seven because her eyes were clear, her skin youthful, and her figure flawless. She stood easily, self-assured.

"You can have them back very soon, Mrs. Curtis."

"I want them back now." She spoke quietly.

"I'm sorry, but not just yet."

"You can do this? You can take over my husband's property without permission?"

"Until our investigation is completed, yes."

"Investigation of what? The cause of death is no problem."

"Whether a crime has been committed is a problem."

“Crime?” There was an edge of sarcasm. She continued to gaze at him, the barest hint of amusement in her eyes.

“That wasn’t murder,” she said.

Methodically, he returned the contents of the billfold to their original places.

“Jim Bartlett,” she explained, almost pleasantly, “was with Jackson when he was killed. According to Bartlett there was a single shot fired from about three hundred yards. First, who would place himself at a point more than five miles east on the south shore around 7:45 a.m. knowing my husband would come along? And second, what person would take aim at Jackson at that distance and time and be certain of killing him?”

“Exactly,” said Peter.

Taking out a leather pouch, she removed a cigarette and lit it; then she sat on the arm of the sofa.

“I know a little about shooting, Inspector. I’ve shot Thompson Gazelle in East Africa and Pronghorn Antelopes in Arizona, and you don’t get within three hundred yards of either. It’s the toughest shooting in the world. But killing gazelles is easy compared to this one. This target never stopped moving. Since Jackson was seated in a boat with his right side towards the gun, it had to be a head shot if it was certain to kill.”

Peter looked at her with some surprise. She picked a piece of tobacco from her lip, and peered at it.

“A moving brain at three hundred yards in one shot. If you think that was planned and deliberate, you’ve got to be an amateur, and I don’t think you’re an amateur.”

“So who do you think fired the shot, Mrs. Curtis?”

“A nut of some sort, or a kid blasting off for the hell of it, to scare someone. The death was accidental.”

“Are you sure there was only one shot?”

“So Bartlett said.”

She had answered rather quickly.

“Has any other shot been fired at anyone since you arrived here?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Ask Jim that.”

“I will. Did you husband have any enemies?”

“Of course he had enemies. He was rich. He was successful.”

“You’re pretty cool about all this,” he said.

She smiled bleakly. “He had better than twenty years on me. I’m not complaining. He gave me what I wanted—money, security, a place in the social register. All I had to do was play the loving and attractive wife before the very important people.”

“You didn’t have to come up here with him?”

She hesitated. “No.”

“Why did you? It’s not very comfortable—no place to go at night.”

The glint came back into her eyes. “I like the outdoors.”

“Do you go fishing?”

“A little.”

“Did you go fishing with your husband?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “He thought of it as some kind of male thing.”

“Did you go out fishing with anyone else?”

“A couple of times Ed Dunning took me. Customer service.”

“Did you ever go alone?”

“Yes, a few times.”

“Did Jim Bartlett take you fishing?”

“I believe once.”

“Why only once?”

“He only asked me once.”

She blew on the burning end of her cigarette.

“He’s unmarried, isn’t he?”

“He’s unmarried now. He was married once.”

“He’s young to be full partner in the firm.”

“He’s ambitious. He’s smart.”

“And now it will all be his.”

She looked at him. “All what will be his?”

“The business, of course.”

She maintained her level gaze. “I suppose.”

“What did you think I meant?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“The inheritance will be yours, of course.”

She smoked. “I suppose.”

He felt suddenly tired.” What happened this morning, Mrs. Curtis?”

“You know what happened.” But he did not answer. “Jackson got up at 5:00 a.m. He had an idea that the fishing is better in the early morning. Actually, the fishing isn’t that bloody good.”

“He and Bartlett had planned this the night before?”

“Actually a few days ago. Curtis always planned ahead.”

“What had they planned?”

“To get up at 5:00 a.m. and fish through to about 10:00.”

“Were they going to have breakfast before they left?”

“No. They were going to have breakfast at 8:30.”

“And how would they manage that?”

“They took eggs and bacon and Jim was going to be let off on shore about 8:00. Jim would cook the breakfast while Jackson trolled. Then, at 8:30, Jackson was going to come ashore and grab a bite. Jackson liked that sort of thing—playing the Boy Scout. With him the scout leader.”

“And they had the place picked out.”

“Oh yes. A stream comes in just east of there.”

“Did Jim tell you he was in the boat when the shot was fired?”

She hesitated. “I assumed he was in it.”

“Why?”

“From the way he told it.” She got up and went over to the table to stub out the cigarette in an ashtray. “And something else, now I think of it: I saw Jim when he came back and his clothes weren’t damp. If Jackson had been shot while Jim was on shore Jim would’ve had to swim out to him.”

“Perhaps.”

“Unless he stripped down, of course.”

“That’s true.”

In leaning over the table, her hair had fallen partly over her forehead. She caught it and threw it back into place with one hand. Beyond her, through the window, Peter saw a man turn down the lodge path to the cabin. Helen followed his glance.

She frowned. “Did you ask him to come here?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll be going.”

But she did not move, hearing Bartlett’s steps on the porch, and then his knock on the door.

Jim Bartlett stepped into the room. He was about five feet ten inches, slender, dark, in his late thirties, and he stared reflectively at Helen for a long moment before acknowledging Peter Gregory.

She met his gaze, and the amused light came back into her eyes. “The Inspector seems to think there’s been a murder, Jim. I think he’s wrong, don’t you?”

Bartlett was no longer looking at her. “The Inspector can make up his own mind,” he said.

“Well, it doesn’t matter to Jackson, anyway.” Her sandals slapped on the linoleum as she moved to the door. “Either way, he won’t be caring.”

“You’d better start a little way back.” Peter said, waving Bartlett into a chair.

“A brief biography?”

“Something like that.”

Bartlett said that after a childhood and youth spent at various private schools, he had graduated from the University of Michigan in Business Administration. He was 23 and wanted adventure, so he joined the Marines, leaving the service in 1990 after seeing action in Panama. He joined his father’s firm and quickly mastered the investment business. He admitted that there were some disagreements between the partners over business methods. His father and Jackson Curtis tended to be over-cautious in investment analysis; furthermore, it seemed to the young man that they were missing a golden harvest in not backing IPOs.

Peter asked him to describe the events of the morning. Bartlett said that he was going to go ashore at 8:00 a.m. to prepare breakfast at a point about 30 feet to the west of Soames Creek, and then the shot came. It was about 7:45, maybe a little earlier.

“First, I heard a cry.”

“From Curtis?”

“It didn’t seem to me that it came from Curtis. It must have been the loon. We’d been idling along very quietly, not talking, and the only sound was the cry of some loon every now and then. We couldn’t see it—it was hidden in the low-lying mist you sometimes get on the lake early in the morning. Sometimes it would be ahead of us, and then we’d hear it cry out behind us, very close. It was kind of weird all right. You know that wail they make?”

“The mist had gone when the shot came?”

“Yes. It seemed to disappear all at once.”

“The water was calm?”

“Dead calm.”

“You were heading parallel to the shore?”

“Yes, right on course.”

“Close in?”

“Not at that point. I’d say we were 80 yards out”

“There was no turning in or out suddenly?”

“No.”

“Heading due east?”

“Just about..”

“You were seated where?”

“I was on the middle seat facing forward. Jackson was behind me operating the motor because he was going to let me ashore. Usually he liked me to work the motor.”

“Were the two of you seated in such a way that the boat was level or tilted?”

“Level. Jackson had a thing about that.”

“In order to operate the motor he must have been sitting somewhat to one side of his seat.”

“He was to the right, and I was somewhat to the left.” He looked inquiringly at Peter.

“Did you look over to the south shore now and then?”

“I guess so, but there’s nothing to see there. The mountains cut out much of the sun on that slope till well after 9:00.”

“So it was dark over there.”

“Mostly.”

“You said you heard a cry just before the shot. Did you hear anything else at that moment?”

“There was a thud.”

“The thud must have come at the same time as the cry if it was Jackson who cried.”

“I said I didn’t think it was Jackson.”

“Then would come the sound of the shot. With about 300 yards between you and the south shore, the difference between the thud of the

bullet hitting home and the sound of the rifle shot would be less than a second. Did you note the difference?”

“I really don’t recall.” Bartlett said. He was looking at the floor.

“Mr. Bartlett, you were in the Marines. You go hunting. You know about guns.”

“A little.”

“That would be a difficult shot, wouldn’t it, from the far south shore?”

“Not an easy one.”

“If it was deliberately aimed. At the head. A moving target.”

“That’s what I thought you meant.”

Peter was silent for a moment, thinking. “What happened then, after you heard the shot?”

“I turned around and saw Jackson falling to his left. He was stopped by the handle of the motor and sort of folded over onto the floor of the boat. We swerved sharply, and I grabbed the tiller. Then I gunned the motor, keeping as low as I could, and headed back here at full speed.”

“And there were no other shots?”

“If there were I didn’t hear them, and they didn’t hit anything.”

“What time did you arrive back at the lodge?”

“Just about 8:00. Maybe a minute or two later.”

“Full speed all the way?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you stop to check on Curtis?”

“What was the point of that?”

“You knew he was dead?”

He nodded slowly. “He was dead alright. I’ve seen dead men.”

“When you got back what did you do?”

“I ran to get Ed Dunning...” Bartlett began.

“And did you get him?”

“No, I didn’t.” He looked down at his lean brown hands. “He wasn’t there.”

“Where was he?”

“When he came back about half an hour later, he said he’d been hauling timber.”

“Did he have timber on his truck?”

“Well, yes, he did.”

“You seem to regard Dunning’s absence as significant.”

“I don’t know whether it was significant or not.”

“You don’t. Tell me something, Mr. Bartlett.”

“What?”

“How do you know the shot came from the south shore?”

“By the volume and direction of the sound, for one thing. Also by the direction of Jackson’s fall and the position of the wound.”

“The answer had come easily. Peter stared at the younger man, and said nothing. Bartlett glanced fleetingly up, and then at the floor again, gloomily.

“I think the ballistic evidence will back that up,” Bartlett said.

“What ballistic evidence?”

“Let’s not play games, Inspector. The wounds of entry and exit are plain.”

“You examined the wounds?”

“Superficially.”

“From more than three hundred yards you’d need three thousand muzzle velocity for clean penetration.”

“You’re still playing games.”

“Do you agree?”

“Depending on the grain of the bullet, the sectional density, and the type of point, a lower velocity could do it.”

“Could go right through.”

“I believe so,” said Bartlett evenly, looking at his watch. It was already after six.

Constable Turner had brought over a couple of sandwiches and a pot of coffee to Cabin 5, and Peter ate alone, looking through a single window at the lake over which the shadow of the mountainous south side deepened into gloom as the sun went down. Once, he thought he heard the cry of a loon coming from far down the lake, but he could not be sure. There was a man named Quill in the North who knew all about loons...

He remembered looking out on another lake when he and Cathy were on their honeymoon. They had a small cabin and when they weren't making love they were on the lake fishing for Rainbow trout or tramping through the woods identifying mushrooms and birdsong and the tracks of animals. In the early evening they would sit on the porch and watch the sun burn itself out behind the ridge of trees on the other side of the lake. Even after the sun had gone the sky continued to blaze on the water and the meadowlarks would begin to sing in the alder grove behind them.....

He felt his fingertips pressing hard against the edge of the table. They'd decided to wait before having babies—wait until he had a more permanent posting and they'd saved enough to buy a home. That took six years. The baby did not come when it should have. Then Cathy started getting these terrible headaches, and they found the growth in her brain.....

Someone knocked at the door.

“Yes,” he said in a voice he hardly recognized.

“Turner here.”

“Just a minute.” Peter got to his feet. “What is it?”

There was a faintly surprised tone in Turner's voice when he answered. “Just as you instructed, I told Kurt Koenig that you wanted to see him. He said he was ready to see you now.”

Peter strode to the sink, dashed cold water on his face and toweled himself.

He opened the door. “Sorry, Turner, I was just washing up.”

Constable Turner was fresh-faced and lanky. Where Corporal Hill fitted perfectly into his uniform, Turner looked ruffled and vaguely uncomfortable. He stared up at Peter with a vaguely concerned expression in his light blue eyes. Peter realized that there would be nothing in the police manual about officers who cried on duty.

“He’s in that cabin over there,” Turner said.

He pointed at an older log cabin set apart among the trees. A trace of smoke rose from the chimney.