

Chapter 4

Making his way along the float proved difficult. Gusts of wind had begun to blow in from down the lake, widening the gaps between the sections of the float and splashing little waves over the top. And his limping foot was no help.

There were five boats attached side by side on each side of the float, all of them aluminum twelve-foot craft with wide beams giving good planing ability. He noticed the shape of what looked like a rolled blanket in the farthest boat on the right, but decided to start on the nearest one. Climbing in awkwardly, he groped with his right hand along the gunwale on either side, but if a repair job had been done it was not perceptible to the touch.

“I’ll save you the trouble. It’s this one.”

The voice seemed to come from the water beside him and then he realized that the sound came from the last boat. He climbed out and walked along.

“Who are you?”

“Tim Dunning. The master’s son.”

Peter was close enough now to make out the eyes in the pale blob of a face. They were deeper smudges looking up at him. The boy was half lying in the bottom of the boat.

“Do you usually sit out here at dinnertime?”

“When I want to get away from the old man I do.”

“He gives you a bad time, does he?”

“He’s a total shit.”

“I see. How did you know what I was looking for?”

“I couldn’t see any other reason why you’d be out here.”

For the moment, Peter accepted this answer. He climbed in. “Let’s have a look.”

Tim moved to the bow of the boat and sat watching.

“It must be great being a police inspector.” There was a strong note of sarcasm.

Peter only grunted. He had found patches on either side of the boat, one a little below the gunwale and the other 3 inches lower. The holes had been filled in with grey duct-tape—not a very good job if concealment was the purpose. He took out his penknife and fastidiously cut away the tape until the bullet holes were clear. He measured the diameter of the holes, and their distance back from the edge of the middle seat.

The boy said nothing except to give a little snort of derision from time to time.

Finally, Peter sat back. “How did you know about these holes?”

“I saw the old man cover them over. Lousy job.”

“You asked him what they were?”

“Yeah.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said they were fucking holes what do they look like and go bother somebody else.”

“Did you ask him how they got here?”

“Nope.”

“Do you know how they got here?”

“Yup.”

“How?”

“Somebody fired a shot through the boat.” He snickered.

“Do you know who it was who fired the shot?” Peter asked patiently.

“Nope. But there’s only one gun here that I know of. And it’s Dad’s. So I think Dad did it. I also think he killed old Curtis. You better arrest him for murder—he’s guilty for sure.”

Peter ignored this. “You don’t know of any other gun?”

The boy seemed to think for a moment. “Oh yeah...” and then was silent.

“Oh yeah what?”

“Yeah...what’s-his-name...lover kraut had one...that’s right. But he wouldn’t do it.”

“No?”

“Have you seen him shoot? If he took aim at this boat from ten paces he’d miss it. Yet he thinks he’s a great hunter.”

“He does hunt, though.”

“He pretends to. It’s just a front.”

“For what?”

“For what! Don’t tell me you don’t know that? You’re the detective in the case.”

“Tell me anyway,” Peter said evenly.

“For making it with the Curtis chick.”

“How long have you known this?”

“Practically since it started, I guess. Everybody knew it.”

“Including Jackson Curtis?”

“If he didn’t know he was stupid and Curtis wasn’t stupid. She was always going for little walks in the woodsies. But that Madison Avenue slut wasn’t interested in woods. Curtis knew that.”

“I thought she liked hunting.”

“The kind of hunting she likes is to be set down by ’copter in the middle of an elk herd. She gets out, her attendants hand her a fully loaded .338 magnum with Klibendale scopes, the guide at her elbow says that big one over there, see, you’re in at 150. Bang! Back into the ’copter while the natives bring in the meat.”

“Somehow I think you’re exaggerating.”

“Listen, if she ever goes into the woods it’s for some other purpose than hunting. Ask the Kraut. He must know all about her by now. Dad told him to cut it out, that he was hired to build guest cabins, not lay the guests. Personally, I’d have fired him long ago.”

“You certainly are a darling boy.”

Tim snickered. “Don’t get personal or I’ll tell Headquarters you’re gay. Can’t you just see those headlines in the *Enquirer*: Queen of the Mounties?”

“Whenever I think I have a handicap because of my crippled foot, I’ll have to remember what your father has to put up with.”

“Don’t waste your pity on him. That bastard deserves all the hair shirts he can put on. And I’m the least of them. If you think I’m rough on him, you ought to hear the old lady.”

“A perfect love nest, isn’t it?” The conversation had made Peter feel grimy, and he wanted to bring an end to it.

“You ask her who murdered Curtis. She’ll tell you.”

“I’m sure she will. And what about Pat?”

“She’s a nympho.”

“Of course,” said Peter.

“Hasn’t she tried to lay you yet? That limp won’t save you—at least not the limp in your foot—or those square clothes either or that faggoty moustache. She’s laid the poor Kraut, and she’s laid me.”

“Oh cut it out.”

“Don’t worry, Inspector, it’s not technical incest because she’s not my real sister. You see, she’s Mom’s first husband’s daughter. Lucky first husband to be divorced from my Mom. He dared to disobey her, I guess. She’s out for IT, Man.”

“What’s IT?”

“Money, property, what else? And she’ll get IT, too. She only married Dad because she thought he had money. You see, she started pretty low—I wouldn’t like to say how low—and the simple way she thinks is: he’s got all this property, ergo, he must be wealthy. She missed the target there. But just you wait. It’s only a matter of time and she’ll have this whole mosquito swamp for her very own and of course for her dear Patsy.”

“How could she get the property?”

“She’ll make the old man’s life such hell that he’ll give it to her with thanks. Or she’ll get him convicted of murder, or something. Does it matter? ...Hey, that’s an angle, Inspector! It was my Mom who knocked over old Curtis and fixed it so that her husband gets taken. How about that?”

“How about this: the son kills Curtis and fixes it so that the father gets taken.”

“Uh uh. I liked old Curtis. You want to know why I liked him?”

“Not particularly.”

“Because when he was around here he gave the orders—what he said went—and the old man had to hop.”

Peter was interested. “Go on.”

“Well, that’s why the old man shot Curtis.”

“Why?”

“To get him off his back. Oh oh. Here comes the guilty party.” The sound of boots on the float echoed hollowly.

“Is that you, Tim?” Ed Dunning called.

“It’s me,” said Tim resignedly, climbing out of the boat.

“What’re you doing her? Who’s that with you? Is it that Inspector?”

“Inspector Gregory and I were just discussing this murder case. We know it was murder, don’t we, Inspector? And I was giving him my hypothesis.”

“I’ll give you a kick in the ass if you don’t get to the house.”

“Ta ta, Inspector,” Tim lisped, mincing up the float and out of sight near the house.

“A fine boy you’ve got there,” mused Peter. But Dunning’s attention was elsewhere.

“You’ve found those holes.”

“Yes.”

“I was going to tell you, but I forgot. Didn’t think they were that important, anyway.”

He was a big bulk hanging over Peter.

“You know very well they were important.”

“How so?”

Peter ignored him. “Tell me how they got here.”

“It was three days before Jackson Curtis got killed. Jim Bartlett was out fishing when somebody across the lake fired at him, or the boat. Just about the same location as where Jackson got hit.”

“Headed in the same direction?”

“Yes.”

“Now, you tell me why this is important to the case.”

“You mean there might be a connection between the two shots?”

“Well, what do you think?”

Dunning considered this for a moment. “I don’t think that it makes much difference. Some nut takes a potshot across the lake and kills Jackson. Now we find out that he’d already taken a shot at somebody else.”

“What does that add up to?”

“It doesn’t add up to anything more than we had before.”

“It rules out accident—the shot that went astray. It means that someone was deliberately aiming and deliberately pulling the trigger. Both shots were good, particularly the second, so the man is no amateur.”

“Have it your way,” Dunning said doubtfully.

“Did Bartlett come right back?”

“Of course.”

“Was he upset?”

“Well, sure he was.”

“What time did he get back?”

“About 11:00 a.m.”

“Was the lake calm?”

“Not a breeze.”

“Why did you patch up those holes?”

“I didn’t want the boat looking like that.”

“You should have reported it.”

“I know that, but if it was a stray shot as we believed, then what good would an investigation do? I didn’t want our names dragged through the papers over nothing. It looks bad when we’re just beginning to make the place pay.”

“Now you’ve got a real investigation on your hands.”

“Yeah, and I think it’s time you cut all these questions and get the guilty man.”

“Do you have somebody in mind?”

“I do.” Leaning forward so that the bulk of his face was only inches away, he seemed menacing. “It’s John Vincent.”

“The last time I talked to you, you said it was an accident.”

“I’ve been thinking about it and now I’m telling you. Vincent is an Indian who hates whites so much that it’s gone to his head. Like you said, it has to be someone who knows how to shoot. Vincent could shoot the moss off a buck’s antlers with his 30.30, and now he’s got one of those high velocity weapons.”

“What is it?”

“A Remington .310 ultra magnum. A good flat trajectory for long range.”

“How do you know this?”

Dunning hesitated. “Kurt Koenig told me. He bought the 30.30 from Vincent for forty bucks, and he saw the new one.”

“I thought Vincent hated whites.”

“He does, and Kurt’s the only one who’s managed to get near Vincent for more than a year. Maybe it’s because Koenig is kind of an outsider, too.”

“What does Vincent want a long-range rifle for?”

“That’s just it! Those things are for people who can’t hunt. It’s a sniper’s rifle. I don’t know where he got the money but he must have wanted that rifle bad. Well, you and I know, Inspector, that no soft-nosed 30.30 bullet fired from the far shore of the lake could have gone through the boat leaving holes like those there, and I don’t believe it could have passed right through old Jackson’s head, either, let alone hit the bugger in the first place. There’d be a foot drop in trajectory.”

Peter was silent.

“And there’s nobody else in those hills over there,” Dunning continued. “It’s old Indian territory and there’s just John Vincent and his father. You’ll notice he picked the spot where the lake is just about at its narrowest? You have to know the country to do that.”

“Has the Remington got a scope on it?”

“According to Koenig it has. And he saw a box of the ammo, too. With

a 180 grain bullet and a muzzle velocity well over 3000 feet per second, it would hardly drop a hand's width in 300 yards."

Peter was silent, thinking. Then he said: "Alright, I'll go up there in the morning. I'll leave early."

"You can take this boat here. It has a full tank."

"And drop by Jim Bartlett's room, will you? Ask him to come along with me in the morning. I might need his help. Tell him I want to be on the lake by 7:00 a.m."

"What about my help?"

"I'd rather not bother you," Peter said politely. "You've got a business to run."

Dunning peered at him. "I'll do that," he said finally.

"Thanks."

"I'll tell the wife to pack a few sandwiches. I suppose you've got a good expense account." Dunning turned to go.

"Aren't you laying this hate business on a little thick, Dunning? Vincent was making part of his living by guiding white men."

Dunning turned back, and again his presence loomed menacingly. "You don't believe me. Alright, I'll tell you what I know. Vincent started guiding last year and his only customer was us here at the lodge. I gave him the business because when I put up that hunting sign I had to have somebody who knew where to find the animals, and I mean knew, not thought he knew."

“And how did it work out?”

“It didn’t. That’s what I was coming to. We were packing in to the end of Pond’s Lake, and it’d been a hard day. You know, flies and mosquitoes and swamp and shale, the works. Now when we came near this little lake Vincent went ahead to see if there was a deer, and after a few minutes he came back to say there was no deer, just a bear rooting around at the other end. Well, Jackson Curtis was never a man to take kindly to the prospect of an empty bag, and he said he wanted that bear. Vincent said that we’d come to get deer, not bear, and it was a bear with her cubs and he didn’t believe in shooting mother bears, unless out of necessity, because the cubs would not survive. Well, Jackson just grabbed his gun and headed for that lake, but he hadn’t gone twenty feet before there was a shot, and Jackson jumped around and aimed his gun at Vincent.”

“Vincent had fired in the air to frighten off the bear.”

“That’s right. I thought for a moment that Jackson was really going to pull that trigger—he wasn’t the kind of man you ever wanted to cross. But finally he just snarled something about how his grandad knew how to handle the fucking redskins in Oregon. Shoot ‘em down, he said, and there’s no more Indian problem. I’ll never forget the look in Vincent’s eyes—it was pure poison. Then he turned and left us.”

“That doesn’t mean he hates all white men. Just one white man.”

“No sir, you’re wrong. I went up to see him soon after we came back from the hunt. You see, I still wanted him to guide for us, but he wasn’t

around his cabin. I was heading back down the trail when he jumped out right in front of me. He told me he didn't want me around Indian land and to go home. I tried to talk to him, tell him if he came down to apologize to Curtis, we'd hire him back again. Well, at that, he went sort of nuts. He said a lot about the white man destroying the whole goddam country and hoped they'd kill one another off—wild talk—and then he told me never to come up there again.”

“And did you?”

“Well, not right there.”

“Where?”

“I went hunting with Jackson and Jim a couple of more times in the general area. But we never saw Vincent. As far as I know only Koenig has seen him since, when he bought the 30.30. And by that time Vincent had got himself that sniper's rifle. I don't know where he got the money for a rifle like that.”