

Chapter 5

Ed Dunning told Peter that Tom Broderick's cabin was about three miles down the lake at a place where the road dipped close to the water. It had a name above the door, "Loon's Luck." Peter knew what that meant. When it came to fishing the loons were usually lucky since they were very fast underwater and could dive deep.

Dunning had told him that the cabin had been built by an old fisherman who sold it to Curtis.

"As a matter of fact, I think Tom was the agent on that deal. In case you didn't know, Tom works out of Fred Case's realty in Kamloops. The deal was that he got the use of the cabin whenever he came up."

"How often does he use the cabin?"

"Every other week or so in the fishing season.. In the hunting season, too."

"Is he married?"

"Yeah, and sometimes he brings her up, but not often. I understand she's not too well."

“Okay, thanks.”

The cabin was tucked in between the road and the lakeshore. There was an SUV to one side and Peter pulled in behind it. A 12 foot aluminum boat with a merc. engine was tied to the single float. The far bank seemed to loom close in the darkness. He looked at his watch. It was approaching 7:35 p.m.

After a moment, Tom answered Peter’s rap.

“I’ll be damned in friggin’ hell—if it ain’t Peter Gregory!” he exclaimed after a moment.

“The very same.”

“Well come on in old buddy!”

Inside, they gave each other a bear hug.

Tom held him at arm’s length. “I’ll be damned...” he repeated. “You haven’t changed that much. Only you got yourself some hairs on your upper lip. You joined the R.C.M.P., as I recall.”

“I did, Tom. Close to 20 years ago.”

“That’s right, and then you dropped out of sight.”

Tom hadn’t changed that much either. The same sandy hair, only thinner, the same stocky build, only heavier. The same blue eyes.... but now they seemed to be looking into the distance, even when he was looking straight at you.

Peter glanced around the cabin.

“I smell fresh fish.”

“You would you old bastard! You always did sniff out my catch. I’ve been out fishin’ most of the day, Pete. Well, to tell the truth, I didn’t get up here until 8:30 or so. Got myself four rainbow. I was just guttin’ ’em.”

Peter looked at the rainbow trout. They looked a little on the small side. It was as though Tom read his thoughts.

“There’s more fish there than you think, old man. Look, why don’t you help me eat them. I can’t down the four, that’s for sure. You’re sallivatin’, Pete.”

Indeed, Peter couldn’t resist them, and grinned at Tom.

“You got me. But I hope I’m not taking what you were saving for your wife.”

“Naw, she don’t care for fish too much.”

He’d lowered his voice a bit, and seemed to have lost some of his exuberance.

“Sit you down at the table and I’ll rustle up our meal, Pete. Oh, and I got some gin, too. How about that? I remember you used to love the booze.”

Peter sat down at the small table near the lakeside window.

“I’m afraid I’m off that stuff, Tom. Quit a few years ago.”

Tom looked at him, yet didn’t look at him.

“You have changed, old bozo. I heard you got married.”

“Yeah, Tom. But...”

“Well, life happens to us all.”

“I lost her, Tom. Not divorce. She died on me. Seven months ago.”

With the words came the old sense of desolation.

“I’m sorry, Pete. You didn’t have that many years with her then.”

“No.” Peter looked out the window at the lake, reflecting a rising moon.

“Well, got to get busy, “ Tom said, trying to be cheerful again. “How about a 7-Up?”

“That would be great.”

Tom turned to the small ’fridge and took out a 7-Up and a bottle of Beefeaters. Peter glanced around the small cabin. It was simply furnished. A double bed in one corner. A couple of easy chairs defining the sitting room area. On the wall opposite hung a .270 magnum. Peter got up and went over to look.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Your old .270. I was always so bloody jealous of you owning a gun like that—so snazzy beside my Winchester.”

“That’s not all you were jealous about.” Tom said, carefully cleaning the last of the fish.

“That’s true, Tom. You were a holy terror of a marksman. I thought I was good, but I wasn’t in the same league with you.”

“My God we had some great hunts, didn’t we?” Tom said.

“We did that.” He’d picked up the rifle and aimed along it. “And you keep it just as clean as you ever did. I remember that, too. You were always cleaning your damned rifle.”

“Yeah, it was just a thing with me.” He held up a fish speared on his fork. “Into the frying pan with you, my friend.”

Peter returned to his seat at the table.

“You on holiday, Pete?”

“No. You know about the homicide, don’t you?”

Tom turned from the stove, a surprised look on his face. “Up here?”

“Yeah, this a.m. about 7:45. A man by the name of Curtis—Ed Dunning said that you knew him—got hit when he was out fishing. Through the head.”

“God damn it! Jackson Curtis?”

“The same.”

“You know who he is?”

“I heard he was some kind of V.I.P.”

“You’re damn right he was V.I.P. Totally loaded with money, and political clout. Do you think it was deliberate, Pete?”

“I can’t be sure yet.”

“Wow. Whoeee.”

“You did business with him?”

“Yeah. You know, I work out of Case’s Realty in Kamloops. When I came up here I was mixing business with pleasure—most of it thanks to Jackson Curtis who was buying up land back then. After that I just came up the odd day or two for a holiday. And you know what that means: fishin’ and/or huntin’.”

Tom had emptied a can of vegetables in a pot and was cooking that along with the fish.

“Did you know Curtis’ wife?”

“Nope. Well, enough to nod to. Old Curtis got himself a cute chick there. And now she’s going to be worth tons of money.”

“We haven’t seen his will yet.”

“Don’t matter. He signed a marriage contract with her that commits him. Don’t know whether he signed away the whole kaboodle, though.”

“How do you know this?”

“Curtis told me. We went fishing a few times together, and we got sort of friendly with one another. I mean as friendly as you can get with an upper drawer prick like that. I don’t know how it came up. Oh yeah, I was telling him about a couple of celebrities who’d signed a marriage contract, and he told me he’d done the same thing with his wife. He said it was the only way to do business. Funny way to talk about marriage. But everything was business to that dork. Here’s your fish, bozo.”

They got serious about the food, then. They ate canned vegetables and bread and the fish, but it was only the fish that mattered.

“My God, you still know how to cook it, Tom. You know, running around the province as I do I have to eat a lot of restaurant food. Just try to find trout on their menus, and when it’s there it’s overcooked.”

They ate in silence for a moment.

Finally, Peter said: “You didn’t like Curtis.”

“Tell me someone who did.”

“Was he tough to do business with?”

“Yes, but that’s not it.” He paused, taking a drink from his refilled glass of gin and 7-Up. “He was a mean son of a bitch and liked being mean. Loved it. Kneeing your balls when you’re down. That warmed his dear old heart.”

“Did he do you on any deals?”

“I’m not that easily done. No. But I’ll tell you something, Pete. My commission was not in cash. It was this place, rent free. And guess what? I got a note from him, oh a month ago, before he came up, telling me that at the end of May, this month, I was to clear out. He wanted this cabin for his scout master.”

“Scout master?”

“Well, that’s what I call him. A guy who was to organize a youth camp here under Curtis’ auspices. You know, right beyond here the road climbs, winds way back from the lakeshore. So this place is right on the edge of that area he was going to make into this youth camp.”

“Where’s the money in that?”

“Oh there’s money in it alright. These are the young sons of wealthy U.S. citizens. Don’t ever get the idea he might want to help the poor kids. But it’s a good question, Pete. I think this is one venture where the profit motive wasn’t uppermost. I think he was hoping to train these kids to lead a right-wing revolution in the U.S.”

“Oh come on, Tom— isn’t that a little far fetched?”

“Sure it is, but this guy’s way out there. He’s so far right he’d call Genghis Khan a Bolshie. Do you know what he said to me?”

“What?”

“He said: blood is going to have to flow, Tom, before we get things right in the U.S. of A. Otherwise, the niggers and feminists and Jews and unions are going to take over America. He meant it, too.”

“A real charmer.”

“Yeah, and he had powerful friends on the far right. Wait till they get wind that their pal has been shot. Watch out then, Pete.”

“They already know.”

“Right. And I know who told them.”

“Who?”

“Jim Bartlett. He’d be on to those guys pronto. He was aiming to topple the old man eventually but he had to do it from the inside like a weevil. Now he has to protect his money. By the way, is he a suspect?”

“Who isn’t?”

“Me, too—your old friend Tommy?” He pouted.

“Nope, you have an alibi.”

“I can’t remember concocting any alibi.”

“You left Kamloops at around 7 a.m. It’s an hour and a half’s drive to Loon Lake from there.”

“I guess you better check that out with the wife. I could be lying.”

Oh we will,” Peter said evenly. “Well, you’ve admitted you hated the guy.”

“I didn’t hate him, just detested the asshole.” He grinned.

“Now, how would that sound to a jury of nice old men and grandmothers? And there is one suspicious circumstance.”

“You’ve got me.”

“Your gun. Why do you have it up here out of hunting season?”

“I always keep it here. See the pegs on the wall? That’s where it stays unless I take it hunting.”

“Aren’t you risking a break-in with you away from here most of the time?”

“We don’t get break-ins up here. And if we did it’s insured—I wouldn’t mind getting a new rifle.”

“Oh well, Tom, maybe you’re not my chief suspect,” Peter said with a laugh.

Tom laughed too, but he seemed to be thinking of something else, looking past Peter, out the west window that gave a view of the moonlit lake.

“Remember those days, Peter, when we were eighteen and nineteen?”

“How can I forget?”

“We drank and wenched and fished and hunted, you and me and Phipp Fontaine and Charlie Coombes. Remember the all-night parties? God it was fun.”

“Yeah, and the trout then, Tom? Remember? We used to catch five pounders as though the lake was full of them. Even the loons were frustrated with the size of those rainbow.”

“Who was that babe you used to go with—Mabel Hunt—it lasted all of three months, and then you were on to someone else.”

“Remember the weekend we brought the girls up with us during the hunting season. Four guys and four girls and we had the idea they’d stay back in camp and cook for us. But no way.”

“Yeah, and our biggest problem was keeping them quiet during the hunt.” Tom had got up and was looking out into the darkness.

“Sometimes I wish.... well, never mind.”

“Go on, Tom.”

“We could live it all again—sounds crazy.”

“Yeah, but I know what you mean.”

“How you getting along, I mean, being alone and all that.”

“Not too well, Tom, in fact not well at all.” He looked at his watch. “I’ve got to get back. My boss is expecting a call from me.”

“Oh, oh.” Tom turned. “Well you get right along then. I was planning to go back to Kamloops in the morning. It’s a work day.”

“Tom, give me another day or two. I might need you.”

There was a moment’s silence, as though Tom was listening to something, but no loon called.

“For you, Pete, okay.”

They hugged, briefly.

Peter had parked and was just getting out of his car outside the cabin when he saw the slight figure of Pat approaching out of the dark.

“You’ve had two phone calls, both from the same guy,” she said, coming up to him. “A Superintendent Newcombe? He sounded like he needed you real bad. Practically growling.”

“That’s normal. I’ll come up there right away.”

“You’re pretty late for supper. It’s nearly 9:00 p.m.”

“Oh, I’ve had supper, down the road.”

She looked at him quizzically. “There’s no restaurant down the road.”

“A guy I used to know asked me to stay.”

“You mean Tom Broderick?”

“That’s right. Do you know him?”

“Sure...though not well. He used to sell some land up here. I guess he was glad to hear about Jackson Curtis getting whacked.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Jackson Curtis was about to throw Tom out of that cute little cabin of his. Now maybe he can keep it.”

“You don’t miss much, do you Pat?”

“I told you I know a lot. Maybe you should give me a private interview.” She cocked her head up at him, widening her eyes, but he did not respond.

“Do you want to come up with me to the Lodge?” she asked. “I’m very afraid of the dark,” she minced.

They started out, walking slowly.

“I understand you’ve interviewed Kurt—Kurt Koenig.” She was serious now.

“I have.”

“I can tell you that Kurt couldn’t kill anyone. And even if he could he’s such a terrible shot he’d miss an elephant at fifty feet.”

“How do you know this?”

“I saw him practising once.”

“What was the gun?”

“An old 30.30. He’d set up tin cans at fifty yards and never hit one of them. Besides, he’s as soft as butter.”

That was not quite the way it was, thought Peter, but he said nothing.

The Lodge sitting room was empty and shrouded in semi-darkness, three feeble lights in false candlesticks spaced on one wall seemed to add to the gloom rather than dispel it. Pat took him to the phone in the entrance hall. Switching on the overhead light, he fingered the number.

“Superintendent Newcombe here.” The gravelly voice had the effect of a blast of cold water.

“Peter Gregory reporting in. Sorry I didn’t get through earlier, but I’ve been interviewing up till now.”

“What have you got?”

“Not much, yet. At this stage everything is preliminary.”

“I’m under a lot of pressure on this one, Peter, meaning some important people want answers and the quicker the better. They’re even trying to get me to go up there and take over the case. What do you think?”

It was like another blast of colder water.

“I don’t think you would be any further ahead than I am now,” he said evenly.

“I’m sure you’re right. It’s just that they want a top-drawer investigation. I tell them it already is that. My finger’s in the dike on this one.”

Peter almost replied that if he kept his finger in the dike he couldn’t come up to Loon Lake, but thought better of it.

“Do you need any forensic people or pathologists or anyone from down here? Aside from Charlie Ross who’ll be up there tomorrow?”

“No, no one. The ident. team came in from Kamloops and the stuff has already been delivered to the lab by now.”

“Just one thing. Was this shooting accidental? Do you have a feeling about that?”

“Yes, I have a feeling about it, but that’s all.”

“Well? Tell me.”

“I don’t think it was an accident.”

Peter had just put the phone down when he thought of something, searched in his address book, and phoned Charlie Ross' home. A bright, nice feminine voice answered.

"Hello Irene, it's Peter Gregory. Is Charlie there?"

"He just got in, Peter. And I hear he's got to go up there tomorrow. This isn't a cover-up for a fishing trip, is it?" She laughed.

"I wish it were, Irene, believe me."

"He's right here."

"My wife is in a mid-life crisis," boomed Charlie. "So how's it going? Got anything?"

"Not much. But I wonder if you could come by way of Kamloops. I'd like you to check something for me. When do you plan to leave?"

"I got some things to clean up here first, and a meeting with the Beaver at 11:00 a.m. I'm supposed to leave right after that."

"You could save four hours if you flew into Kamloops. You could borrow a car from the rural detachment there. The thing is I want you to go to this address..." he read it out to Charlie, "...and talk to Louise Broderick, wife of Tom, an old pal of mine. Old pal or not I've got to check his story. He was at Loon Lake this morning, but says he didn't arrive till about 8:30, which means he must have left Kamloops on or shortly after 7:00 a.m. The wife should be able to confirm that."

"Wives sometimes fib for their husbands."

“That’s why I want you to go out and see her. You’ll know if she’s covering for him. You’re very good at that.”

“It comes from studying my wife for so long. Ha! Ha!”

“See you tomorrow, Charlie.”