

Chapter 6

At 7:00 a.m. the sun had not yet climbed above the mountains far to the east when Peter and Jim Bartlett got into the outboard. Peter buttoned his bush jacket against the cold before putting the boat at full speed. When they were near Soames Creek, he turned off the engine and they drifted in the silence, through the tufts of mist hanging over the lake. Neither of the men spoke.

Peter was sitting in the position that Jackson Curtis had occupied, and was watching the back of the hunched figure ahead of him, when the loon cried out. It came from the water near them, maniacal laughter followed by a wail that seemed to pierce from some other world. Even Peter was startled, and Bartlett whirled about.

“Let’s get out of here!” he said angrily, and then quickly regained control. “ I thought we were going after that Indian.”

“Dunning told you about it, then.”

“Of course,” Bartlett answered.

“But you already suspected John Vincent? Because of the quarrel between him and Curtis?”

“He seemed the most likely one,” Bartlett said guardedly.

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“I suspected—I didn’t have proof.”

“And about the earlier shot, the one three days before the killing that was aimed at you and went through your boat?”

Bartlett turned fully around. “Look, I just didn’t see the point of telling you about that. It had to be somebody over there....” He pointed to the pool of darkness that hid the south shore of the lake. “I knew you’d come to Vincent. He’s the one man who could get that shot on target.”

“We’re talking now about the first shot, the one fired when you were in the boat alone.”

“Well, go on,” the Bartlett said, obviously bothered.

“You think that was Vincent, too?”

Bartlett’s hesitation was hardly noticeable. “Who else?”

“Was it a morning like this?”

“No, it was later, after 10:00.”

“Was it calm?”

“Almost.”

“No waves?”

“Hardly even wavelets.”

“Coming from which direction?”

“Down lake, from the east.”

“Were you moving parallel to the shore? You weren’t turning in and out?”

“Parallel as I could make it.”

“And there was no tilt to it because of how you were seated?”

“There was no tilt. What are you trying to establish?”

“Your story.”

“Well, is it established?”

“That’s what I’m working on,” said Peter, almost cheerfully. He started the motor. “Now, as to yesterday morning, where were you and Curtis when the shot was fired?”

“Somewhat further out, otherwise it’s about right.”

“We’re about fifty yards offshore now. So let’s give it another thirty and we’re somewhat to the west of Soames Creek. About right?”

“I’d say so.”

“And you followed the north shore at that distance until you turned inshore to come back?”

“That’s right.”

“How far along did you go before turning in?” At trolling speed, they were following the route indicated by Bartlett.

“About another quarter of a mile.”

The sight of a ten-inch rainbow trout arching out of the water in pursuit of a fly made Peter regret not having brought his fishing gear. They moved at trolling speed until Bartlett said, “About here.”

“Did you turn out or in?”

“A fairly wide turn in, so that we were offshore less than 30 yards on the way back.”

“And about how many of these full turns did you make before the shot was fired?”

“I really wouldn’t know, Inspector, quite a few.”

“So you were on the eastbound outward loop—the start of it, to the west of the creek mouth—when Curtis was hit?”

“Yes.”

Peter completed the loop and looked at his watch.

“Then you were to go ashore and cook breakfast. Could you point to the spot?”

Bartlett did so.

“Let’s have a quick look,” Peter said.

The place to which Bartlett directed him was a clay bank about 30 yards west of Soames’ Creek. A few low bushes grew out of the bank, and Bartlett tied the line to one of these. They clambered on shore and Peter peered around. Pines and a few fir were scattered about, but only further back from the lake did the undergrowth thicken. Anyone along the bank or even 20 to 30 feet in would be visible from out on the lake.

“Where were you going to cook your meal?”

“Over here.” A circle of stones marked the spot. “We’d done this before as you can see.”

The location was set back about 20 feet from the water's edge. Peter wandered around, looking. But there was nothing to see except a few ashes and here and there the prints of a large dog.

"Where are we going now? The Indian's place is back there." Bartlett nodded toward the southwest.

"I know," said Peter as they churned toward the eastern end. "Since we're down here I thought we'd drop in on Blake Moran. See what kind of spread he has."

"It's nothing to see," Bartlett said glumly.

"So you've been down here."

"Once. I was fishing down this way with Curtis and we dropped in to see him. I guess you know or will know soon that Curtis and Moran were buying up land around here. It was Curtis' idea; he wanted the lake to be all his and I guess he was using Moran to close the deals. I don't really know. I wasn't too interested."

"I thought it was Tom Broderick who was helping him buy land."

"It was Tom in the beginning, that's right. Then Curtis got involved with Moran, don't ask me how. I never liked the man."

"Why do you bother coming to Loon Lake, Bartlett? It doesn't seem to me that you're that interested in anything to do with this country, including the fishing."

“I don’t mind fishing,” said Bartlett, watching the oncoming land.
“Mainly I came because Curtis expected me too. He could never leave business entirely alone, with me in charge, though he pretended to.”

“He’s done well by paying attention to business.”

“He’s done well.”

“Could you have done better?”

Bartlett smiled thinly at him. “In his place? Why, of course.”

They pulled into Moran’s weatherworn dock, and walked up past the remains of a wooden snake fence passing along a trail hemmed in by thick bush. A few old cottonwood trees towered overhead and crows flew from one to the other, cawing. They made a surprising din in the prevailing silence.

The house, which suddenly loomed in front of them, had been hastily put together from weathered boards that looked as though they’d been milled by hand. It appeared to Peter that the house leaned a little to one side, but perhaps that was an illusion. They climbed the creaky steps to the front door and knocked loudly. For a few minutes there was no response, except that a large mastiff leapt silently onto the porch from the side and slowly approached them, baring its teeth. The door opened abruptly, though Peter had heard no one approaching. Blake Moran stood there.

“No,” he said quietly to the dog and it reluctantly halted its advance.

“Come in,” he added to the two men.

“You can wait out here,” Peter said to Bartlett. “I won’t be long.”

The front door opened directly onto a large room, with a drum stove to one side and a couple of mottled sofas. Two old cougar hides were stretched on the walls and on a side table a stuffed eagle spread its wings, its claws gripping a lacquered rattlesnake that twisted upward. Dust lay everywhere.

Moran stood near the centre of the room, his head cocked to one side as though listening for something, his yellowish-white hair falling over his soft fawn shirt collar.

“Well? What can I do for you?”

“We were looking around Soames Creek—you know the shot was fired from opposite there, the shot that killed Curtis.”

“Is that so?” Moran said.

“Do you have a rifle, Mr. Moran?”

“I do, though it’s not been used in some time. It’s an old Winchester.”

“Could you let me see it?”

“Surely.”

Moran was wearing soft shoes and left silently. There was something agile, almost supple about him that belied his age. Most people would put him down as an ageing hippy, but he didn’t talk like one.

Peter examined the 30.30 Winchester that Moran handed to him. It looked unused. Even the breach was rusty.

“You used to hunt?”

“A long time ago.”

“No doubt your were a good shot.”

“Good enough. The cougars used to get my calves.”

“And now?”

“Don’t have any cattle. My ranching days are over.”

“What do you do, Mr. Moran?”

“You mean for a living? Nothing.” He did not elaborate.

“I suppose you’re the original inhabitant in these parts, other than the Indians.”

“Not quite. There was an old man living here when I came. He’d come around the turn of the century.”

“You owned some of the north side of the lake?”

“Most of it at one time.”

“You’ve sold some since?”

“Yes.”

“Who bought it?”

“Well, Ed Dunning, of course, bought his piece from me. And there were other pieces. Jackson Curtis bought a lot of it through a company he controlled.”

“How much?”

“Nearly all of it over the years.”

“But what for? He didn’t intend to live here.”

“Maybe he intended to retire here some day and wanted it all for himself.”

“Why did you sell? For the money?”

The older man shrugged. “Why not sell? I have no family. Why not?”

For the first time, Peter noticed a slightly guarded tone.

“You know Fern Dunning well, don’t you?”

But Moran was not at all perturbed by the question. “Yes, I know her well. She’s a lonely woman, and her marriage is not all it should be. She used to visit me sometimes.” He smiled slightly. “She called me her seafaring man.”

“I guess you know the land better than the sea—every inch of this land. You wander around a lot.”

Moran’s large grey eyes fixed, for a moment, on Peter’s.

“Some.”

“You went over that ground at Soames Creek pretty carefully. Looking for something?”

Moran stared at him. “You must’ve seen my dog’s prints.”

“Well, were you over there.”

“As you said, I wander a lot. I may well have been over there.”

“The day of the murder?”

“So it’s murder is it? Well, I guess I might have had a look around.”

He paused. “Yesterday afternoon.”

“Did you notice anything?”

“I saw nothing.”

There was a pause. Peter badly wanted to unsettle Moran, to get under his skin. There was something opaque, hidden, about the man.

“And what happens now that your business dealings with Curtis are over, for good?”

“Well, I’d say the property goes into his estate, wouldn’t you?” Moran said.

“You mean it’ll go to Helen Curtis?”

“I guess that’s so. She’s his wife.” Moran stared at him unblinkingly.

Peter turned to go.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been of more help,” Moran said to his back. “The events of this world don’t concern me much anyhow,” he added softly as Peter opened the front door to leave.

“Good-bye, Mr. Moran.”

Jim Bartlett was sitting on the front porch step staring without expression at the dog who sat staring back at him from a few feet away, equally expressionless.

“Let’s go,” Peter said, thinking about Moran’s remark.

The dog scarcely stirred as they headed down to the dock.

Starting the motor, Peter noticed, half hidden among the reeds a few feet offshore, the still figure of a large loon. It seemed to be watching him.

“Well, did the old bird have anything to say?” Bartlett asked casually.

“Not much.”

“Another wasted trip, then.”

“Not at all,” Peter said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean we’re on track.”

But at that moment he could not say where the track led or who was making the track. He only knew that he could not account for something he had felt at Moran’s. It was an apprehension as strong as the smell of a dead animal washed up on the beach.

They crossed the lake directly to the south side. There the massive slope of the land rose from the water slanting steeply for more than a thousand feet without an outcropping or ledge anywhere as far as Peter could see. As they neared the area approximately opposite Soames Creek, Peter studied the shoreline carefully. A few rocky ledges juttied out into the water here and there. So it would be possible, though difficult, for someone to work his way down the slope and take a firing position on one of these ledges. Peter nosed the boat into the largest of the ledges and climbed ashore, leaving Bartlett to hang onto a root. The shelf of rock was no more than twenty feet across and less than ten feet from front to back. Peter peered across at the Soames Creek area. It looked a long way off.

He climbed back into the boat and they continued along the shore. At one point they approached a loon that vanished underwater as they came near. Bartlett swore at it.

“You don’t like loons,” Peter said.

“They’re useless,” Bartlett muttered.

“They’re different,” Peter said. “The best of the divers—they’re great underwater—they can behave like submarines, regulating the amount of air in their feathers so they can stay at any depth they like. I’ve had them follow me just under the water, with only their eyes above the surface.”

Bartlett gazed across at the north side of the lake and said nothing.

“The one who just dove under is probably following us right now,” Peter went on. “They don’t like us around. We’re too near their nesting places.”

They tied up at a small promontory about three miles from the west end of the lake. But though the mountain slope looked somewhat gentler, it was a much tougher climb than Peter had expected. The ground was gravelly and loose underneath and without the toe support of his left foot he had to rely heavily on his right leg. They rested at the first ridge, a third of the way up, and ate the peanut butter sandwiches packed by Fern Dunning. Far below on the other side they made out Dunning’s lodge, half hidden in the trees. It looked rather idyllic from a distance.

They started again and soon reached the top of the ridge, where Peter called another halt. His left foot ached from the climb and he took off his boot and sock and massaged it.

“How did that happen?” Bartlett asked, staring at the place where Peter’s big and second toes should have been.

“An Arctic patrol. Got caught in a blizzard and had to sit still for five days. We ran out of fuel and there was no brush for a fire.”

They had reached the gently rolling plateau laced with small lakes that stretched to the valley of the North Thompson River. Once it had been a green wilderness, but not anymore. Large areas had been ravaged by fire, leaving here and there a few small stands of timber. They hiked on until Peter saw a glint of Vincent's lake over a low ridge of blackened stumps.

Peter stopped and swore.

"You know this place," Bartlett said, surprised.

"I knew it, but not like this, burnt to the ground."

The cabin was built of lodgepole pine poles chinked with clay and moss. A double window looked out beside a low porch that led to the entrance. Peter had seen many such cabins all over the north, up to the edge of the Barrens. There would be no fireplace, just a wood stove. By the time the first snow came firewood would be heaped around the entire cabin giving added insulation and fuel for the stove. There would be no running water or electricity. An outhouse would be out at the back.

As they approached, a young Indian stepped outside with a rifle cradled on his arm. This, thought Peter, must be John, the son of the Paul Vincent he had known. He had been just a kid then, chasing his sister among the trees in the game of catch-a deer. Now he was a thin, strong looking man approaching thirty.

"What do you want?" the young man said as they came near.

“You won’t remember me, John. You were about nine years old when I stayed the night with your father. My name’s Gregory, Peter Gregory, R.C.M.P.”

There was no sign of recognition or greeting in John Vincent’s eyes. “That was twenty years ago,” he said, as though he were talking about another existence that did not intersect with this one.

“Is your father still alive?”

“He’s alive, but that’s about all.”

“And your mother?”

“Dead.”

“Your sister—she was older than you as I recall—where is she?”

Vincent looked blankly at him. “She took off seven or eight years ago.”

“John, could I have a word with your father?”

“Is that why you came?”

“No. But since I’m here I’d like to speak to him.”

“Why did you come?”

“I’ve come to investigate a killing.”

“Nobody’s been killed here, just Indians dying slowly. You want to investigate that? You want to investigate about who started the bush fire that destroyed this country, and why it went out of control?”

Peter looked around him, at the charred remains of the forest.

“Ed Dunning told me you were bitter.”

“I have a right to be. That man with you can tell you why, too. The killers are people like him, tourists shooting the game from their helicopters.”

Bartlett stirred uneasily.

“The killing I’ve come to investigate,” said Peter, “is the killing of a man, this man’s partner.”

Vincent showed no reaction.

“Where were you yesterday morning at 7:30, John?”

“I don’t know,” he answered sullenly.

“Were you here?”

“I guess so.”

“The claim is that someone fired a shot from this side of the lake at Jackson Curtis who was fishing on the other side. Did you fire that shot?”

“No, I would not waste a shell on him.”

Again Bartlett stirred.

“That’s a fine looking gun you’ve got there,” Peter said.

“It’s alright.”

“Come on, it’s more than alright... a Remington .300 Ultra Magnum.”

“Vincent shrugged. “My old 30.30 was better. This one turns bullets off every twig.”

“But for open long range shooting it’s hard to beat.”

Vincent was silent, looking straight back at the Inspector.

“Could you give me a round?” Peter asked.

Vincent ejected on e and threw it too him. Peter turned it over, examining it.

“So, a spitzer with a soft point. With a 180 grain bullet and better than 3200 feet per second at the muzzle. You’d only get what?—not even a 5 inch drop at 300. Could I see the gun, please?”

Vincent hesitated, then held it out to him. Peter sniffed at it.

“Do you always clean after shooting?”

“Yes.”

“A nice rifle, John.” He handed it back to Vincent, while Bartlett stared. “Well balanced, too.”

John Vincent said nothing.

“Do you have a scope?”

“Inside.”

“Now can I see your father?”

“Have you finished with the questions?”

“For the moment, yes.”

John turned and entered the cabin.

“Bartlett, I’d like you to wait near the head of the trail,” Peter said. “I won’t be too long. But if you get bored you could start down to the lake.”

“Aren’t you going to be needing my help?”

“What for?” Peter asked politely.

The younger man bridled a little. “Well, if you’re going to arrest him you might need my help.”

“If I arrest him,” Peter said, “I won’t need your help.”