

Chapter 7

The interior of the dimly lit cabin was clean looking and simply furnished. A hand-made, solid looking table with a couple of well used chairs stood opposite the door. The table was bare except for a transistor radio that would pick up the Cache Creek radio signal. On a shelf above the table were a few rather tattered books, and a narrow wooden bed filled up most of the right wall of the cabin. Immediately to the left of the door was a large wooden stove and beyond that a sink with a bucket half full of water underneath. On a bed in the far left corner lay Paul Vincent, his arm resting on his forehead. He was half muttering, half singing to himself. Peter recognized the repetition of certain word sounds that he seemed to remember having heard before, but where on earth could that be? The Paul Vincent of twenty years ago was grey haired. Now his hair was a ghostly white, his bronze skin looked drawn, and his frame shrunken.

The old man became silent, and he removed his arm from his head. He seemed to be waiting. Peter went over to him and offered his hand. The old man took it.

“Paul Vincent, you remember me? Peter Gregory.” He sat down on the cot.

“Yes—oh, yes.” The old man said, as though listening to something far away.

“That night of the big wind when I stayed here?” said Peter after a moment. “I’ll never forget that. I’ll never forget what you told me. Do you remember that? It was twenty years ago; there was a big wind that night.”

Paul Vincent nodded, and then began to speak in a hoarse whisper. “You could see the game running—that was the first we knew—the game all running mad. They don’t care about us, run right past us. Then I knew it was a big fire. Johnny, he wanted to stay and try to save the place but I said no, run, run like the deer. So he did. Twelve miles to the lake up there. And Johnny goes down to Dunning’s and phones forest government-man and this man tells Johnny government can’t stop it—fire too big. Johnny tells him to go get loggers. Government-man says he can’t do that because the loggers are all down in Clinton on holiday. Johnny gets mad. Go get some people from the town, he says. No, says government-man, too much danger from other fires. Johnny asks him, what other fires? If other fires come, says the man. Johnny says this country’s burning up and it’s our country. Too bad, says government-man, but it’s all small timber, not much value. Then the fire gets close, burning all around, smoke everywhere, couldn’t see the sun...”

Old Paul Vincent lapsed into silence as though struck dumb by that final image of devastation.

“The sun was there alright,” said John, standing near the table, “turned red by the smoke. But he couldn’t see it anymore. That’s when he went blind.”

They were silent.

“What finally stopped it?”

“The wind shifted to the East and blew the fire back on itself, and then it rained. But it was still smoking two months later.”

“And the game?”

“There’s no game, not around here.”

The old man seemed lost in reverie, muttering to himself.

“It’s all there in his head, what he sees,” John said.

John jerked his head toward the door and they went outside.

“You sold the 30.30 to Kurt Koenig.”

“I shouldn’t have sold it, but I went kind of crazy after the fire last summer. I just went to Vancouver and bought a new gun, the best. It took everything I saved from the year before. Dunning said I could do all the guiding for him with that gun.”

“But you bought the gun after you had the disagreement with Curtis in the fall.”

“Disagreement, you call it. That man Curtis wanted to shoot me. He would have, too, except Ed Dunning was there!”

“That was over a mother bear, wasn’t it? He wanted to kill it.”

“Killing’s the name of the game for him. Anything that moves, he wants to kill it.”

John looked into the distance. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“This money you used to buy the gun,” Peter began slowly, “did you have it in the bank?”

“No, in cash. I don’t use banks.”

“You must have a little left.”

“Just a little.”

“How much?”

“Maybe fifty dollars.”

“Where do you keep it?”

“In the house...”

“Could I see it?”

He followed John into the house. The old man lay with his arm flung over his head. He was muttering to himself again, but almost inaudibly, taking deep breaths now and then.

John bent down and pulled up a loose floorboard. From the cavity beneath he drew out a small tin box. Peter stretched out his hand...

“May I?”

The cover had rusted to the casing and Peter had to pry it open with his old jack-knife. It flew open. Inside were sixty-three dollars.

“John,” Peter said, reaffixing the top, and handing the box back to the young man, “this cover hasn’t been opened for a very long time. You didn’t take the money for the gun from there.”

“No. I just kept it in my wallet.”

“What wallet?”

“Do you want to see that, too?”

“How much did you have in your wallet when you went to Vancouver to get the gun?”

“Twelve hundred dollars.”

“And the gun cost?”

“About eleven hundred dollars with the scope.”

John was silent, avoiding Peter’s gaze. He looked at his father, and went outside. Peter followed him.

“Come on, John, you’ve got to do better than that. I know you didn’t buy a gun like that with your money, even if you had that much money to spend. You shoot for the pot, and you can do that with the 30.30—you don’t need a .300 Ultra Magnum. And you wouldn’t buy it to make yourself a guide. You don’t guide with a rifle. All you do is take the people with the guns to the game.”

John looked bleakly at the ground.

“You’re in trouble, John. You see, there was the serious dispute between you and Jackson Curtis. For that we have three witnesses, Ed Dunning, Jim Bartlett, and also Helen Curtis.” At the name of Helen

Curtis John's eyes narrowed. "We have the fact that after this quarrel you went down to Vancouver and bought a new high-powered rifle with a scope, not a bush gun, but something suitable for long range shooting. Also, considering your knowledge of the country and your marksmanship, you are about the only person who could have carried out such a killing successfully. Finally, the bullet that struck Jackson Curtis must have come from a long range cartridge fired from the south shore."

"I didn't kill Jackson Curtis."

"Will a jury believe that? I don't think so; not as it stands now."

John was looking at the ground. "Let me be very clear about this, John. I don't want to take you in, but I will have to if you won't defend yourself."

John Vincent looked up.

"Why don't you take me in? Why should you care?"

Peter answered slowly: "Because you are Paul Vincent's son. Because I've met you and find it hard to believe you killed Jackson Curtis even if you hated him. And because I wouldn't want you to be the fall guy for somebody else's crime. Those are my feelings, but they are not reasons that would impress a jury." He paused, waiting. "There are at least three witnesses who will stand up and testify against you in court."

"They say I did it?"

"That's only natural, isn't it?" He decided to take the chance. "If they put Mrs. Curtis on the witness stand, you'd be finished."

John stared at him.

“She says I did it?”

“She’ll not only say it, but sign her name to it.” Peter hated the lie, but felt he had to chance it.

John turned, went over to the cabin and sat down on the steps. He was hunched over, frowning at the ground. When he spoke Peter had to strain to hear him.

“The first time she came up here was two years ago during the hunting season. They wanted me to show them where the game was. It went alright. I found them a couple of deer, one with a nice spread of horns.” He paused, peering into the distance. “I was surprised to see her, to see a woman on a hunt, but she was no ordinary woman, that one. She took to the bush like a fox in heat.”

“That’s surprising. Tim Dunning said she hated the woods, I mean the real woods.”

“Not her. The more sweat there was, the harder the trail, the more she seemed to go for it. I never saw a woman like that before.”

He stopped scuffing the dirt with his boot. “The next time I saw her was later that same fall, only this time she came up with Koenig. We hunted then, too. Got on the track of a cougar. We put my old dog onto it, she’s dead now, and followed as close as we could. Helen practically outran that dog. I’ve got good legs and lungs but I had to push hard. Koenig was left miles behind when we caught up to that cougar. It was

treed and the old dog was booming away there, the cougar staring down—it was a big one—switching its tail. I raised my 30.30 to shoot, but she said, no, let me. So I gave her the gun and she brought that cougar down with one shot through the heart.” John passed the back of his hand over his forehead. His skin shone. “When I went to reach for my gun, she pulled it away, and the next thing I knew we were... together. It wasn’t like love; it was like wolves mating.” He stopped, elbows on knees. A large crow passed overhead, flying hard. “Afterwards we went and rounded up Kurt. He was lost like always, stumbling around in a spruce swamp. Well, she came up once more that season, this time by herself. My father was off in the woods, and we had a couple of hours together.” He shifted uneasily. “The next spring was all the trouble with the fire and I never saw her except when I went down to phone the Forest Warden at Clinton. When I was through Dunning had to talk to me about the plans for the fall—how I was going to guide them. Then I left and was going along the trail around that lake down there. Just where it starts to climb to the plateau a small stream comes down. There she was. She was naked, and her hair was all over the place. Oh yes. Her hooks were all the way into me by this time. The whole mountaintop was on fire, and there I was screwing her by the stream.” He stared at the ground as though he wanted to be covered by it. “Well, you know what happened after that. They came up in the fall—Curtis, Helen, Dunning, and Bartlett—and there were no deer anywhere and Curtis just about shot me over that she-bear. The next day I got two

sets of visitors. Dunning who told me I had to come back and apologize to Curtis. I sent him packing. Then about three hours later who should come along but Helen and Kurt Koenig and I was so mad at the whole white race I was ready to tell them to go, too. But they didn't go; they stayed. They told me about their plan to get rid of Curtis. Kurt seemed kind of unhappy about the whole thing. I thought it was because he didn't want to let me in on the plan. He looked even more unhappy when she said there'd be no secrets between us and then told me about Koenig's prison record. Then we all took an oath to kill Jackson Curtis." He looked sideways up at Peter. "Yes, I did that. I was that angry at the bastard. It just happened and before I knew it I was a partner. Then I guess we talked about how to do it. The idea was to get Curtis in crossfire out on the lake. I'd fire first from the south shore and Kurt would open up from the north, just in case I missed. Then I'd get out to him in a canoe that I would make before the following spring and hid in the bushes on the shore. So I'd pick Kurt up, we'd tie weights to Curtis' legs and dump him in mid lake where it's real deep. Then we'd wash out his boat, if there was any blood in it, let it dry in the sun, and set it adrift. We'd also throw his hat on the water and let it drift along, too, if that had no stains. They'd figure he fell overboard while bringing in a fish—that happens sometimes. Helen said my 30.30 would be no good for the long shot. But the 30.30 would be alright for Kurt because he'd be a lot closer. So we worked out a deal. I'd hand my 30.30 over to Kurt, and the payment for that would be twelve hundred dollars,

which Helen gave me right then. She said the 30.30 wasn't worth even a tenth of that, but Curtis' death was worth a whole lot more, many millions of dollars. I was to go down to Vancouver, get a top long range rifle with scope, bring it back and do a whole lot of practicing with it for the spring when she and Curtis would be coming up for some early fishing. The understanding was that Kurt and me would get a big reward when the money came in."

John Vincent stopped, picked up a small stick from the ground in front of him, and snapped it.

"I don't even like to kill animals. It's just for the pot, flesh for food that's all. But Helen Curtis knew how to put things together to get what she wanted. She got me when I was burning mad about Curtis; she made me feel important, not just another stinking Indian. She gave me money when I badly needed it, she made love to me, she made me feel like... somebody. But not somebody good. She had a way of bringing out the worst in a man. Kurt she used to call her Nazi Storm Trooper and me, I was the Red Death or the Savage Satan. It sounds crazy. It was roughness she liked. When we made love I had to be rough or she laughed at me."

Peter nodded. "Go on with the story."

"Well, I got the new gun like she said and practised with it until I could hit a tin can at three hundred yards ninety-nine shots out of a hundred. I had to be that good. And then came the spring. The trouble was by that time I didn't want to do it. I wasn't angry anymore and I

hadn't seen Helen all winter. But I had the gun and didn't see how I was going to get out of it. She came up to see me the second day after they arrived, May 13th. She told me that Kurt Koenig had turned yellow and she told me just what she thought of him. But she said he would keep the secret because of his crime record. That seemed alright. And she said the reward that was going to him would go to me instead. And she told me to do it the next morning. She said Curtis would be fishing alone and that he always wore a bright blue hat, but that I'd better take along binoculars just to make sure it was him. So I went."

He took a deep breath. "I knew the shore along there, and picked a place where there's an outcropping of hard clay. When the fog began to lift like it always does about 7:00 or 7:30 I sat down, sighted in the scope and waited. The boat came along and into the line of fire. It hardly seemed to be moving. For me it was a sure shot."

He stopped for so long that Peter finally said: "Well?"

"I couldn't do it. I just couldn't squeeze that trigger."

"So you went home?"

"Yes."

"What day was that?"

"Five days ago."

"And Curtis was alone in the boat?"

"Just Curtis."

"How do I know you didn't try again yesterday morning?"

Vincent looked at Peter. "I guess my story wouldn't sound too good in court, would it?" He paused. "Aren't you going to arrest me?"

"No. At least, not now."

After a moment, Vincent stood up. He picked up the rifle that was leaning against the side of the cabin. "Take this to Helen Curtis. Tell her it's hers. I don't need it anymore. I've got an old shotgun in the house. With slugs I can pull down anything we need."

But Peter shook his head. "You can keep it for now. One more thing. What do you know about Blake Moran?"

John stared hard at Peter, then swiftly away. "Not much. Why?"

"How much do you know?" Peter persisted.

John studied the ground as he scuffed it with the toe of his boot. "He used to own a lot of the land around the lake."

"Did he ever come up here?"

"Just once, to see my father. That was a few years ago..."

He was silent.

"What did he come to see your father about?"

"I dunno. Maybe about property or lost cattle or something."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Just for a minute when he left."

"And what did he say?"

"He asked me to come down and visit him some time."

"Did you?"

“No.”

The young man shifted uncomfortably.

“I’d better return to my father now,” he said.

“Why didn’t you visit him, John?”

John looked sideways as though towards something he could not see with his eyes, but which was there somewhere, crouched in the sunlight.

“My father said I mustn’t go near him,” he said finally.

Peter waited. “Did your father tell you why he did not want you to visit him?”

“No,” said John. “He never told me why.”

Peter felt sure that the young man was lying.