

Chapter 9

Mrs. Dunning and Pat were preparing the dinner when Peter stepped into the kitchen.

“I hope you don’t mind my barging in,” he said.

Mrs. Dunning looked up at him and then went on with her work. She was a smallish woman, probably once very pretty, and she had retained her figure. Her eyes were smoky blue, and her black hair was streaked with gray. As she moved she gave an impression of trim efficiency. But there was something bleak about her.

“I can’t talk to you now,” she said.

“You don’t have to interrupt what you’re doing.”

She turned to him. “Let me save you some time, Inspector. I don’t know anything about the death of Mr. Curtis. Why he was killed, who killed him—I don’t know. I stay out of other people’s business and I only ask them to do the same for me. Now, if you’d like to go, I’ll finish making supper.”

But he did not go.

“Mrs. Dunning, you married Ed Dunning more than fifteen years ago and came here to Loon Lake Lodge. They’ve been years of pretty hard struggle, and now Mr. Dunning tells me the place is beginning to pay for itself—you’re over the top.” He paused, watching her. “That should give you a good feeling, a sense of accomplishment.” She stirred a pot of potatoes on the stove. “On the other hand,” he went on, “if, after reaching this point you heard that the place was about to have a new owner, it might upset you, mightn’t it?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I think you understand.”

“We own the place.”

“In name only.”

For a long moment she stared at Peter, and spoke quietly over her shoulder, “Pat, go and get your father.”

The girl left wordlessly. Peter leaned against the counter. She did not move and her eyes remained on him, but blankly, without center or focus, as though turned to polished stone. She was thinking hard, he knew, and the poison of her thoughts was sinking deep.

Ed Dunning came into the kitchen with an enquiring look.

“Yes?” he spoke to Peter.

“Is it true?” his wife asked in a low voice.

“Is what true?” He turned towards her but his eyes were evasive.

“Is this place ours, or not?”

“Of course it’s ours.” He frowned and his eyes flickered towards Peter.

“And it isn’t going to be sold?”

“Not by me it isn’t. What’s going on here?” He glowered at Peter.

“What’ve you been telling her?”

“I think you know.”

“No, I don’t.”

“We made some enquiries with Mr. Curtis’ Chicago attorney. He told us that this place was mortgaged to the hilt and that Mr. Curtis was preparing to foreclose on you because of your failure to keep up payments.”

“You mortgaged the lodge?” Fern Dunning asked, trying to relate to the monstrosity of it. “Is that true?”

Ed Dunning looked at her. “Yes.”

Her fists suddenly clenched. She placed them on the table and held them there.

“Ask yourself why I did it,” Ed Dunning said grimly. “We were going broke, and we had nothing to offer but three lousy, leaking boats and this lodge with its broken-down furniture and lumpy beds. We had to fix up or go under. Curtis was our first big customer, and our only one for a long time, and one day he *asked* me if he could help out—a long term, low interest mortgage, he said. We had the potential; he could see that. As he said, there wasn’t a better fishing lake in North America. I could pay the whole thing back without penalty when I was over the top.”

“I was a fool,” she said. “I should have seen it.”

“What was I to do, give up the place?”

“I only married you for this place, you know that.”

He stepped back. “Oh, I know that alright. You’ve made that clear often enough.”

“And now it’s gone.”

“Not yet it hasn’t,” he said dispiritedly.

Slowly she took her fists from the table, and stood erect.

“Arrest him,” she said coldly.

“On what charge?” Peter asked.

“Murder. He did it.”

Dunning swayed, as though swept by a gust of wind.

Peter asked, “Can you prove that?”

“Come with me,” she commanded.

She led him into the master bedroom and pointed at the closet. “In there,” she said. Ed stood near the door.

Peter opened the closet, reached in and pulled out a bolt action 30:06 Remington.

“That’s the gun he killed Jackson Curtis with,” she said quietly. “That morning when Curtis and Jim Bartlett went fishing early, Ed got up and told me he was going into the bush to cut some logs for his bridge. He took his gun with him. After Jim came back I looked at the gun. It had been fired, alright. Now, I see why he had to kill Jackson Curtis,” she added bleakly.

Pat had followed them into the bedroom and flew at her mother.

“It wasn’t just him! It was her, Helen Curtis!”

Their attention focused on the small, thin girl. She stepped towards Peter. “Helen Curtis got him to do it. One day I went to Kurt’s hut...” At the recollection her voice trembled. “Kurt was supposed to be there, but he wasn’t. Later I heard he’d driven into Clinton on Dad’s orders to buy some things. I meant to surprise him, and crept up on the porch, and threw the door open... there they were... Helen Curtis and my so-called step-father... right there... together...”

She was quiet, watching Peter. Ed Dunning shook his head slowly.

“I knew it was going on,” said Mrs. Dunning. “He had to be getting it somewhere. I didn’t care. I didn’t marry the pig for that anyway.”

So there it was, thought Peter, as he examined the 30:06, all these splendid people letting their hair down. It was enough to make you believe that the Fall of Man must be true after all.

“Alright,” Ed Dunning said with surprising calm, “listen to these two all you want. I have nothing to hide. Supposing I did get to Helen Curtis. Who wouldn’t if they had the chance? The truth is I never even tried because I couldn’t afford to risk Jackson Curtis finding out. As for the 30:06, I didn’t take it with me yesterday morning. But I can’t prove I didn’t. Can anybody prove I did? It’s their word against mine.”

Ed Dunning left the room with a glance at his wife. She stood motionless except that her hands were slowly clenching and unclenching. Peter put his hand on Pat's shoulder. She was trembling.

"Pat, I think your mother wants to be left alone. What do you say about serving the dinner? I'll be there in a few minutes."

Pat nodded and left the room.

Alone, facing him, Fern Dunning looked suddenly exhausted. She sat down on the bed.

"I thought he loved this place. I never thought he'd let it go to someone else." She said it as though she were talking to herself.

"Maybe it's as he pointed out, that he needed the money to make the place pay off, only it didn't work. So then, according to you, he murdered Curtis; his motive being to save the lodge from foreclosure."

She looked at him expressionlessly. "His motive was more than that. Pat wasn't lying when she said that he had something going with Helen Curtis, just as I wasn't lying when I said he took the rifle."

"The lodge means a great deal to you, Mrs. Dunning."

"Aside from Pat, it's all I have, or thought I had." She got up and walked to a window that faced onto the lake. She gazed out. "I haven't had an easy life, Mr. Gregory. My first husband gave me Pat, and that was the only good thing he did for me. He drank a lot and sometimes he beat me, but I didn't leave him until the day he manhandled Pat. She was only three. I had no money and lived mainly by waitressing. Then Ed Dunning came

along. He was no beauty but he was a worker and he didn't drink. And he offered us a house-- this lodge. That's what I wanted, especially for Pat." She turned to him. "He'd had an unhappy marriage, too, and what he wanted was someone to look after the house, someone to cook and sew and clean and keep up the garden. I kept my end of the bargain, but he didn't keep his. He lost the property to Jackson Curtis."

Dinner wasn't exactly a jubilant affair, despite a very acceptable roast beef. Charlie massively squeezed in beside Helen Curtis, where he was greeted with a cold stare. At the last moment, Ed Dunning appeared and carved the beef expertly and silently. Mrs. Dunning remained absent and Tim joined them only when the meal was half over. No one spoke, even after Peter had introduced Sergeant Charlie Ross. Helen smoked a cigarette with indifference. Jim Bartlett gazed morosely at the table. If Peter had wanted to create a certain psychological climate, it was obviously lost on this group. Charlie attempted one or two pleasantries, but they fell flat and he soon gave up, with a slightly baffled expression on his enormous face. Had it not been for Tim, the dinner would have passed in complete silence. In his own way, Tim restored human communication, of a sort. He sat down and began to briskly butter a piece of bread.

"Well, well... if it isn't another Mounted Policeman come to supply the muscle when the long awaited arrest is made. The Inspector here doesn't have time to do that dirty work—he's too busy making deductions."

“Shut up,” growled Ed Dunning, “and eat your food.”

“Sorry, Daddy. Daddy, did you now that I was out for a little walk and when I came back guess who was rummaging through my cabin?”

“It’s not your cabin.”

“Well, the cabin which I am presently occupying,” he said with mock petulance. “Do you know who it was, Daddy? It was the big piece of fuzz here, Sergeant Toupee.” He drew his own hair back from his forehead with one hand. “I guess it’s not trespassing when the police do it, is it? But what on earth could he be looking for in my cabin? Maybe it’s cocaine he’s looking for. They’re not really investigating a murder—these Horsemen—they’re looking for drugs. Is that right, Sergeant?”

“No, that’s not right.” Charlie had turned a deeper shade of pink while Tim spoke, but he was doing his best to control himself.

“I don’t think it’s right either, rummaging in somebody’s cabin without a search warrant. Tell me, what were you looking for?”

Charlie said, “I was looking for you.” Peter smiled fleetingly at Charlie.

“Me? I’ve been in some pretty tight places, but under the mattress and behind the books? Oh, I bet I know what you were looking for. Daddy, do you know?”

“I said shut up.”

“That’s my Dad’s favourite expression,” Tim nodded to Charlie. “When I was just a tiny tot and climbed on my Dad’s knee to ask him who God was, he’d say ‘oh shut up.’ For some time I thought that was God’s other name,

Oh Shut Up. Anyway, I'll tell you what the man was searching for, Dad. He was after the gun. You know, the thirty-thirty that Kurt had?" He looked around the table and received no response, but there was a curious tightening. "Well, don't any of you care if the police catch their murderer? Aren't you going to help the law? You know that they need that gun in order to solve this murder, don't you? And therefore, or as Inspector Gregory would say, ergo, and all that, whoever is the murderer, and one of us has to be, had better get rid of that musket fast." He munched on a tiny morsel of meat, looking at Helen as he spoke. "Of course, that's what they hope you'll do. Aren't they cunning? That's why the fuzzy muscle is here: to watch and to swoop just at the moment when you're trying to hide the Evidence. So my advice is..."

But Tim was unable to finish the sentence. Bartlett was on top of him, choking him, shaking him, terrier-like.

In a moment Charlie, with surprising agility for his great bulk, darted around the table and pulled Bartlett away. Tim held his throat and looked terrified. Bartlett, his face expressionless but shining with sweat, turned and lunged from the room. Peter and Charlie glanced at one another and followed him.

"That's right!" they heard Tim screech. "Arrest him! If not for murder, for assault... with intent to murder!"