

Chapter 10

Jim Bartlett was sitting on the side of the bed when they entered his room.

“Can I get you a drink?” asked Peter.

“In the cupboard.”

Peter poured a couple of ounces of Haig and Haig into a glass and handed it to Bartlett. “It wasn’t nice of you to clobber that charming boy,” Peter said. “However, that’s not why we’re here.”

“Why are you here?” Bartlett’s voice was a little hoarse.

Peter watched a fly battering its head against the windowpane. Outside, the light was dying. “I guess you know this case is piling up against you, Bartlett.”

Bartlett sipped his drink. “Go on.”

Peter studied the man for a moment. “Why should somebody shoot at you from the far shore of the lake, as you claim? It doesn’t add up.”

Bartlett was holding his glass in the palm of his left hand. He began rotating it with his right.

“Go on.”

“The bullet that passed through the boat you were in three days before Curtis was killed could not have come from the south shore. The bullet hole on the port side was more than three inches below the bullet hole on the starboard side. To account for the angle of declination inside the boat you would have had to have been above the tops of the trees on the south shore. By your own testimony, the angle formed by the holes couldn't have been caused by the tilt of the boat. There were no waves, no sudden turns, and you weren't sitting so as to tilt it.

You see, Bartlett, the land along there on the south side is so steep you'd have to be a monkey to make the shot at the angle formed by those holes. And if you went higher, to the top of the ridge, you'd be too far back—over 600 yards.”

“I thought you wanted to know about the shot that killed Jackson,” Bartlett said.

“We do. But there was an earlier shot, and would any jury believe they were unrelated? To have any shot fired across a wilderness lake at a boat is a rare occurrence. To have two shots fired across the same lake within three days of each other, in the same location, strongly points to one person firing both shots, or at least two persons acting in collusion. Assuming that there's only one person, then it's likely only one gun was used. That's the gun we're searching for now. It's also likely that if the first shot was fired from this side, the north shore, then so was the other one. Why go all the

way around to the other side of the lake and fire from three hundred yards when you can stay on the north side and fire from about 130 yards? It doesn't make sense."

Peter waited, but Bartlett was silent, turning the glass slowly in his hand.

"Who do you think would do a thing like that?" Charlie asked.

"Our answer," said Peter, "was that you were the most likely person to do it, Bartlett, because you would figure that the police would connect the two shots, thinking they were fired by the same person—just as we have done—and that therefore the person who fired the shot through your boat also fired the shot which passed through the head of Jackson Curtis. So it's a setup you engineered."

"One which would take you right off the hook, you see," Charlie added.

"What the jury will believe," Peter went on, "is that you, who would inherit the investment firm on Curtis' death, lied about the shot coming from the south shore that killed Curtis. Why did you lie? The jury will be told that three days before the murder when you were alone in the boat you went ashore near Soame's Creek, and having previously stashed the 30:30, you now removed it and fired a shot through the boat. But you made one mistake. You fired the shot from a standing position causing the bullet to take a path that made no sense—given the topography of the south shore. Anyway, you thought you had an alibi. So on the morning of the killing,

after you were let off ashore, you retrieved the rifle and, waiting until Curtis was on the inner loop of his troll, placing him about thirty yards offshore, you shot him from ambush. A jury appreciates a narrative like that: one that fits the facts and explains a lie.”

“Without the gun for evidence?” Bartlett asked.

“Oh, we’ll find the gun alright.”

“By tomorrow afternoon we’ll have a squad of officers searching every inch of that area,” Charlie said cheerfully.

Bartlett drained the last of his Scotch and placed his glass on the table.

“What are you going to do—arrest me?”

“Will you make a statement?” asked Peter.

“Get it over with, then you’ll feel better,” Charlie said affably.

They waited.

“I didn’t kill him.”

Charlie clucked his tongue and Peter looked pained.

“In that case, will you tell what did happen out there on the lake?”

“Just the facts,” Charlie added.

Bartlett twirled the glass rapidly in his hand.

“You’re pushing me. All you’ve got is circumstantial.”

“Which is all we need,” Peter said.

“Ballistic evidence,” added Charlie, “goes down strong with a jury.”

Bartlett stood up, his face expressionless. "I think my attorney might have something to say about this."

Peter climbed to his feet. "You contact your lawyer then, but do it by morning. Naturally, we'd prefer a statement, but we'll arrest you without one if we have to."

"A statement would be in your own interest," Charlie added quickly. "A confession nearly always leads to a reduced sentence."

"Good night, Mr. Bartlett," Peter said, closing the door.

But there was no response.

Peter and Charlie walked along the corridor and into the dining-lounge area. The place was empty and the flames had already died down in the big stone fireplace.

"Charlie," Peter said quietly. "Wait here until I return. I'm going to visit Helen Curtis."

Charlie raised his large eyebrows, looking upwards. "The pressure goes on there too, does it?"

"The pressure goes on everywhere."

Peter retraced his steps down the corridor and stopped in front of the third door. From inside came the murmur of low voices, and he bent close to the door trying to make out the words, but they were muffled. He knocked quietly. The murmuring stopped. And he heard a short burst of whispering,

then steps toward the door. It opened and Helen Curtis stood there, in a dressing gown.

“Hello, Inspector,” she said. There was an ironic edge to her voice.

“I’d like to talk to you,” he said, moving into the room. “If you don’t mind.”

Tim Dunning sat on the bed.

“Have you come to make the great arrest?” His voice quavered a little. “I’m ready.”

“What are you doing here?” Peter asked angrily.

“I’m sitting on Mrs. Curtis’ bed, and I was telling her how easy it was to grow grass in these parts.”

He trailed off into silence under Peter’s stare. The boy was trembling, but not because of him, Peter realized. It was something else.

“I want to speak to Mrs. Curtis alone,” Peter said.

Tim stood up, and pretended to yawn. “Everyone wants to speak to Mrs. Curtis alone. But words will fail.” He sauntered to the door. “Right, Mrs. Curtis?” He gazed at her for a moment with unfocused eyes. “Just whistle if you need me, Inspector.” he said with a sneer and closed the door behind him.

Helen Curtis took a cigarette from a box on the table and lit it. “What is it?” she asked. “I’m tired.”

“I’m sure you must be,” he said.

“I’m not your murderer.”

“I hope you never will be,” he said.

She released the smoke from deep in her lungs. “What do you want with me?” He did not answer.

She put down her cigarette, pulled the sash holding her dressing gown, and it fell open. She was naked underneath and the youthfulness of her body surprised him. Her breasts were firm and the colour of honey, the nipples dark brown. Her stomach was smooth, except for the deep cleft of her navel, and her legs showed no mark of age.

“Is this what you want?”

She let the dressing gown drop to the floor and turned around slowly, her arms raised from the elbows. She turned shifting her weight so that her breasts quivered slightly. Her thighs and buttocks were perfect.

He was overcome by her nearness—the musk scent of her, the tip of her tongue showing between parted lips, the look in her eyes challenging him, sullen.

She placed one hand on the side of his head. “You can have me if you like,” she said and drew herself closer. “You want me, don’t you? I can see it in those big brown eyes.”

He wanted her alright. He had not made love to anyone since Cathy’s death, and the sharpness of his need surprised him. He felt bitter anguish.

“Put it back on,” he said harshly.

She withdrew her hand, and shrugged, reaching for her gown.

“Do you always sell yourself so cheaply?” he rasped.

She tied her dressing gown together, and sat down, taking up her cigarette.

“Not always,” she said finally.

“And never for free.”

“Only in weak moments, and they are rare.”

“For Kurt Koenig, was it free?”

She inhaled deeply and let out the smoke slowly. “So he told you his story?”

“He did, and your part in it.”

“What was my part?”

“You sold your body.”

“And his?”

“He failed to pay the price.”

“And that was?”

“Your husband’s murder.”

Her eyes looked down as she flicked her cigarette against the ashtray, then up, measuring him.

“Naturally I deny that.”

“Naturally. He was the perfect dupe. Even when he kicked that chair away, he was in love with you.”

She contemplated the end of her cigarette. “What do you want, Inspector? I did not kill my husband.”

“When Jim Bartlett returned with Curtis’ body, where were you?”

“In bed. I hadn’t even had breakfast.”

“How did you find out what happened?”

“Jim came and told me.”

“He was the first person you saw that morning?”

“Yes.” There was an amused glint in her eyes. “Except for Jackson.”

“You could have slipped out of your cabin, driven down lake, fired the shot, beaten the boat back, and slipped into bed again.”

“There’s no road on the other side of the lake.”

“That’s so,” he said, “if the shot was fired from the other side of the lake.”

She flicked the cigarette with her middle finger. “And it wasn’t?”

Peter was silent.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, “where the shot came from. He was shot and not by me.”

“But you do admit you could have done it.”

“No, because I would have been noticed either leaving or returning.”

“Who would have noticed you?”

“Ed Dunning, or his wife, or Pat.”

“Ed Dunning said that he was on that same road collecting timber for his bridge.”

“That still leaves Mrs. Dunning, or Pat, or Tim.”

“You could have used Kurt Koenig’s old Volkswagen instead of your own car.”

“But how could I have been sure of getting back from his place to the lodge without being noticed?”

“Not impossible. Pat and Mrs. Dunning would be busy at the back of the house, and you could return by the front.”

“And Tim?”

“I just saw Tim sitting on the bed. You said you were rarely for free.”

Helen stubbed out her cigarette.

He persisted. “So you see it would be possible for you to do it.”

Her voice remained even. “If I were going to commit murder, I would not depend upon possibilities, only certainties.”

“John Vincent says that you gave him the money to buy a high powered rifle.”

“He’s lying,” she said calmly.

“Didn’t you give him twelve hundred dollars for the purchase of such a gun with a scope? I saw the gun. It’s a Remington .300 Ultra Magnum. Excellent gun for long range work, but he has no money for a gun like that, and no use for it.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“Two men, John Vincent and Kurt Koenig. You tried to get both of them to kill your husband. One committed suicide, the other would be willing to go on a witness stand and testify against you. You know that it was physically possible for you to carry out this murder. You could do it and pin it on Koenig or Vincent. As for motivation—what could be stronger? On

the death of Jackson Curtis you stood to come into seven hundred and thirty million dollars.”

“Get out.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Either charge me or get out.” She was enraged, but without emotion. It was a congealed fury, frightening in a man, and somehow awesome in a woman. For a moment, they glared at one another... Peter, himself angry, firm against her icy strength... Helen hating this creature of the law, yet unable to shake him off.

Finally, he backed down. “I’ll be waiting for you, Mrs. Curtis.”

Charlie was alone in the lodge sitting room and Peter took a chair near him.

“Are we getting anywhere?” Charlie asked.

“We’ll see.”

Charlie glanced at him with his large owlsh eyes. “It’s been pretty rough, hasn’t it?” he said quietly. “I mean about Cathy. I couldn’t believe it when I heard. I was down in Mexico and never had a chance to tell you how sorry I was, and am.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

“Don’t worry about the Beaver.”

“Why should I worry about the Beaver?”

“I mean about the other thing... you know...”

Peter felt a sense of despondency.

“Look, Charlie...”

“I know, I know... The Beaver’s just that way. Old school crank. Works by the book.”

“In this outfit, you fall off your horse just once,” Peter said, “and you’re marked for life. Do you realize that I haven’t fallen off in more than two years—never a nip, though God knows I could have used about a thousand since then. I thought that was past history, all forgotten.”

“It is, Peter, by me and your friends. But I’m afraid the old Beaver will not forget the day he found the bottle in your desk. Did you say you were sorry when he called you into his office afterward? Oh no. You just worked him over for removing your fine old whiskey. That incident really upset him and he can’t help gnawing away at it like beavers do with hard wood.”

“So he sent you up to keep an eye on me,” Peter said slowly. “I can just hear him: ‘Did Gregory get through the day without his little shot? Offer him one to see if he weakens.’”

Charlie stirred uncomfortably. “I don’t think he’s that stupid, Peter. To tell you the truth, I don’t think it’s past history that really rattles him. He’s just plain jealous of you.”

“Jealous of me for what?”

“You should know the answer to that. He’s above you on the bureaucratic ladder, sure—but he’s ten rungs below when it comes to criminal work, and that’s all he really cares about. You’re just too damned

good at what you do, Peter. No one on the Force comes near your record of successful investigations. Come on. I'd give ten years of my life to have a record like yours." He thought about what he'd said for a moment. "Well, almost."

"It's just luck as far as the Beaver's concerned," Peter said. "To him my method is all wrong. He gathers these little pieces he calls facts; the hard evidence he likes to call them. Then he tries to fit these pieces all together, just like a jigsaw puzzle. That's supposed to give him the whole picture. Only it rarely does."

"No? So how do we get the whole picture?" Charlie asked, with an innocent expression on the vast tract of his face.

"The picture's there all the time," Peter said, standing up and stretching. "Only, we don't see it. You have to go into the dark room and develop it. Give it the acid treatment until a positive image starts to emerge, just like a photographer does."

"I see," said Charlie doubtfully. "The acid treatment."

"That's what we're doing, aren't we, Charlie?" Peter said cheerfully, "using the acid treatment on these jokers and squeezing out the whole picture?"

Charlie lumbered to his feet, looking a little less than totally convinced.

"First I think you've got to point the camera in the right direction."

Peter bowed his head in mock deference.

They let themselves out the front door of the lodge. The night was without moon or stars, and vaguely chilly, with a damp in it that clung to the flesh. From far away drifted the cry of a loon, wraithlike. Peter swore under his breath, an ancient phrase that seemed to include the loon, Helen Curtis, and the darkness of the night.

They had only Peter's little pocket flashlight to guide them. They turned the corner to the front of the cabin, and a figure stepped into the far edge of the light. The two men froze. Peter snapped the beam of light upwards.

It was Tim Dunning, eyes blinking whitely.

"I've got to talk to you..."