

Chapter 11

Inside Peter's cabin, Tim Dunning sprawled out in a chair. He looked as though he had run to the point of oxygen deficiency.

"I want to stay here with you," he said in a plaintive tone.

"There's no room," Peter said curtly.

"I don't care. I'll stay in this chair."

"What do you want to stay here for," said Charlie with forbearance, "when you have that nice cabin all to yourself."

"They'll kill me." Tim stated it simply, as a matter of fact.

Peter lay down on his bed, propped up with pillows. "Who will?"

Tim sat upright. "Please shut off the light. I'm a target from outside."

They turned off the light and sat listening to one another's breathing.

"It sounds dramatic and all that, but they'll kill me if they get the chance." His voice, not much more than a whisper, quavered a little on the word 'kill.' You saw Bartlett attack me. I got too close to the truth in there. I knew I shouldn't have said what I did, but I just kept stumbling along..."

"Said what?" asked Peter.

“That about getting rid of the gun. They’re planning to do it tonight or early in the morning. And I blurted it right out. Bartlett couldn’t help himself. He’s a go-for-the-throat man.” His voice sounded muffled. “He gives me the bends.”

“How do you know it’s Bartlett and Helen Curtis?” Peter asked. “You said it was your father before.”

“How do I know? Because I heard them plan the whole thing, down to the last detail.” Abruptly he was silent... listening, listening to the dark, afraid of it.

“When was this?”

“Last fall, when they came up for the hunting season.”

“And you didn’t come to the police?” asked Charlie with incredulity.

Tim laughed nervously. “No, I didn’t, and I’ll tell you about that, too, though it won’t sound pretty in your innocent ears, Sergeant.” He paused, as though hoping for a reaction, but Charlie only grunted. “You see, from the first time I saw her I really dug that Helen Curtis chick and I figured maybe since she was married to such an old cock she might welcome some younger action. So I started to move in, but I admit I didn’t get very far, not before I found out she was already screwing the Bavarian minstrel...”

“Who?” Charlie inquired.

“The Kraut, Koenig. Then one night I saw her going into Bartlett’s room. I thought my God can’t this chick get enough? And if so why won’t she roll out the mat for a clean young thing like me?”

“And she wouldn’t?” Charlie asked hopefully.

Tim’s voice was indignant. “She treated me like a fly in her soup. So alright, I knew what I was going to do. If I could get something solid about what was going on between her and Bartlett, I’d put it to her: either she’d part the curtain for me, or I’d give all the naked facts to Jackson Curtis himself. As it turned out, I got more facts than I knew what to do with. You see, right next to Bartlett’s room was a bathroom. Bartlett didn’t use it because he had his own private john attached. As a matter of fact, his adjoined this public one I’m talking about, which was hardly ever in use except at the height of the tourist season, you know when all the pollution curves go sharply upward. So one day when Bartlett was out fishing I bored a very small hole right through the wood, then went round into his room—I had access to the master key, being the master’s respected son—and covered the hole over with a bit of cotton gauze that I’d already dipped in wood stain. From three inches you couldn’t tell the difference from the real wood. And my Dad says I’m no craftsman! Then on the public side I did the same thing just in case a crapster happened in. Two thin membranes and a tunnel of air between me and adultery. And it worked like a charm—that is, so long as Bartlett’s bathroom door was open. Wow! What I heard in there, Sarg, especially when they were taking a shower together. The only problem was to get them together at all, because they hardly ever met. They weren’t taking any more risks than they had to. Anyway, it was a long vigil. You’d

think I had the permanent shits the length of time I put in there... but I finally got what I wanted.”

He gave a faint groan; Charlie shifted uneasily in his chair.

“This one night—well, at first I couldn’t make out what they were saying because Bartlett’s bathroom door was closed. And then he came into his bathroom and ran the tap, I guess to water down his Haig and Haig. Because when he went back into his bedroom their voices came in loud and clear. Helen did most of the talking. All about some gunshot that was supposed to come from the other side of the lake. I didn’t know what the hell they were talking about. At that point they must have been looking at a map of the lake because I heard the rustle of paper and she said look, right here at the creek—she said—you could get a clear shot from back in here, honey and so on blah blah, and he said, what about the gun? And she said, it could be hidden easy in a hollow stump or tree. I still didn’t know what he was supposed to be shooting at, but I was beginning to get a sticky sensation around the roots of my young pubic hairs. And then it came right out. Bartlett said that more than once he and Curtis had played this boy scout game, you know, where Bartlett was let out on the shore to hustle breakfast while the old scout went on trolling, and so why should anyone just have to believe that he was in the boat with Curtis when the shot crashed through that old woodsman’s skull? Now, when I heard these simple words, I will admit that the sweat glands began to splash a little—I mean, that whole wall seemed like tissue paper ready to just blow away

leaving me sitting there like a priest without a confessional. But I hung on anyway, and got my earful.”

The silence closed in around them. It was like sitting in a tomb, thought Peter, hearing the disembodied voice of one of the dead, who thinks he is still alive and displays his misdeeds with a sense of pride.

“Anyway, Bartlett was doubtful. He thought the idea of getting Koenig or Vincent to kill Curtis was a better one. Helen said that Koenig didn’t have the interior gristle and she couldn’t be sure of Vincent anyway. She guaranteed no one would suspect Bartlett. She said she’d worked out the perfect alibi.”

“Which was?” Charlie urged in the pause that followed.

“That’s what Bartlett wanted to know, but she just laughed in that unfunny way of hers and said he’d find out one day. Well, that was all. Helen said she’d better be getting back to Daddy Curtis or her alibi about going on an evening stroll would collapse like a witch’s tits. Then, I heard Bartlett’s door open and listened to her going down the hall and out the front door. What a wonderful couple. I was soaking wet and sat there for a while scratching the ends of my broken nerves. I couldn’t care less whether Curtis lived or died and I badly wanted Helen. But to get mixed up with a couple of killers—that was another purple bag. I mean Bartlett would saw my balls off with a comb and never even see the humour in it. And Helen would smoke three cigarettes and polish her nails while he did it. You know, cool people, just about absolute zero degrees. And that was a picture that

should have turned me right off. Only it didn't. I still wanted Helen real bad—I wanted her worse than ever. Don't ask me why?"

"I won't," Peter assured him. "So what did you do then?"

"I worked out a plan of action, naturally, being gifted that way. I said to myself: I'll tell her I have it all on tape and in a safety deposit box. Then, she wouldn't dare go through with Curtis' murder. Even if I gave her the tape, or she found it in some way, she could never be sure that I hadn't dubbed a copy. And she wouldn't risk removing me from this vale of tears. I'd tell her that the deposit box would be opened in the event of my untimely demise. Believing I had evidence against her on a conspiracy to commit murder, she'd have to cooperate with me in body if not in spirit. You have to admit, Inspector, that the plan was elegant. I was preventing murder, and looking after my poor adolescent needs at the same time..."

A scratching sound came from underneath the cabin.

"What's that," Tim whispered.

"Just a rat," Peter said.

Charlie was anxious to press on with the story. "What did Mrs. Curtis say?"

"When I told her I had the facts on tape and showed the hole I'd bored, she looked at me with a little more respect than the ordinary termite. Right off she asked me what my price was. As if she didn't know. I said: you, honey!" The memory of it made him momentarily gleeful. "Jus' little old you! Do you know what she said then?"

“No,” Charlie said, betraying the eagerness in his voice.

“She said: is it me you want or my body? Because if it’s me you want the price is too high, but if it’s my body you want I’ll consider it. So, when I told her, she considered it, and she said... yes. What else could she do?”

“Was it worth it?” Charlie blurted out. “Look what you got yourself into.”

“Oh, I know what I got myself into, Sarg, and yes, it was worth it. What she taught me was never put in any book.”

Charlie clucked his disapproval. “And you so young.”

“You felt in no danger?” asked Peter.

“I said I told her the information was in a safety deposit box which would be opened upon the event of my death.”

“Did she want to know whether the box was in your name or an assumed name?”

“I told her I put it in my name naturally because otherwise if I died there would be nothing to identify me with the holder of that box, but I wouldn’t tell her which bank it was in.”

“The date you overheard all this information was...”

“October tenth, last year.”

“So you would take out the box the day after. You would have to since you spoke to her the day after that.”

“I guess that’s so.”

“In Clinton?”

“It would have to be somewhere nearby, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would. And she would check up to see if you were away on October the eleventh.”

“Nobody saw me for about five hours that day. I could have borrowed Koenig’s car.”

“She would find out about that, too.”

“There’s a ranch four miles west down the road. I could have walked there, and got a ride in.”

“She could check on that, too.”

“But she couldn’t be sure!” Tim sounded desperate.

“It wouldn’t be too difficult to make enquiries through a solicitor and find out if you held such a box, especially if it was in a town nearby.”

“But what difference if she did find it!” Tim cried. “She still couldn’t open it.”

“No, but once she’d located it, she merely had to pay the annual rent on your box—and that could go on indefinitely.”

“In the even of my death?”

“Who said anything about your death? You would simply disappear, and the rent would be paid regularly.”

“I do have a family, you know...” Tim’s voice was querulous. “Not much of a one, but surely to God they’d do something about my disappearance.”

“Would they? Because you’d packed up and left? They know how you feel about them—you’ve made that very clear—and so it would cause no great surprise if one day you just weren’t around, and never came back. Do you really think they’d go to the trouble and expense of trying to trace you? Why? And where would it lead? No one would ever find you. You’d be in a concrete block, maybe part of the highway system.”

Tim groaned. “So that’s it, then. That’s why those two went ahead with it.”

“For seven hundred and thirty million? Do you think they’d let Tim Dunning stand in their way? Initially she cooperated with your ‘adolescent needs’ just so that you wouldn’t sound off before the killing took place. After the killing she told you that Bartlett knew and would kill you if you talked. That’s what you found out tonight, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Tim’s voice sounded hollow.

“Was there anything else, any offer of money, for instance?”

“No.”

“In the meantime—since last October—Helen and Bartlett had investigated enough to be sure that you never did have a tape, that you’d merely overheard their conversation. So they figured that after they’d killed Curtis they could wait for the opportune time to take you off and make certain you had no record. I think you’d tell them everything before they were through. Then, they’d dispose of you without leaving a crisp curl of your adolescent hair.”

He waited, but Tim made no reply.

“What do you expect us to do, Tim?”

“Do?” he said shrilly, “Why, arrest them. Arrest them now! Don’t wait until morning.”

“I’m not ready to arrest them.”

“What more do you want?” the younger voice wailed. “They’re killers, and they’ll kill *me* if they get the chance.”

“Then we’ll catch them in the act,” said Peter blandly.

There was silence, except for the fitful scratching of the rat they had heard earlier. Tim moaned softly.

“Tell you what I want you to do, Tim. I want you to go to Helen Curtis right now and tell her you’ve been talking to us. You don’t have to say you’ve told us the story—that might be foolish—just that we *know* the story. Tell her that we’re going to arrest Bartlett and her first thing in the morning, and if she hopes for a reduced sentence, she’d better give us all the facts now, tonight. We especially want to know the location of the gun used to kill Jackson Curtis. Will you do it?”

“Go out there?” Tim faltered. “No thank-you.”

“How would you like to spend five years in prison, Tim?” Peter said quietly.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve committed an indictable offence in withholding this information until now—information that could have prevented a murder

from taking place. It wouldn't be hard to show that you were an accessory to the crime."

"Five years," added Charlie, "with blackmail on top of it."

"You're going to cooperate with us, Tim, whether you want to or not. They won't kill you tonight, not under our noses. Now, go. Sergeant Ross will take you as far as the lodge."

Charlie switched on the light and stood by Tim's chair. The boy climbed to his feet, his face white.

"I wonder if you realize what they're like." Tim's voice wavered. "They'll do anything, you know."

"Okay, son, don't worry," Charlie said soothingly. "Inspector Gregory told you you'd be safe for the time being."

"Sergeant Ross will wait for you to come out again," Peter said. "He'll see you to your cabin, and you can tell him what happened. I'll send Constable Turner to stay with you tonight."

"I sure hope you know what you're doing," Tim said wanly. He stood drooping, looking dully into the darkness outside, when Peter opened the door. Then he hurried after the burly Sergeant.

Peter turned off the light and lay back against his pillows, looking into the darkness. From the distance came the cry of the loon: wild waves of laughter followed by the long wailing cry that seemed to pierce to the heart of life. There was no more primitive bird song on earth than this. The

females, guarded jealously by their mates, would be laying large brown eggs now close to the water's edge because they hated to travel on land, their legs being set too far back for happy waddling. Loons were creatures of the water and the air. They could outswim trout and dive to nearly 200 feet. They could fly with great strength and speed, sometimes performing aerodynamic marvels just for the hell of it. But they were at their most spectacular when mating. He'd seen them in the North, male and female, alike in their plumage, moving rapidly across the water together—all 32 inches of them standing straight up, only their webbed feet churning the surface of the water, wings stretched wide apart, yet motionless. Slowly, tiptoe like that, they would turn and face one another like ballet dancers.

Again he heard their cry, only further away this time, and he thought of Cathy's laughter. He could never forget that sound either, which had always filled him with joy—the wild, sweet quality of her laughter, like soft bells...

There wasn't very much laughter in the last three months of her life. Nor was there very much in the year or two before he quit drinking. She couldn't understand his being a serious drinker. She told him that over and over. You're too self-contained, too controlled, too bloody rational to be a drinker. And you're a police officer. He didn't tell her that maybe she was describing part of the problem. He had trouble with the discipline and the regulations and the protocol. He had trouble with his own finely tuned mind, which saw things with such clarity, most of the time. But he could

never change anything or anyone. He could never diminish the brutality and greed and lust he saw around him every day. It troubled him a lot, picking up the shreds of people afterwards.

In the North nearly everybody drank; it was a way of life, a form of survival, a wall against the winter and the Outside that always kept creeping in. But the hard craving hadn't got to him until after he'd crippled his foot in the eastern Arctic and was sent south to recover and be trained for less physical work: criminal investigation. The transition was difficult. He didn't like the classroom routine nor the unnecessary repetition of procedures he'd learned the first time around. The entire course of instruction bored him. And there was a more fundamental problem. The Arctic experience had changed him in ways he was hardly aware of himself. He'd seen a depth of life he hadn't know existed. Partly it was the North itself—powerful, implacable, beautiful, and unreal. There were the people, too, the Inuit, especially an old man named Quill. But old Quill gave him another version of reality without appearing to say a word about it; just slipped it to him, so to speak.

Quill's world was a world of spirits; a world where human and animal forms intermingled and sometimes changed places. This way of thinking was not completely strange to Peter. He'd heard his mother, who was a Blackfoot from the foothills region of Alberta, talk about the powers of some shamans and she had witnessed the phenomenon of the shaking teepee. Peter liked the idea that he was a halfbreed, yet felt doubtful about

shamanic powers—until old Quill began to demonstrate his own power.

Quill was able to predict happenings, there was no doubt about that, and he could dredge up things about Peter's childhood which Peter had difficulty remembering. On several occasions, Quill proved that he could see events then occurring far beyond the range of normal human vision.

What could Peter do with Quill's version of reality as a reprocessed constable learning to do criminal investigation in the big city? Whisky sometimes helped to bridge the gap a little, or seemed to, by fuzzing the brain. Then one day he met Cathy skating on the Rideau Canal. It was as though she had dropped from the sky just for him. For a long time she was the only help he needed, until they moved west and he got assigned to undercover work.

His first job was to investigate a major stock market fraud and to do this he had to play the part of a young man recently arrived in town who'd come into a lot of money and was looking for a good investment—an easy mark. About a hundred and fifty bar parties and office meetings later, he had what he needed. The case created a sensation when it broke, dragging down some important people, including a trust company executive. It was a tour de force from the point of view of his career, but meant the end of two drinks a day for Peter Gregory. Eventually, he was transferred to homicide, under Superintendent Albert Newcombe, the Beaver, who spent his days chewing at paper, the closest thing to wood he could find.

Then came the big fight when Cathy told him she did not want an alcoholic father for her child, or an alcoholic husband either. Somehow he found the strength to put away the bottle and leave it on the shelf, for the sake of Cathy and the child who never came. They had more than a year of the old happiness together before her agonizing headaches began and the discovery of the tumor. At least he had given her that year.

When Charlie returned an hour later, he found Peter fully dressed and propped up high against the pillows, sound asleep. Charlie hated to wake him.

“Not much to tell,” he said when Peter at last opened his eyes. “The lad says she can’t make up her mind. He thinks she’s afraid of Bartlett. I can’t see her being afraid of anybody.”

“It was worth a try,” Peter muttered, swinging to a sitting position on the side of the bed. He bent down to pull on his shoes. “We’ll have to keep watch.”

They decided to take turns of three hours each until morning, with Peter taking the first watch.

When Charlie had settled his great frame on the mattress, Peter took out his notes and began to go over them, adding notes as he went page by page, stopping often to stare out into the darkness. When he had finished, he yawned and looked at his watch. It said 2:37 a.m., and he rose and went outside on the porch.

The moon was covered in cloud and the gloom of the night oppressed him. He left the porch and followed the path to the lakeshore. The silence was complete. Even the loon, feeding in the shallows downlake, made no sound. Then the moon sprang free from the cloud mass and flooded the valley with its radiance. It was like the lights all going on in an empty theatre.

He returned to the cabin by way of the lodge. Looking up over the rim of the lodge porch as he passed, he saw someone standing behind the French doors that led into the living room. Her face was caught in the full moonlight, and she was staring at something above and behind him. The unearthly pallor of her white skin ended abruptly where the dark red material of her dressing gown began. Perhaps she saw him, for she turned quickly and moved away. It was Fern Dunning.