

Chapter 12

At 3:00 Peter awakened Charlie. "It's your turn, I guess."

"What's wrong?" asked Charlie, sitting up. He recognized the flat tone in Peter's voice.

"I don't know." Peter sat motionless on the bed, "Perhaps that's what's wrong."

"You're tired," said Charlie, tying his shoes. "That's what's wrong. I was feeling that way myself before I stretched out." He stood up and looked at his watch. "You've given me nearly three and a half hours. Now lie back and go to sleep."

Peter pulled a blanket over him and lay back, but he did not immediately sleep.

He could not shake from his mind the image of Fern Dunning standing at the window and looking out—not at him—he knew that by the way her head had been turned—no, not at him but as though looking for... looking for what? Or for whom? Then the question receded into the mists of sleep that seemed to creep towards him from the lake, and soon he had lost

the shape of the question, though he swam hard in its direction. Then he was sinking down into the mud of the lake.

He awoke to find Charlie firmly shaking him by the shoulder.

“It’s on its way.”

“What is?”

“The boat.”

They tumbled out of the cabin and stared out at the lake. An outboard boat was rounding the first point headed east along the northern shore. The time was 5:50 a.m.

“Tell Turner we’re leaving. Then go down to the float and get a boat ready for us,” Peter said. “Make sure we’ve got a full tank of gas. I’ll join you in three or four minutes.”

He strode to the lodge, opened the side door, and walked down to Jim Bartlett’s room, but it was empty. Helen Curtis was also missing from her room. He returned along the corridor and then crossed the main lounge to the master bedroom. He knocked, and after a minute a voice said, “Yes?”

“Gregory here, Mrs. Dunning. Could I speak to you?”

She half-opened the door, peering out.

“Mrs. Dunning, do you know who just left in one of your boats?”

“Did someone leave?”

“Jim Bartlett and Helen Curtis left in one of your boats. It’s a little early, even for fishing, isn’t it?”

“Well... almost.”

“Where is your husband, Mrs. Dunning?”

“Leave me alone,” she said.

“Is he in here?”

“He’s in the office.” And she closed the door.

Ed Dunning heaved over on his couch when Peter opened the office door.

“What is it?” he asked.

“One of your boats headed downlake about four or five minutes ago. Jim Bartlett and Helen Curtis took it.”

Dunning rolled over and sat up.

“Sergeant Ross and I are leaving now. You come along when you’re ready. And bring your son. We might need him.”

Dunning stood up and moved towards the chair where he had folded his pants and shirt. He was clad in undershorts and Peter noticed the thickness of his shoulders, the mat of hair on chest and back.

“Better bring your rifle, Dunning.”

“Don’t worry,” Dunning said, and began to climb into his pants.

Peter turned to go. “You’ll have to be on the lookout as to where we beach our boat. It may not be easy to find in this light.”

At points where the mist was thick Peter could barely make out the shoreline. This was not a serious problem so long as they kept a bit out

from the land, but as they approached the creek, Peter veered closer in, at the same time cutting his speed. He kept just far enough out to avoid hitting the numerous snags that jutted out from the shore. They moved quietly at trolling speed, sometimes shifting into neutral in order to peer into the wreckage of old trees grouped here and there along the bank. Peter fought down the urge to speed up and depend on luck rather than observation. But it would be too easy to miss the other boat.

At last they came to a stretch of shore where chunks of land had fallen into the lake, due to the action of water eroding the sandy loam of the lake's edge. In one such place where erosion had formed a small bay causing trees on either side to lean down until their branches touched the water, Charlie noticed a flash of white. They parted the natural screen formed by the branches and saw the boat tied to a sizeable tree root.

They pulled alongside and clambered ashore.

"We don't want to hide our boat," Peter said in a low voice. "The others have to see it. Leave enough slack bowline and shove it back through those branches."

"I haven't any slack bowline," Charlie growled.

Peter swore softly. "You'll have to stay here and signal them in. Have you got a flashlight?"

For answer Charlie flicked on his pocket flashlight, being careful to point it offshore. "You're not going after them alone?"

“I don’t know what’s happening in there, Charlie, and we can’t waste time guessing. I’m going to move ahead and try to locate those two; let’s hope you catch up before I have to make a move.”

“Why do we need the Dunnings anyway?”

“Because they know this area, and we could have a search on our hands. Also, I want to see how Dunning behaves. We might learn something.”

“More acid tests?”

“You could say so. Anyway, stay close to the man. I don’t want him to use that gun of his. I want a live Bartlett.”

Peter pushed his way into the underbrush. He moved cautiously, knowing how easy it would be to get sidetracked onto a deer’s trail. There was only silence, except for a bird far off in the forest giving out a few notes. It sounded less than enthralled at the idea of a new day.

The brush gave way to a glade of pine trees and he stopped to listen. The sunlight was creeping into the forest, turning spider webs glassy, and casting a tracery of light and shadow onto the moss-covered logs. He searched for signs but could find nothing—no scuffed moss or broken twigs.

He stood perfectly still, hardly breathing. Old Quill had told him once that there was a way of finding people or animals who were beyond your sight. He wished he knew what the trick was, which worked so well for Quill. The quality of the light changed, something cold turned in his gut, and he heard a gunshot, then a distant scream.

He plunged into the damp bush, cursing his lame foot, trying to follow the directions of the sound. A bluff of rock appeared before him, and he had to work his way around it. On the other side he stumbled down a sharp embankment of shale and stopped. A sound came from not far off. It was like the gobbling of a high-pitched goose, followed by the low voice of a man. Before he could move there was the shattering sound of a shot, and then an agonized shriek. Running straight at the sound, he came upon them in a small clearing. Bartlett's back was toward Peter and he was in a half crouch. Maybe the babbling cries of the woman prevented Bartlett from hearing Peter's rush. He started to turn, holding the handgun, and Peter crashed into him.

The impact threw Bartlett back with such force that he broke the branches from an old pine tree that stood behind him and his handgun flew from his hand.

Peter covered him with his 9 mm Smith and Weston.

"Get up," he said.

On his hands and knees, Bartlett stared bleakly up at Peter and started to climb to his feet. Then he charged, ignoring the gun, perhaps correctly thinking that the police officer would avoid using it if he could. His shoulder caught Peter squarely in the stomach, hurling him back. For an instant Peter was swept by blackness and he found himself on the ground, groping for the handgun that he had lost in the fall, then lurching to evade a

powerful kick to his head, swinging his own legs around to catch Bartlett off balance and bring him down.

They fought, rolling over and over in the debris of the forest floor. Peter had the initial advantage and the cordlike strength and cunning derived from combats in northern mining towns. But he was older, with a lame foot, and his purpose was not to kill but merely to subdue. The young man had been trained in hand-to-hand combat and fought to disable or kill his opponent. Peter felt the struggle going against him. Bartlett managed to get on top of him and started to batter his head against the ground, then turned to pick up a rock nearby. Blood ran into Peter's eyes, but not quite enough to blind him, and as Bartlett swung back, poising the rock high, Peter twisted his body and struck with all his strength into the diaphragm. Bartlett collapsed onto him with a strangled sound, and in a moment Peter was on top of him, grasping him in a paralyzing back lock, face down in the soil.

Peter glanced over at Helen Curtis. She was lying on the ground like a badly broken doll, moaning, blood welling into the moss. He heard a shout and Charlie clambered, panting, through the thicket towards them.

He snapped manacles onto Bartlett's wrists, and helped Peter into a sitting position against a log.

"I'm alright, I think. Scalp lacerations, and some bruised bones. Take a look at her. Where'd he hit her?"

By now the Dunnings had come up to them. For once Tim Dunning had nothing to say.

“Both knees,” said Charlie from a crouching position beside Helen. “He’s shot up her knees.”

“Get tourniquets on,” said Peter. His head was beginning to throb painfully. “Tim, the creek must be very near. Soak this handkerchief in it, and double back.” Tim left, running. “Dunning, you know how to make a stretcher out of your jacket?”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Dunning. He stared hard at Bartlett, who was lying on his side now. “I’d like to shoot that bastard right now.”

“There’s been enough shooting,” said Peter. “Get a couple of pine poles—and put that gun down.”

By the time they got Helen Curtis to the boats, she was in extreme agony, moaning brokenly, and they had nothing to relieve the pain. They placed her as comfortably as they could in the boat with Ed and Tim Dunning.

“We’ll be following along with Bartlett shortly. Get her to the hospital just as fast as you can.”

The boat roared off, Tim sitting forward, shrunken, staring numbly at Helen Curtis, who had taught him what you will never learn from any book.

“Now spit it out, Bartlett. The real story.”