

Chapter 13

Bartlett's story began when he returned from an extended business trip in England to find that his father's partner had taken to himself a bride. Helen Curtis did not exactly fit Jim Bartlett's conception of the ideal executive wife. Not that beauty bothered him. He knew that no sum of sexual attractions was likely to influence Jackson Curtis, who was, according to Jim's father, totally impotent. Jim had presumed, therefore, that Curtis had made the connubial arrangement with Helen Alban, the much-photographed model and playgirl, in order to sustain his image of rugged masculinity before the world. It was not her beauty that bothered Jim, but her clearly evident braininess. For in her position as the senior partner's wife, she might threaten Bartlett's growing power in the firm. She would do worse than that, Bartlett knew, if she discovered that he was engaged in financial deals on the side. When Bartlett found that Helen had in fact hired an investigator to look into his affairs, he wasted little time in launching an investigation of his own.

It turned out that Helen had not always been a model and consort of the international set. Her real name, he discovered, was Genevieve Deneuve, better known as Jenny Den—a much sought after call girl before she turned herself into Helen Alban. Her fully detailed list of wealthy clients, their leading characteristics and proclivities, constituted a document of pure social dynamite, especially since two of the men on the list were prominent politicians.

What were Helen Curtis and Jim Bartlett to do when confronted with the facts of one another's damaging backgrounds? They formed an alliance, naturally. It was an arrangement that neither included nor precluded sex. Nothing romantic, of course. Casual lust was good enough for Jim Bartlett. He used women as Helen used men, without affection. It wasn't that he lacked emotions, but these were aggressive rather than tender. He could hate but not love. Ordinarily in control of himself, there were lapses—moments of ferocity. He had found out all about that side of himself as a boy at private school and then in the Marines.

Within a year of her marriage Helen wanted badly to be rid of Jackson Curtis. Marriage to an old, wealthy, impotent man had seemed a splendid idea at first. For the first time in her life she would have money without having to perform the usual boring service. And for Helen Curtis money was all that counted. Brought up by an alcoholic mother and a brutal father in filthy poverty, her one controlling impulse was to rise so far above her environment as to come to believe that it had never really existed. She had

gone on the street with that purpose alone—to make money fast and to climb out of the gutter with it. She had almost accomplished her purpose over the years. She had put up with every humiliation, catered to every depravity, and had accumulated over four hundred thousand dollars when she met Curtis. But it was not nearly enough money—not for the security and freedom she craved. No amount would be enough.

By the time she met Curtis she had acquired a new name and profession. She had become a model, and had ideas of one day becoming an actress. It did not take her long to find out about Jackson Curtis' sad state and to conclude that he needed her not only for the sake of his social image but also for his self-image. She thought he would be an easy mark—one of those aging boys. And so it was a dreadful shock to discover that if he was nearing sixty he had the vital constitution of a goat, that if he was rich he was anything but generous, and that he was searingly jealous, which was most surprising of all, in view of his collapsed manhood. He had her watched constantly. She had always manipulated men by the cunning use of sex. But here was a sexless man, and she found herself unable to control her situation. He even tricked her into putting most of her own money under his care. Of course, she could have left him and sued for divorce. But the marriage contract she had made him sign was weighted heavily in her favour only in the event of his wishing separation from her or in the event of his death. And he had no intention of leaving her or dying: that was clear.

She raged inwardly, and she waited. It was finally Jackson Curtis himself who gave her the opening she sought.

One exception to the old boy's eternal vigilance was in Nature's bosom. Curtis' father had been a Unitarian Minister who equated God with Nature and Nature with Innocence. By this simple logic, the City became a synonym for Evil, which implied that each man must preserve his soul's connection with Nature or else risk damnation. Insofar as he thought about it, Jackson Curtis himself did not believe any of it, but he was affected emotionally to the roots of his being. In the business dealings of the city he became a highly successful practitioner—among ruthless people noted for his ruthlessness. Yet, in a twisted way he was very like his father. He became rich, but spent little. He owned a large house and lived practically in one room; he drove a five year old Chevrolet and kept a Rolls Royce in his garage. He liked beautiful women around him, but never touched one of them. He acquired all the paraphernalia of the twentieth century multi-millionaire, but essentially he remained a boy (Helen was right about that), more explicitly, a nature boy. This, his father's doctrine of nature, Curtis made his own. Only Nature was real, and good. We had only to get out there beyond the crowded cities to absorb its lessons. The literal return to Nature was for Jackson an urgent need, a religious obligation, but one without gentleness or compassion, one of "tooth and claw," as he liked to call it. So the wilder and rougher the piece of nature, the better he liked it. The fact that Loon Lake was isolated, that the lodge was somewhat raw and

unfinished, merely added to its value in his eyes. To hunt and fish in this wilderness was to live like natural man. He encouraged Helen to take walks, to climb, to hunt, to get to know the country, to be herself, as he used to say almost piously. Helen did just that.

According to Bartlett, she proposed the murder of Jackson Curtis in the first summer that they visited Loon Lake. At first, there was no suggestion that he, Bartlett, was to do the actual killing. She had met Kurt Koenig who naturally had become infatuated with her, and in a moment of self-truth, had told her about his criminal record. Here was the perfect fall guy, except for the fact that, when it came to the crunch, he let her down. The second possibility was John Vincent, whom she approached after the flare-up between Curtis and Vincent. He, too, in the end might fail to carry out the killing. So the wheel came around to Bartlett. Helen argued that the natural suspects in any case would be Koenig or Vincent, and that he had nothing to worry about. Still, he balked.

Then one morning, Jackson Curtis being indisposed, she and Jim Bartlett went fishing. At Soames Creek she said they would have to go ashore for a few minutes. When she reappeared from the bushes she was carrying a rifle. Thirty feet or so away she pointed the rifle at Bartlett, and told him to get out of the boat. When he did so, she fired and the bullet pierced the boat just below the gunwale. He was rather surprised, even though he had come to expect almost anything from Helen, and demanded an explanation. She said here was the solid alibi they needed. Bartlett would

say that when he was out trolling alone somebody fired at him from the far shore. After the shooting of Curtis had taken place, the police would conclude that the two shots were connected, that both were probably fired by the same man, and since Bartlett couldn't have shot at himself while sitting in the boat trolling, that other person, X, was guilty of the murder of Curtis. The finger would then point at Koenig or Vincent once accident was ruled out.

At first, Jim thought this might indeed provide an alibi, but he knew something about guns and ballistics and began to perceive a few problems. For one thing, the gun would have to be designed for long range hunting to convince the police that the shots fired from the far shore would have the precise effect they did have.

When he proposed this difficulty, however, Helen said that she had thought of this, and therefore, she had helped Vincent to buy a long range rifle, a .300 Ultra Magnum Remington. Still, Bartlett worried. It was not that he was incapable of murder, but he was a practical man and concerned about details.

Then came the morning of the killing. Jackson had wanted a wilderness breakfast and Bartlett was going to be let off at 8:00 to cook it. About 7:45, while they were still on the outward loop, and before they turned toward shore, a shot rang out and Curtis was hit. Panicking, Bartlett was about to head for home with the dead man. Then he remembered what the plan had been with respect to the gun.

Bartlett studied the backs of his hands. “I suddenly realized that just as Koenig and Vincent had been set up to be fall guys, so might I. You see, after Helen had fired that shot through the boat, we had sex. It was just to divert me from thinking too hard about the problem, but I didn’t see that at the time. I hadn’t agreed to the killing of Jackson. But I pretended to go along with her and we talked about what we could do with all that money. Her idea was, of course, that she’d share it with me, evenly. Well, after awhile she said she’d have to go to the John and no fooling this time. But she started to take the gun with her. I said what’s that for? She said she was afraid of bears. Okay. So later she comes back without the gun, and I asked where it was. She said she’d hidden it, but sounded a bit worried. I said, what’s wrong? And she said, I don’t know what to make of that hiding place. So I said well let’s see it. It was lying between some roots with some leaves over it, and I was pretty appalled. The wind comes along removing the leaves and there’s your gun. She said, maybe we should find a better place for it. You’re damn right, I said pulling the rifle out of there, and so she started to look and I followed with the gun. Finally, I found a half-buried log. The stuff in the core was rotten. We hollowed it out; I put the rifle inside and then replugged the ends. Perfect. Very pleased with ourselves. It never crossed my mind that she’d planned the whole thing ahead of time—that she’d trapped me by getting me to put my fingerprints all over that gun—having cleaned off her own, of course.”

He fell silent again, and his hands slowly balled themselves into fists, and a red blotch formed on his forehead. Then he began to relax a little and sweat shone on his face.

“I got her in the knees,” he let out. “If you hadn’t come along, Inspector, I’d’ve fired once more, low down in the stomach, and watched her puke her life out. She had it coming.”

He took a deep breath.

“Go back,” said Charlie, “to what happened after the killing.”

“I suddenly saw her whole plan. First of all she thought the Mounties were alright for postcards but were unlikely to get beyond the accident theory. If they did, they’d pick the man with the record, Kurt Koenig, or, failing him, the Indian who hated white demons, John Vincent. Actually, it should have worked, given average police work. But what if the police work wasn’t average? What if they got beyond Koenig and the Indian? What then? Well, there I was, the final trump, the ultimate patsy. She had to make certain that there’d be no mistake about that. How did she manage it? She did it this way. If the police decided to check out the possibility that both shots came from the north, not the south shore, and that maybe the missing gun was stashed somewhere in that bush on the north side, then they’d have a thorough search and they’d find it. Helen could make sure they’d find it. And it would be covered with my fingerprints.”

“So there I am in the boat with the dead Curtis and all this going through my head. I turned inshore, beached the boat at the campsite and

ran like hell to the hiding place. But it was empty. What'd I expect? It was all in the script, and I had to go along with it and hope to God the cops were as dumb as they usually are." He turned to Peter. "I knew you'd sniffed out the lie yesterday morning when we went out on the lake, but what could I do? If I told you the truth, why should you believe it? The gun's in there somewhere, and it incriminates me."

"And so at the point of a gun," Peter said, "you made Helen come with you hoping to force her to reveal the location of the 30.30."

"That's right."

"What would you have done with it when you found it?"

"Handed it over to you. I knew you'd be on our tail. It was a race. I knew that, but I figured that if I could get hold of it and hand it to you you'd realize that I couldn't have known where that rifle was after the shooting, but that Helen knew. That would clear me, and nail her."

"And Helen took you to this second hiding place."

Bartlett frowned. "She said she was taking me to it, and pointed to this old pine stump, only it wasn't there." He paused, his lips tight. "I was sure she knew. I told her what I'd do if she didn't tell me where the gun was. She yelled that she didn't know. And then I shot her..."

Charlie looked grimly at him. "Maybe she didn't know, Bartlett."

"She must have known!"

The day was warming up, and Peter's head was one dull ache.

“Show me the hiding place of the gun—the one you and Helen first agreed on.”

The way was through fairly thick brush into a boggy area not far from Soames Creek. Bartlett pointed to an old pine log, half buried in gummy foliage.

“That’s it. We hollowed out the right end.”

“Take a look, Charlie.”

Charlie reached down. “There’s no plug in this one.” He reached in, grunted with surprise. “Look what I’ve got.” He drew out a Winchester 30.30.

Bartlett stared with astonishment.

“But how’s that...?”

Using a handkerchief, Peter worked the lever five times. Four rounds spun out.

“I tell you that gun was not there!” Bartlett exploded.

“Pretty clever, Bartlett,” Charlie growled. “You knew you were on the hook so you made it look like a frame-up.”

“Do you think I’d’ve brought Helen down here at the point of a gun if I knew where that was?” Bartlett shakily lit a cigarette.

Charlie looked at Peter, who seemed to be listening to a bird singing far off. “Come on.” He wheeled and plunged into the bushes, the others following.

They came out above where the boat was tied.

“Sit down,” Peter said to Bartlett, “and wait for us. I don’t have to tell you it would be stupid to make a run for it.”

Bartlett nodded and lay down on the embankment above the lake.

“Come on, Charlie.” When they had gone a few yards, he stopped. “Now, suppose you were Bartlett,” said Peter, “where would you have fired from?”

Charlie glanced around. “Well, not from here. He’d need to fire from a point that would give him maximum field.”

He began to search the ground farther to the east.

“That bush is too thick,” Peter pointed out. “In order to have the lateral field he’d have to expose his rifle barrel, and at that range Curtis might see him.”

Charlie continued in an easterly direction. “It gets too open beyond here.” He looked disappointed. “Maybe if he was farther back...?”

But it was obvious that there was no place in the vicinity that provided the narrow horizontal slot needed for both maximum cover and lateral field. Finally, Charlie looked around at Peter.

“It’s a poor site,” he admitted.

“Bartlett was an officer in the US Marines,” Peter said. “He would instinctively pick the best firing location. Okay, let’s say he found that position and got away one good round at Curtis. Then what?”

“He’d have to get out to that boat fast.”

“How? By swimming?”

“Well, he could be stripped, ready to go. Oh, we forgot one thing.”

“What’s that, Charlie?”

“There’s no guarantee,” Charlie said glumly, “that Curtis would turn the speed down after he was shot. He’d probably still be moving along for a bit at trolling speed.”

“I checked that with an experienced boatman, Charlie. As soon as Curtis let go of the handle, which he did immediately on receiving the hit , the boat would go into a tight slow spin. It wouldn’t go anywhere.”

“So Bartlett would have maybe a 30 foot swim. That’d be no problem.”

“That’s right, Charlie. And what would he do with the rifle?”

“If it was me, I’d dump it in the lake.”

“So would I,” said Peter. “I’d dump it out in the middle of the lake. They might find it by dragging, but unlikely at that depth. One thing I wouldn’t do. I sure as hell wouldn’t hide it in this area.”

“But he might,” Charlie persisted, “have hidden it in order to frame somebody else.”

“With his fingerprints all over it? And why force Helen Curtis down here and shoot up her knees?”

Charlie thought about this. “To make it look as though he didn’t know where the gun was. If he didn’t know where the gun was, he couldn’t have fired the fatal shot.”

“But if this was a set-up, surely it would point toward the fall-guy. Who was being framed? Besides, when we found Jim Bartlett he was in the process of killing Helen Curtis—hardly the act of a calculating man. He was desperate.”

“For sure,” Charlie said reluctantly.

“Finally, there were four out of five rounds in the gun. One round was the one fired at the boat. That’s all.”

Charlie gave a helpless shrug.

“We still haven’t found the place he could have fired from,” Peter said.

Charlie got to his feet. “I’ve got an idea. We’re looking along the shore. But toward the creek mouth might be better.”

“Let’s look,” said Peter.

They followed the fringe of the bush from the mouth of the creek north on the west side and found, at a point about thirty yards in from the outer shoreline of the lake, a natural trench beneath a screen of branches formed by a young fir tree.

“This must be it.” Charlie could not entirely suppress his excitement.

“I think it is,” said Peter, looking at the ground. “Look here, the grass is pressed down in places. Now let’s see if we can reconstruct our man’s firing position.” Peter started crawling into the trench.

The soil was clay silt out of which grew long, sick-looking tufts of grass.

“He couldn’t have taken a prone position, Charlie,” said Peter over his shoulder, “because those bushes growing up in front screen the lake. He must have been sitting. It’s the best way for this kind of shot anyway...” Peter came to a spot near the base of the spruce. The branches growing out of it formed a wide circling umbrella over him. “There are imprints here alright.” He sat down on the largest of them. “You’ll notice, Charlie, that when I put my feet into the proper position for firing they ...” Peter paused, disconcerted. “The prints are somewhat short for my legs. Hand me the rifle.”

Charlie had been carrying the 30.30 by the leather sling. He crawled over to Peter and held it out. Peter took it carefully in his handkerchiefed left hand, placed his elbows against his knees, and sighted along the barrel to the lake. He grunted in surprise.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie queried.

“The fringe of those spruce branches is several inches too low.”

“That’s funny.”

Peter lowered the gun. “Charlie, look over to my right, just about where that clump of grass is.”

Charlie crawled around him and peered.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, picking something up. He held it out to Peter. It was an empty rifle cartridge. “Take a good close look,” Charlie said. “Its not what we have the right to expect.”

Peter looked.

“It looks like a 30.06 cartridge to me,” Charlie said with a small sigh.

They sat on their haunches silently pondering the cartridge case.

“You’d better get back to the lodge, Charlie, and take Bartlett with you. I’ll follow along in Bartlett’s boat, but I’m going to drop in on Mabel Donahue on the way.”

“Oh yes, the born-again lady,” Charlie said absently.

“She has a cabin a mile or so this side of the lodge. She visits for the summer. Who knows, she might have something for me—maybe even hot coffee.”

“That’s more than I’ll get at the lodge,” Charlie muttered. “I’ll be damned,” he added, looking at the cartridge as though at the leading edge of some dark conspiracy.