

Chapter 14

Mabel Donahue's cabin was set back from the edge of the lake, a nicely proportioned little abode made of pine logs. He found her, a largish woman, digging with a hand trowel in her flower garden.

"Hello," she said, shading her eyes and looking up at him. "Are you the police officer?"

"Yes. My name's Peter Gregory, R.C.M.P. You heard what happened, then?"

"Mrs. Dunning phoned me and told me that there'd been a murder. I only met this man Curtis once, though I suppose I saw him going by in his boat a few times, though I couldn't be sure."

She was in her early sixties, he guessed. She wore a shapeless green dress and had grey eyes set in a rather square face. Her hair was cut in the pageboy fashion.

"Was that all Mrs. Dunning said?"

“She did ask me if I’d seen their boy, Tim. Well I hadn’t. I was surprised she called me, even about murder. Except about business she’s hardly said two words to me in these past eighteen years.”

“You had this cottage before the lodge opened?”

“Oh yes.” Her blue eyes surveyed him. “But I don’t think I’ll answer any more questions until you come in and sit down. I’ve got some coffee. You don’t look well—especially with that large lump on your head. Do you want some ice on it?”

“No thanks,” he said. “But the coffee would be great.”

Inside, he was glad to sink into a comfortable armchair. The room seemed surprisingly large, with a row of French windows giving onto a wide porch. It was like a smaller version of the lodge, but tastefully furnished, uncluttered, and lived-in.

She put some coffee on to percolate and sat down on a large tan sofa.

“My only knowledge of what went on at the lodge came from young Tim who used to drop by now and then. I don’t know whether it was my cookies or what. We talked a lot anyway.” She paused. “He was a lonely boy.”

“I have an idea he made up for it,” Peter said, “in various ways.”

“If you mean the pot and the girl chasing,” she said, “I don’t think that helped him much. His mother shunned him and his father treated him harshly. So he was lonely and confused.”

“You said Mrs. Dunning never called you except on business.”

“Well, of course she had no particular reason to. I only come up here three or four times a year aside from the summer, and then I like to be alone. The rest of the year my friends keep me hopping. I guess the Dunnings wanted the lake all to themselves and that’s why Mrs. Dunning offered to buy this place.”

“Was it a fair offer?”

“Offers, you mean. At least once a year. In the beginning they seemed far too low, but of late years—well, she seemed prepared to pay almost anything.”

“You wouldn’t sell?”

“I wouldn’t sell. You see, my father, who built this place with his own hands, left it to me, and I’m going to hang on. It’s my little haven from the world.”

Peter remembered Ed Dunning’s comment that Mabel Donahue was some kind of religious nut.

“Dunning said you were a born-again Christian.”

“Yes, I am,” she said, “though I can imagine what Mr. Dunning said about that.” She looked at him and laughed. “Don’t look so serious,” she said. “It’s simple, just like coming out of a tunnel into the light of day. That doesn’t make life any easier—oh no, because the world is still inside the tunnel.”

“Including your piece of nature here on Loon Lake?”

She did not answer immediately, but stared out onto the distant reaches of the lake.

“I don’t really have the kind of information you’re looking for. I mean the hard facts, though I don’t think facts alone are going to find your murderer.” She looked at him. “I’m afraid what I’m going to say will make you feel a little the way Mr. Dunning feels about me. But I can’t help that, can I? First, let me get you that cup of coffee I promised.”

While she was out of the room, Peter leafed over the pages of an album on the table in front of him. There were pictures of her mother and father formally posed, and of herself growing up. She was a handsome young woman, though hefty. He turned over several pages, and stopped at one that caught his interest. She was standing with a dog at her feet, her hand on the shoulder of a boy of 14 or 15. It was John Vincent, he was sure.

She had come into the living room, and stood behind him for a moment, then came around and placed the cup of coffee on the table before him. “You asked me about Loon Lake. Loon Lake hasn’t been the same since the fire.”

“Certainly not those hills to the south.”

“You know about the fire then?”

“I used to hunt and fish here twenty years ago. I stayed one night with Paul Vincent, an Indian who lived on the other side. Yesterday, his son John told me about the fire. I saw what it did.”

She stared into her cup for a few moments before replying. “Well, then, you’ll understand. I was here at the time of the fire. As you know it never got down to the lakeside, but I will never forget looking across the lake at that mountain ridge over there. The night sky behind it was a strange hue, and it got brighter and brighter. I could see the trees on the ridge before they caught fire. It was as though giant worms of flame were eating the whole land. It was horrible—a vision of hell.”

She was silent for a time, and Peter sat, waiting.

“I knew Paul Vincent well. As a girl I used to hike up there, usually with my brother, but sometimes alone, especially after I got to know Paul. He taught me so much. Things you couldn’t find in a textbook. About living things, not in the abstract, but the inside—how they feel. He believed they were part of us, and we were part of them. That forest up there was his world and I think the fire killed him—I mean killed his soul. He didn’t even know me afterwards. Oh, he’d talk alright, rambling on and on to himself, or so it seemed. But then it dawned on me that he wasn’t talking to himself. He was talking to spirits, and sometimes they were demons. Oh yes, Mr. Gregory. You don’t believe in such entities, but I do. Paul Vincent did. It was the demons that destroyed him. And now, he’s really dead.”

“What did you say?”

“He’s dead. I know he’s dead.”

A gentle breeze rippled the leaves of the trees outside. Unaccountably, Peter felt chilled. Late afternoon light lay across the lake.

“He’s dead. But what he had to tell me before he died—not in so many words, mind you—was that the fire was no accident. It was set by a man-- a man who wanted to turn that rolling forest land into a cattle pasture. Oh yes. A man who wanted the land only for cattle, not for the Indians and the wild things. Paul said that man was Blake Moran.”

She turned on the light, and her hair looked very white.

“You’re interested in who murdered this man Curtis. I don’t know. But I do know from Paul Vincent that Moran set the fire. But he didn’t do it for the reason Paul said. He wasn’t interested in ranching. Everyone knew that. He did it to oblige someone, or to prove himself to someone. Someone important.”

Peter sipped his coffee.

“You said you once met Jackson Curtis?”

“Oh my yes....”

Peter waited.

“You see, I’d resisted all offers for my property. I didn’t realize that he was behind them. A strange man.”

“Strange?”

“Very. One day he tied up at my little dock. He asked if we could sit down and talk, and of course I told him to come in. He got right to the point. He said he’d like to buy this property and was willing to pay far more than it was worth. He smiled at me and said that he admired me for driving such a hard bargain. I said: ‘But Mr. Curtis, you don’t apparently understand. This

property is not for sale, not at any price.’ I noticed his smile vanished at that—poof!! He said: ‘Everything has a price!’ I replied, ‘Not this property.’ And he got right up, went to the door and opened it before turning to me, ‘One way or another, Miss Donahue, this property will be in my hands before the year is up. Make no mistake. I would advise you to deal with me very soon, while you still can.’ So you see, Inspector, why I regard him as a very strange and dangerous man. In some way he is still dangerous—demonic.”

“I see.”

“Inside you’re laughing at me, and I shouldn’t blame you. What I’ve told you is only a small part of it. The rest is hidden.”

“What do you mean by ‘hidden,’ Miss Donahue?” Peter could not help a feeling of irritation.

“From you, for one,” she said quietly. “It’s hidden from you because you won’t let yourself see it.”

Peter could not avoid a deep sigh. “You mean the connection of Jackson Curtis’ death with the fire. You’re talking about a fire that occurred a year ago.”

“But it started then, you see. Everything changed then. Loon Lake was not the same. Even now I feel like a stranger, an unwanted stranger, still threatened. I know that what happened back then is connected to this murder.” She looked up at him squinting in the light of the lamp. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you? I’m sorry to complicate your job with

my intuitions and ghosts of times past. I guess I really do have nothing that will help you. I think you should talk to Tim Dunning. I feel he knows more than he would like to say.”

Peter rose with an effort.

“Thank you, Miss Donahue. If there is a connection in all these events, we’ll find it.”

She saw him to the wide open French doors. The sky had turned grey and rain clouds were massing.

“Oh, there is a connection,” she said, smiling up at him. She turned and stared at the dark mass of the land across the lake. “By the way, did you know that last night was the anniversary of the big fire? Yes. I remember it to the day. I was standing right here looking across at that mountain ridge.”

By the time Peter tied up at the lodge dock a light rain had started to fall and he felt numb with weariness. He saw no one around and followed the path up to the cabin. Charlie was lying in his bunk, but sat up when Peter entered.

“Find anything?”

“Just connections, Charlie.”

“Oh, connections,” Charlie said, lying down again.

Peter sat down on his bed. “What happened to lunch?”

“In about half an hour. You can guess the problems. Ed Dunning took Helen off to hospital. He’s not back yet.”

“Now for the bad news, Charlie. We have to have another session with Tim Dunning.”

“Have a heart.”

“Mabel Donahue thinks he knows something.”

“What could that plaster-peeker know?”

“He knows more than he’s told us, Charlie. I’m sure of that. And I think he’s on to something a lot stronger than marijuana.”

“Where would he get that stuff up here?”

“I’ll give you one good guess.”

Propped on one elbow, Charlie stared at him. “What did you mean by ‘connections’?”

But Peter was asleep.