

Chapter 15

Lunch was an even more dismal affair than supper the night before. There was no Helen to put a warm glow in Charlie's eyes. Tim, who could at least provide some lively conversation, did not appear. Ed Dunning had returned from Clinton to report glumly that he had taken Helen to the emergency ward, by which time she was "off her nut." Jim Bartlett fingered his food as though it were polluted. Having prepared the meal, Fern Dunning made a brief appearance to announce that she would not be joining them.

After eating, Peter went into the kitchen where he could hear Pat noisily cleaning off plates.

"Well, Mr. Mountie, where's your man?"

"Or woman?"

"*And* woman. You know Helen's role."

"Maybe. Where's your brother?"

"He's no brother of mine, thanks very much. And I wouldn't know where he is. He's supposed to be helping me clean up. But, as usual..."

Peter was on the way out when she stopped him.

“You don’t think Tim was involved in this, do you? Tim may be smart with words, but he wouldn’t even have the strength to pull a trigger. He’s a total dud.”

“I don’t know,” Peter said, turning. “He seemed to have something going with Helen.”

Pat gave a snort. “He told you that? And you believed him? You Mounties are too much. That little nerd can hardly lift his arm, let alone get it up with someone like Helen.”

“Last night I found Tim in Helen’s room with her. He seemed right at home.”

“You bet. But it wasn’t for love.”

“What was it for, then?”

“I can’t believe you,” Pat said, her head cocked mockingly, looking up at him. “You Mounties can follow footprints in the wet sand at noon, but you can’t add two and two.”

“You mean the dope he was getting from Helen?”

Her face changed, becoming serious.

“You’re right on. Yes, Helen had him on her golden hook. First coke, then heroin.”

“Why would she bother getting Tim hooked on heroin?”

“Why don’t you ask her? Maybe he knew too much, and this way she could control him.”

“What did he know?”

“I think he knew it was Ed and Helen. Maybe he knew it was going to happen before it did. But poor Tim was hooked to the bone.”

Outside in the dining room, Charlie fingered his empty cup of coffee.

“Charlie, I’d like you to do another search of Tim’s room, and Helen Curtis”. I mean a close search and not for a gun. Look for anything to do with heroin.”

“Is there anything that boy hasn’t been into?”

“If there is, let me know. While you do that I’m going to have another chat with Mrs. Dunning.”

Fern Dunning stood beside the half open door clearly unwilling to let Peter enter. Her eyes glanced at the 30.06 rifle he carried. He had taken it from the lodge office where Ed Dunning had left it.

“I have nothing more to tell you,” she said flatly.

“I think you do, Mrs. Dunning, and I’d appreciate discussing it with you in private.”

She turned slowly and let him follow her inside. The room smelt of must mixed faintly with lavender.

“Why have you brought that gun in here?”

He set the rifle down, leaning it against the wall.

“Because,” he said, fishing a small notebook from his side pocket, “you said something yesterday that interested me.” He turned the pages.

“Here it is. You said that after Jim Bartlett returned with the body of Curtis—these are your words—you ‘looked at your husband’s gun,’ and you found that ‘it had been fired, alright.’” He closed the notebook. Now then, Mrs. Dunning, I’d like you to explain exactly what you did when you looked at the gun. I’d like you to show me.”

She looked with distaste at the gun, and at Peter.

“Do you see what I mean, Mrs. Dunning? How do you tell by looking at a gun that it had been fired? What you really meant was that you’d picked up the gun and checked it. Is that right?”

“Well.... yes.”

“Please, go ahead. Pick up the gun and show me how you checked it.”

“This is stupid,” she said heavily.

“I don’t think so, Mrs. Dunning.”

Gingerly, she reached for the rifle, taking it by the stock and lifting it up to cradle it, balanced, above her hip. She opened the breech and slid the bolt back. Then she raised the rifle and sniffed the open breech.

“That’s all I did,” she said.

“All?”

“Well, I removed the other cartridges.”

“Yes.”

“And counted them. There were only four.”

“Very good.”

She closed the breech and released the firing pin, then handed the rifle to Peter who returned it to the wall.

“Does that tell you something?”

“You know how to handle a rifle, Mrs. Dunning.”

“I had to know. I was brought up on a farm in the Kootenays and had to learn to shoot for the pot, because we never had enough land to make a go of it. I was glad to leave the hunting to my husband when we came here.”

“Your husband. Are you still speaking to one another?”

“Not if we can avoid it.”

“Why do you stay with him?”

“This place is as much mine as it is his.”

“It was his money in the first place.”

“It’s my care and management that kept it going.”

“He has the title.”

“Title to what? Another bankruptcy if someone doesn’t do the work.”

“It was losing money and that’s why your husband borrowed from Curtis: to keep the place afloat.”

Her eyes went hard. “Curtis used his money as a lure so that he could grab this place, nothing else. On top of our other expenses, we now had interest to pay. Ed just dug us into a deeper hole, as Curtis knew he would.”

“And that’s why your husband killed Jackson Curtis—to get out of the hole—is that how you see it?”

“How I see it isn’t important. Look, you’re playing with me. You know that two people were in on this and that one of them was Helen Curtis. What you don’t know is who pulled the trigger for her. I think it was Ed, and I don’t say that just because I hate him for what he’s done to me and Pat and this property. It just so happens that it’s also true. The man was a patsy for that woman.”

Peter was silent, staring at the gun. “Mrs. Dunning, on the morning Curtis was shot you phoned Blake Moran. Why?”

She looked away quickly, and turned a little to one side.

“He’s a neighbour. You phone a neighbour when you’re in trouble.”

Her voice sounded a little strained.

“And he had an old acquaintance with Jackson Curtis.”

She paused for a second: “Yes.”

“In fact, he was involved with Curtis in buying land around the lake.”

“I heard that.”

“I think you *know* that, Mrs. Dunning.” He looked into his notebook again. “Does the name Star Rise Holdings mean anything to you?”

“I think it was Jackson Curtis who had that.”

“The main business was buying lake property.”

“I believe so.”

“And in the days when you and your husband were still on speaking terms, the lodge here owned a third of Star Rise Holdings.”

“That would be in Ed’s name.”

“It was in Ed’s name. But you were actively involved, Mrs. Dunning, for example in trying to get Mabel Donahue to sell.”

“There was a time when we wanted to expand a little.”

“As late as six months or so ago, when you offered Mabel Donahue a price far above market value?”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Fern Dunning said.

“You made this offer when the lodge was up against it. You had no cash of your own, neither you nor Ed. Who were you acting for?”

“Well, we did agree to sell Curtis some of our lake property, and to help him buy pieces owned by others.”

“Even though by that time Star Rise Holdings held the mortgage on this lodge?”

“I told you I didn’t know that.” Her voice had gone hard. “That was Ed’s doing.”

“According to Mabel Donahue, you made several phone calls to her and were very angry when she turned down all your offers. It doesn’t look to me as though you were just doing Jackson Curtis a favour as an old-time customer.”

“I still don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“No, and you don’t like that feeling, do you, Mrs. Dunning?”

She glared up at him, sideways.

“Frankly, I don’t even think,” Peter said, “that your husband was involved in these other transactions. It was all you—and Blake Moran.”

She spun around in a rage.

“Blake Moran had nothing to do with it! If he was working for Curtis that’s his business. It has nothing to do with me.”

Again Peter looked into his notebook. “That’s not what Blake Moran says. He says you were close friends. ‘She called me her seafaring man.’ That was one phrase he used.”

She was fighting her emotion, her face working. “How dared he...”

“Because it’s over. It’s all over now that Moran has got what he wanted.”

“No,” she said, “no.”

“Oh yes. In the beginning he’d do anything for Curtis...when Curtis told Moran he’d like to get rid of the Indians on the south side , Moran did so, didn’t he? He set it all on fire, the whole countryside. It was his idea.”

She had gone quite still and watched him with pure malevolence.

“That was an act you really admired, Fern. Here was a man after your own heart. A man of action who would do anything to win out. Even Curtis was impressed by that act. To burn a whole countryside! It really cemented Moran to him. They were partners after that, at least for a time.”

Fern Dunning had regained full control of herself, and stood waiting, immobile, eyes fastened on him. There was something reptilian about her eyes.

“When I saw you standing at the lodge window last night I couldn’t understand what you were looking at. You were standing there as though

hypnotized. I thought maybe you were sleepwalking. But Mabel Donahue cleared that up. She said that last night was the anniversary of the fire, after which nothing was ever the same. To her it was an experience she didn't like to think about, but to you it was great. You were remembering that night, weren't you?"

They stood still, measuring one another.

"And so ..." she breathed.

But before he could resume, the harsh sound of the telephone came from the lounge room of the lodge and Dunning's gruff voice called out, "Inspector Gregory! Peter Gregory!"

Peter went to the phone, taking the 30.06 with him, leaving Mrs. Dunning standing there, staring at the empty doorway.

The voice at the other end of the phone was Mabel Donahue's.

"After you left here, Tim dropped by and I've been thinking about it ever since. I really don't want to bother you again with more of my concerns ... especially about Tim, whom you seem to dislike ..."

"Please go on," Peter said.

"Well, he's been very agitated, you know, nervous and twitchy. He's always been a hyper boy but never like this. But the point is, he had nothing to say. I mean he talked, of course. Can you imagine Tim not talking? But there was nothing to it. It's as though he was chattering away simply because he wanted to stay with me. Finally I asked him to stay with

me. I think he's asleep at last. I do think you should come down and talk to him, later this afternoon or perhaps in the morning."

"Do you think he has something to tell me?"

She hesitated. "I think he knows something, perhaps a great deal. But he's afraid ... terrified. Am I over-dramatizing as I apparently did earlier today?"

"No," Peter said. "And thanks. Keep him quiet until morning. I'll be there." He hung up.

Charlie had come into the larger room. He was holding up a small syringe.

"Do you know where I found it?" Charlie asked in disgust, and answered Peter's stare. "In a fine old Bible. He'd cut a cube out of the pages. It's funny. I knew when I saw the Bible that it must be there. That boy would never keep a Bible around just to read it.