

Chapter 16

Peter and Charlie had returned to the cabin. Charlie looked out the window at the drizzling rain. “It had to be Ed Dunning.”

“Please, Charlie.”

“It had to be. I admit I thought it was Bartlett but I see how stupid he would have to be to do it that way. And he’s not that stupid.”

“No.”

“But Helen and Ed figured how to do it so as to point the finger at Bartlett. Ed was in deep trouble with his mortgage. He had to get off the hook, and teaming up with Helen, who was not too hard to team up with—that was the way to go. There’d be a lot more in it for Ed than just freeing up his property. Now we’ve got the hard evidence. The 30.06 casing will match to that rifle. If they do match, you’ve got him.”

“The casing could have been placed there.”

“Come on... give us a break. Why do you always want to complicate things?”

“I’m not complicating things, Charlie. Someone else is. One problem with your theory is that you’re assuming now that it’s Ed who’s stupid. Notice how we’ve been thrown off the possibility of Bartlett by finding the 30.06 casing. If Bartlett were really smart, he’d have placed that casing there himself, to make it look like Ed fired the shot.”

“And that Ed had set it up with the 30.30 to incriminate him. That’s a thought. You’re telling me Bartlett’s back on the suspect list?”

“Everybody’s on the suspect list.”

“Including me?” Charlie said with a gigantic yawn.

“Sure, you had the motivation. You’re tired of city investigations and wanted some country air by a nice lake. So you murdered Jackson Curtis knowing I’d bring you in on the case.”

“You must admit I’m one smart cookie. Who’d ever figure sweet old Charlie could do such a thing?”

“Only me, but don’t worry. I won’t arrest you just yet.”

Someone hammered on the cabin door. Charlie opened it to let in Ed Dunning, who stumbled on entering.

“There’s something important I’ve got to tell you. Real important.” He looked terrible, with dark grooves under his eyes.

Peter gestured toward a chair, and propped himself up against the headrest of the bed.

“Well?”

Dunning sat down in a half-crouch.

“I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about it,” he said in a muffled voice. “It’s Tim I’m worried about.”

“That’s news alright.”

“You think I’m a no-good father, but just maybe you need to hear my side of it about how Fern turned away from me. I thought she wanted to settle down like I did and make the lodge into a paying proposition. But it wasn’t long after we came up that I found out she wasn’t what I thought she was.”

Dunning looked over at Charlie who had emitted a small snort.

“Fern seemed to be closing off from me, turning away. Then I found out where she was turning. To the one person on the lake who lived here year-round and took to visiting regular, sure, Blake Moran.”

He heaved his thick shoulders back and then let them fall forward again.

“Don’t ask me how he did it but he soon had her eating out of his hand. Maybe I didn’t handle it right. I got mad, not with him but with Fern. We had one row after another. We’d’ve split up except for the lodge. I’d put everything I had into it and I wasn’t going to let it go, and Fern felt the same way. What else did she have? Then Jackson Curtis came on the scene. He seemed more like an old boy scout than a big businessman, always hiking and fishing and playing around with maps and compasses. In those days he liked to sometimes hunt up there on the plateau, until that business with

young Vincent and the she-bear. After that, Curtis didn't want to go up there. He just stayed at the lake and fished."

"By this time you weren't seeing anything of Moran?"

"No more than I had to. Fern and I had agreed to stay together on a live and let-live basis, which Fern took to mean she could go and visit Moran whenever she felt like it. Sometimes she'd stay away for two or three days while guess who looked after the lodge. That really burned me, but what could I do? I wasn't about to let the lodge go down the tube because of Fern. No way."

"Besides the lodge was yours, not hers."

"In name only. For one thing, we had a contract that nailed down the 50/50 partnership between man and wife. But 50% of what? 50% of a bust if we didn't do something to lure the summer tourists, and that meant more boats and more accommodation. Sure I went to Jackson Curtis for backing. He was loaded and he wanted Loon Lake Lodge to stay open. I knew that much. How was I supposed to know the rest of it?"

The door was still partly open. The rain had stopped and the gray light lay limply on the trees outside. Dunning got up and closed the door, then returned heavily to his chair.

"What was the rest of it?" Peter asked. He could hear the loon far down the lake. It was calling for its mate.

"I knew that Curtis and Moran had formed this company..."

"Star Rise Holdings."

“That’s right,” Dunning looked at him with faint surprise. “It was to buy lake property. According to Fern, Moran came up with the idea and made himself the working partner. Curtis was the power, of course. Anyway, Fern wanted to be part of it. She said they’d give us one-third partnership in return for some pieces of lake property we owned. I’d already signed a mortgage for the lodge property itself with the old fox, something Fern knew nothing about, but I had no choice but to go along. So that’s how it went. In a matter of a few years all the lake property belonged to Star Rise Holdings, except for that piece of Mabel Donahue’s.”

“What about the land south of the lake, up on the plateau?”

Dunning peered darkly across at Peter.

“That was Indian land. It’s what Curtis and Moran were trying to get hold of these last couple of years. After the big fire, Curtis, working through Moran of course, offered pin money for a 23-year renewable lease. Curtis figured the band was so hard up and scattered, with most of them living over Cache Creek way, they’d accept whatever he offered, especially now that the land was worthless. The offer was made to old Vincent because he was supposed to be hereditary chief of what we used to call the Shuswap Nation. But Moran told him that if he didn’t sign his agreement, the deal would go through anyway, that Curtis would just make the offer to the band council, which is mostly those Cache Creek Indians. Their approval was all he needed according to federal law. Curtis was after the chief’s signature only so as to speed up the process. I don’t know why, but old Vincent is a

big man among the Indians, and not just the Shuswap. Anyway, Vincent shook his head and so they turned the deal down.”

“When was this offer made?”

“In the late summer after the fire. I guess it was August.”

“Go on.”

“I’m trying to tell you what this Star Rise was after. They were after all the land around this lake, and they’d stop at nothing to get it. I didn’t know why it was so important. I thought Curtis was just plain land-hungry. I didn’t have a clue about his real plan until Tim led me to it.”

“Tim led you to it?” Charlie asked skeptically.

“What set me off was the goddamn dope he was using. First there was marijuana and coke, which a lot of kids play around with, but then he got into heroin. And that had to be Helen’s doing.”

Dunning studied his big hands, gloomily.

“I didn’t know what to do. I gave him the flat of my hand a few times to bring him to his senses, but it didn’t do any good. Nothing did any good. And then I found out he was visiting Moran on a regular basis. That really got to me.”

Dunning looked across at Peter, and scowled.

“One time, not just Fern, but Tim, stayed away overnight. So the next morning I went down to Moran’s place. They didn’t hear me coming because I parked the truck out on the road and walked in.” He shifted uncomfortably. “They were all here except for Tim and Pat. It was some kind

of meeting; I could see that. Moran was sitting behind a table in the middle of the room. Bartlett, Helen and Fern were on the big sofa, and Curtis was sitting in a chair on the far side with his arms folded. Nobody seemed surprised to see me. They just stared at me...”

“We were expecting you to come along sooner or later,’ says Curtis”

“Where’s Tim?’ I ask him.”

“Never mind about Tim,’ Curtis answers, ‘Tim’s alright. What I want you to start thinking about is yourself, not Tim, and just how you’re going to fit into our little group.’”

“You mean this Star Rise Company?’ I ask him.”

“Star Rise is part of it,’ he answers. ‘Do you want to hear the rest?’”

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t want to hear anything about it, but Curtis had me cornered and he knew it. So I told him to go ahead.”

Dunning felt along the edge of the chair, then balled his hands together in his lap.

“What Curtis proposed to do was set up Loon Lake as the center for a brainchild of his which he called the Order of the Rising Star. Don’t ask me where he got that kooky name but it wasn’t half as kooky as the idea behind it. He said the Rising Star was America, that America had been pushed around for long enough, not just by the outside world but also by the leftists running the President. He said that he, along with a lot of other businessmen like himself, were about to change all that. He said the key was to get support from young people, so this new Order would bring

groups up here and prepare them to set things right when the time came. Those were his words: 'set things right.' He thought Loon Lake was the ideal training center for these groups: lots of space and no FBI prowling around and asking dumb questions. The space would be needed so these young people could be trained as paramilitaries—trained to shoot straight. But the main thing was they'd learn to obey orders, and you can guess who'd be giving the orders. Oh yeah, the man was dead serious."

"So what did you do?" Charlie asked.

Dunning gave a shrug. "What could I do? I had to pretend to go along. Just to get out of there I had to pledge an oath of secrecy, and I knew they meant it. Otherwise I'd be floating face down. Kooky as it sounds, they weren't fooling."

"What about Tim?" Peter asked.

"They told me he was in a side room asleep. That meant doped to the eyeballs. I carried him out to the truck and took him home."

"Was he a member of the Order?"

"Tim? As far as Curtis was concerned, Tim was just a nuisance. And that was another thing they held over me. Curtis said they wouldn't be responsible for Tim if I goofed on my pledge and didn't cooperate. They had me cornered in more ways than one and there was nothing I could do about it."

"And Pat. Where was she?"

“She was back at the lodge. I don’t know what she knew about the Order, if anything, though Fern might have told her. Anyway, she wasn’t a member.”

Peter was silent for a moment. “What’s behind this story, Dunning? What are you trying to tell me?”

“I want you to know who killed Jackson Curtis.”

“Well, who did?”

“Blake Moran.”

“Yesterday you thought it was Jim Bartlett and before that John Vincent.”

“I’m trying to tell you why I lied.”

“You mean your oath of secrecy.”

“That’s right. They meant it.”

“Yet you’re telling me now.”

“I have to. Otherwise, I’m being set up for a murder charge. I know that. If you arrest Moran, I’m safe for long enough to get out of this country.”

“Why would Blake Moran kill his own leader?”

“Because he found out that Curtis was going to dump him. You see, Blake’s a guy who comes from the bottom of the pack. No money, no connections, just a big idea of himself. Along comes Jackson Curtis, a multimillionaire with lots of connections. So here’s Moran’s big chance. All he has to do is sell himself to Curtis. He did that when he agreed to set fire

to the forest. Oh yes, Curtis loved that. I guess he thought that Moran would stop at nothing and do what he was told as long as there was a payout. But Curtis was no fool either. He knew that Moran was lowlife and would be more of a liability than an asset in the long run. Moran had already done his main job of buying up the Loon Lake property. There were just two pieces left: the Indian land and Mabel Donahue's place. Curtis could do the rest without Moran. His only mistake was that Moran got wind of it, probably through Helen. All Moran had to do was finish off Curtis as Helen wanted him to do, and then watch all those grateful dollars fall into his lap."

Peter thought for a minute.

"Where did Bartlett come in?"

Dunning frowned. "I see him as the dark horse," he said slowly, "the coming man. He could afford to sit back and let the old guys do the ground work, then take over when the time was ripe."

"And Helen was working with him?"

"Helen was working for Helen. Nobody fooled Helen. That was one woman who had her head screwed on right. And she was a real threat to Bartlett—well, you saw what happened."

"This woman with her head screwed on right was an addict who got your son onto heroin." Dunning looked warily at Peter. "In fact, you did your damndest to get her on your side. You saw the way this deal between Curtis and Moran was headed, and you made yourself a buffer against Bartlett."

Helen saw your value, and as you said you had no choice. The lodge was going down the tube one way or another, so you placed your chips on a winning number, or so you hoped. You were desperate, and a desperate man will do anything.”

Dunning’s head had come up and he was staring defiantly at them.

“I didn’t murder Curtis,” he said quietly, “but I can prove that Blake Moran did.”

“Where is it? Give me your proof.”

“I can give you Helen Curtis’ sworn statement that Moran was the killer, and her confession that she was his accomplice.”

“You’ve got that? Come off it—she was half out of her mind—delirious.”

“I’m telling you the truth. When I took Helen to the hospital she said she was ready to tell the whole story.”

“To the police?”

“To the police.”

“You’ve got nothing on paper.”

“She’ll tell you to your face, and sign a statement as well.”

Then he spoke as though to himself.

“You’re going to believe me this time.”