

Chapter 18

Peter slammed on the brakes above the entrance to the lodge and looked down at the lake. It had begun to rain and clouds lay heavily along the mountain ridge to the south. Charlie, wearing a slicker, strode up to the car and thrust his meaty face into the right window.

“Glad you’re back. Mabel Donahue phoned about 5:20. Tim took off. She thinks he’s gone down to Moran’s place. Have you had anything to eat?”

“Get in Charlie. I grabbed a double hamburger in Clinton.”

Charlie climbed in, shaking the rain from his cape.

“She said we’d better drop by her place first. She has something to say.”

“Did you eat?”

“I made up a beef sandwich. The pounds are dropping away.”

They swerved onto the main road.

“Does the name Cy Cutler mean anything to you?” Peter asked.

“Cy Cutler. I don’t think so.”

“Moran is Cy Cutler, an escaped con from across the border. Helen says he kept a clean record over here. Then along came Curtis and he saw a way of using Curtis’ money to set up a narcotics operation, without Curtis’ knowledge, of course. It would be a link in the international ring, flying heroin to drop points across the border.”

“Seems like we’ve got a bad ‘un,” Charlie said cheerfully. “No wonder Mabel Donahue is worried.”

But Mabel Donahue was not around. Instead they found a note attached to her back door addressed to Inspector Gregory.

“I couldn’t wait any longer for fear of what might happen to Tim. He wouldn’t listen to me. See you at Moran’s place.”

Peter swore under his breath.

“What does that mean: ‘He wouldn’t listen to me?’” Charlie asked.

Peter swung the car hard, skidding onto the gravel on the road to Moran’s.

They parked beside Moran’s dirty yellow pick-up. On the other side was a grey Volkswagon van which they took to be Mabel Donahue’s.

No one answered Charlie’s heavy knock. He tried the door and they stepped inside. A musty chill hung in the dim interior. They went down the short hall from the kitchen to the front sitting room where the dust on the furniture lay undisturbed as though no one had lived there for months.

“By the looks of this house, he hasn’t got a jelly bean to his name,” declared Charlie.

“You never know, Charlie. Some of these guys live like kings and others like rats, but you can never be sure who has the money or the power.”

Peter looked out the smeared front window toward Moran’s shabby wharf. He opened the side porch door.

“I was wondering what happened to the dog.”

Tied to the porch railing, it lay on its side in a pool of blood. They turned it over and saw where the bullet had entered, shattering part of the skull.

“Poor dumb beast,” Charlie muttered savagely. “Why would he do a thing like that?”

“If he intended to disappear he might do that. He’s the kind.”

“He didn’t even have the decency to bury it.”

They went back into the front room and opened the door they hadn’t tried. It gave onto the one bedroom in the house. Except for a sleeping bag rolled up on the double bed beside a large bound suitcase, the room looked as un-lived in as the rest of the house.

“He’s leaving alright,” Charlie said. “Shall we open it?”

“Let’s find him first.”

An old 30:30 Winchester stood against the wall. Peter opened the breech and a live round popped out. He sniffed the breach.

“Blake didn’t shoot the dog with this,” Peter said, returning the gun to the wall. “Come on. Let’s check the barn.”

The trail at the back wound between scrub brush high enough to block their view. Following it they came to a pasture fringed by some neglected looking apple trees. The barn, too, looked unused and decrepit, but a well-worn path led to a side entrance. Peter did not bother knocking, but pushed the heavy door open and stepped inside. They stood still while their eyes adjusted to the half-light filtering through several small windows.

Then a voice said: “Here I am. You’ve found me.”

Blake Moran sat on the edge of a small table toward the other end of the room. On two chairs in front of the table were Mabel Donahue and Tim Dunning, hands bound behind their backs, strips of adhesive covering their mouths. Moran held a revolver to the side of Mabel Donahue’s head.

“Move forward where I can see you better and throw your shooters on the floor. I’d just love to blow a large hole through this old piece of mutton here. She’s been a real nuisance to me.”

They did as they were told, moving to the center of the room. There they slowly removed their 9 millimeters from their holsters and dropped them on the dirt floor.

“What are you going to do, Moran?” Peter demanded.

“In a minute I’m going to cut Tim loose and he’s going to crawl across that floor and pick up those tools you’ve dropped and bring them to me. Then he’s going to take those manacles you’ve got on your belt, Sarge, and

snap you guys together. It'll tickle my old sides to see two Mounties dancing a jig together till my flight comes in."

"Your flight?"

"A plane is coming to take me away to the land of the free. Won't that be nice? I've been in exile long enough. By the time they find you, I'll be gone for good."

"Another escape for Cy Cutler."

"So Lady Helen told you about me. I figured she might now that she's about as useful as a legless sow. Cy Cutler was my name in the good old days when I had the world by the tits. I changed it for the name of a man I once admired, who suddenly passed away."

"I can guess how," Charlie grunted.

"The world is a very violent place, Sargee. Haven't you heard the news? Once you accept it, you have a lot less trouble. A man does what he has to do and does it quick."

"For a man of action you've spent a lot of time sitting on your ass," said Peter.

"Sitting on my ass, was it? Oh, no, sir, I was more busy than your whole busybody police department put together."

"And now you've blown it, Cy. All your work gone down the tube."

"I prefer to be called Moran if you don't mind."

His eyes were slate like and he stared without emotion at Peter.

“If you mean the sudden passing away of Jackson Curtis, you are wrong, sir, though I wasn’t the trigger. Sure, I worked it out with the once beautiful Helen, a fine handcrafted ‘wet job’ as the Russian mafia likes to call a hit. And it would have worked. But then little fart-face here,” he languidly waved his gun at Tim, who shrank back, “phoned and told me you were going up to the hospital to see Helen and I knew she’d make out I was the shooter. Bartlett really screwed things when he shot up Helen’s lovely knees because then he had himself an alibi. You’d never believe he’d do that unless he didn’t know where the fucking gun was. So Bartlett’s off the hook and that leaves me dangling in your simple cop’s mind, though I didn’t do it. So right away I got on the phone with an old pal and told him to come and get me in return for a load of number one heroin. They should be here anytime.”

“How did you get Tim down here?”

“Y’see I had him on a short lead and told him he’d better get here before I left for the blue yonder and I’d give him a supply of the stuff he loves more than his little pink life. Of course, that wasn’t strictly true. I decided I’d take him on the plane ride with me, I’m that fond of the little bugger.”

He leered at Tim, whose face was a mask of horror.

“So you’re telling us that Helen Curtis did it herself,” Charlie said with some incredulity.

“Helen?” Moran laughed thinly. “No way, Sargee. She did what I told her.” He tapped the barrel of his gun. “Did you know that addicts hate to die, Sargee? Oh yes. It’s a strange thing but life is beautiful for a junkie.”

“Beautiful,” Charlie said grimly, “as the cinders of hell! Helen Curtis wouldn’t take orders from a down-and-outer like you—gun or no gun. She didn’t need you. She was top dog and you needed her to make a mark with her husband.”

“Top dog on a heap of shit, that’s what she was. I knew all about Helen. Helen Alban, yes, and before that Jenny Den, junkie and hooker, trying to ring a big man.” He snorted. “Curtis didn’t know and she couldn’t afford to let him know. That’s where I had her. Just the same, she knew I’d gun her down if she doubled me.”

“You’re a great man with a gun,” Charlie said. “Like your friend, Bartlett.”

“Bartlett’s no friend of mine but he didn’t do your crime. No sir. He had too much to lose. But I’ve got an idea who did it.”

There was a moment of silence, Charlie shifting his weight as though getting ready to leap with all 230 pounds of heaped muscle.

“It wasn’t one of us,” Moran continued calmly. “I mean it wasn’t professional. It...”

He stopped, listening. They all heard it then--the faint hum of the approaching aircraft.

Still holding his gun to Mabel Donahue's head, he spoke in a tired voice: "Now, Tim, I'm going to undo you and you're going to move fast *in a crawl* across that floor and bring those guns back to your Uncle Blake. You make the wrong move and I'll put a bullet where your backbone should have been."

Carefully, he took a spring knife out of his jacket pocket with his right hand, flicked the blade out and, leaning forward, cut the bonds holding Tim's wrists. Then he straightened and pushed hard with his foot, toppling Tim's chair. "Move!" Tim scurried on hands and knees across the floor, grabbed the two pistols and swiftly returned, placing them on the table. He crouched at Moran's feet.

Moran moved his gun from Mabel Donahue's head and pointed it at Tim. He leaned forward and ripped the tape from the boy's mouth.

"No ... please don't ..." Tim whined ... "Please, don't, Blake!"

They heard the approaching plane cut its speed for landing.

"Now tell these officers how you did it to Jackson Curtis. Quick!"

"Blake ... don't shoot me ..." the boy whimpered.

"She turned to you when everybody else backed out, huh? Said you had to do it or else she'd tell me to cut you off for good, huh?"

The boy's eyes were fixed hypnotically on the barrel of the weapon pointed at his face. His mouth worked soundlessly. Sweat shone on his forehead.

Then Blake Moran looked up.

“What’s that?” He asked with surprise.

The surprised look deepened sharply in the roar that filled the room.

Moran toppled back lifeless over the table.

John Vincent, holding a 30:30, stood in the open doorway.