

Chapter 19

Two of the RCMP Emergency Response Team carried Blake Moran's body bag over to the 'copter and loaded it on board. The third, Tom Perkins, wearing a trim mustache, stood beside Peter Gregory on Moran's dock. The Cessna tied there had landed minutes before the arrival of the police helicopter. A small, balding man in his late thirties wearing a leather jacket sat manacled in the 'copter, looking bored. He was Curly Vieta, pilot of the plane and well known to the police in the U.S. and Canada for drug violations. He had spent most of his life in jail and was now going to spend some more.

"Your timing was perfect," Perkins said. "We got your call around 6:00. You said be here by 7:00, and we landed right on the tail of the Cessna. Very clean."

"By guess and by God," Peter said.

"Speaking of God," said Perkins, "it's too bad this Moran had to part this world. He might have been helpful."

"I doubt it. He was an old-timer in the trade. Old-timers don't talk."

“I guess you’re right.” Perkins nodded at the Cessna. “That’s an old-timer, too. The crooks are going cheap these days, or maybe this Moran was way down on their list. Anyway, we found a large supply of heroin in that bag of his. Anything to report back?”

“Tell them it’s a matter of hours.”

“Sure. Say goodbye to big Charlie for me.”

“See you.”

By the time Peter had reached the ranch house where the others were gathered, a windy roar from beyond the screen of the bushes told him that the ’copter was lifting off with the manacled Curly Vieta. They would send someone to fly out the Cessna in the morning.

Inside, Mabel Donahue, sitting on Moran’s ancient sofa, had her arm around Tim’s shoulder. His head was in his hands, and his body trembled spasmodically.

Charlie was talking to John Vincent on the porch. Peter went out to them.

“You just flung open the barn door and bang! Moran was dead and I was ten years older.” Charlie was saying. “I can still feel the wind from that bullet. A 30:30, too. Was it your gun?”

“No. I looked in the ranch house but nobody seemed to be around. I found the gun in the bedroom leaning against the wall.”

Charlie gave Peter a significant look. “John saved that boy’s life at the risk of his own, and ours too, yet by the look of him you’d think he’d swatted a fly.”

“But you didn’t come down here to save Tim, did you, John?” Peter asked.

John looked out at the lake. It had begun to rain again, and the darkness was deepening in the trees.

“I saw Mabel’s van outside.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Why did you come down here?”

“I came to see Moran.”

“What about?”

“About my father,” he said slowly. “He is dying.”

Yesterday afternoon Peter was standing on Mabel Donahue’s porch hearing her say Paul Vincent had already died.

“What would your father’s death have to do with Blake Moran?”

John continued to look out at the lake, not answering at first.

“I sat up all night with my father because I didn’t want him dead. I kept talking to him. I kept telling him everything would be better. I’d build him a new place over by Long Creek—he liked that country. We’d start again, I said. We’d have a new life in the green timber fishing the lakes. He never answered me.”

He turned to Peter, his eyes somber.

“Blake Moran killed my old man when he set fire to our country.”

“Moran was doing what Curtis told him to do.”

“I didn’t mean to shoot him. I came down to tell him to leave this country, get out for good. Then I saw Mabel’s van. My father knew her from the old days before I was born. He always said there is one white person you can trust, Mabel Donahue. When I saw her van and she wasn’t around, I was afraid of what Moran would do to her because Moran was after her land and she wouldn’t sell it. So I took the gun from his room and went over to the barn. I went up to it and I heard a voice—Moran’s voice. He was threatening someone. I just opened the door a crack and saw it all, saw Mabel tied there and Moran about to shoot the kid. I let fly.”

Charlie nodded with a sigh. “You let fly alright.”

“Arrest me if you have to, but that’s the truth.”

“One thing about you, John,” said Peter, “is that you know how to tell some of the truth and make it sound like all of it. You’re not just a country boy, John, as you make out. You’re street savvy.”

“So?”

“So why did you go to the city so much?”

“I was looking for my sister who ran away.”

“Did you find her?”

“No.”

“If your sister was in Vancouver you’d’ve found her because she’d be between Hastings and Powell streets and she’d have friends, people who knew her. You wouldn’t have to look long. But the truth is you didn’t bother

to look because it wouldn't do any good even if you found her. She's a city girl now. She wouldn't return to life in the bush. Don't tell me you went to Vancouver to find your sister."

John's eyes narrowed, burning into Peter's.

"The truth is that your father wasn't just any old blind man, a broken down shaman with no believers. Oh no. He was much more than that-- someone very important to you and not just as your father. He was a leader, a big man among his people. And you went to Vancouver, and other places to carry messages and keep in contact with his people. Sometimes he went with you. Am I right?"

"Keep talking."

"Along comes Blake Moran. He's wandering around your land up there, adding up its value. He meets with you and your father. He wants to buy a lease on your land and you tell him this is Indian land and not for sale. But that's not the end of it. After him comes Helen Curtis, and you've never met a woman like that before. You follow her around like a puppy, and while she's playing with you Blake Moran is visiting your Dad. Moran soon finds out that old Paul Vincent is no ordinary man; he's a chief. All Moran wants is to find a way to get hold of the Indian land, but your father won't even listen."

"He couldn't do it. It wasn't his to give."

"Moran doesn't know that. He's only a white man, but he's heard about the power of hereditary chiefs. He believes that your father has the

power and influence to persuade the band members to agree to such a sale, actually a long-term lease. But he gets nothing but silence from your father, so he thinks the old man is holding out for more.”

“That was why I came down here the first time. I wanted Moran to leave my father alone.”

“When was this?”

“Two summers ago.”

“And what did Moran say?”

John looked away. “Helen was here, and that kid, Tim. Helen ...” he stopped.

“We went for a walk. She took me back to that barn ...”

“She never brought up the subject of the land?”

“No. What she wanted came later.”

“You mean the plan to kill Curtis.”

“Yes.”

“Did Moran visit your father after that?”

“Only once.” The rain was driving down hard out on the lake. “After the fire.” His voice sounded strange, hollow. “It was dry that spring. Hot and dry. I never saw it like that before. The rain came in June and July, after the fire. I came home one day and found Moran talking to my father, who was holding a piece of paper. Moran said the land was worthless now, but he could still offer some money for it. He just needed my father’s signature. I made him leave. I followed him outside and he told me I was crazy trying to

live on a burnt-out piece of land. He said I could live at his place with my father. He'd turn over the barn to us, and Helen could visit me there anytime. He said I could work for their company and would be paid well. All Moran wanted was a piece of paper signed by my father leasing the land to the company ..."

"Star Rise Holdings."

"I told him the signature would be worthless. He said that was for him to decide. He said I'd better think about it if I knew what was good for me and my father. He left then. I never saw him again until ... now."

"And you believed that he set fire to the land?"

"Yes. My father told me about it. He told me that he saw Moran pouring kerosene along the edge of the meadow above the lake. He saw Moran set it on fire."

"I thought he was blind."

"The blindness came after the fire. Anyway he saw it in a vision. He could see things that were happening miles away, and sometimes before they happened."

Charlie snorted, "You believe in these visions?"

"My father's, yes."

"He was a shaman, Charlie. Shamans are supposed to have visions."

"Oh," Charlie said, looking unconvinced.

"I think we'd better get back up the road to the lodge. I'd like you to come along with us, John. You can drive with Sergeant Ross."

“Hang on,” said Charlie. “Isn’t this maybe the moment to ask Tim the question Moran was asking when our friend here let fly. I’d really like to hear the lad’s answer.”

“Do you really believe for one moment that that poor little adolescent in there could have committed a cold-blooded murder? Tut, tut, Charlie.”

“Tut, tut yourself,” said Charlie with dignity.