

Chapter 20

Peter drove to where the road crested perhaps a hundred feet above the lake. The rain fell steadily. He pulled over and shut off the engine. Charlie, John, and Mabel had taken her van and would meet them at the lodge. Tim, his face long and pale, sat hunched against the door.

“Moran wanted you to confess to the murder of Jackson Curtis,” Peter said. “But with a gun at your head, the confession would be worthless. You can forget about it.”

“What do you want from me?” Tim’s voice was thin and strained.

“Only the truth.”

Tim stared at the drops of rain splattering on the windshield. Suddenly he turned to Peter.

“Do you know what you’re messing with?”

“Maybe more than you realize.”

“The fact is you don’t. You’re telling me to be up front when you don’t even know what you’re dealing with.”

“Tell me.”

“Why should I? You won’t believe me. And then I’m alone in the grinder.”

“Try me. I might understand.”

“I don’t understand it all myself,” Tim said plaintively. “Helen told me a little, not much. The rest I picked up on my own. I used to think the more you know the better off you are. What a pile of crap.”

He was silent for a moment, his thin fingers twitching at the door handle.

“Everybody makes out that Curtis was just an outdoor crank with a treasure chest. Let me tell you he was a whole lot more than that. He was big—maybe too big. He was going to do things that would make some heads of government lose their sleep. I mean everybody else was a midget compared to this man. He just laughed at them. I used to take him fishing because I knew all the best places and he told me things that really opened up my eyes. I mean he was part of the real world and knew how to make it tick. Then Helen asked me to take her fishing and I hope you don’t think I refused. She was real friendly, even shared a joint or two with me. She knew everything and everybody and she was the wife of the big man. Anyway, one day I went around to her cabin to take her for a boat ride because the others were off hunting. She didn’t come to the door but called for me to come in. Well, when I went in my old blues just about popped their sockets. She was in a bra and panties and some filmy covering you’d have to hold against a light to see. She said we’re going to have a special hit for the

day and told me to roll up my sleeve. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't care as long as the goddess did it to me. I was sick as hell afterwards, but we began cranking heroin on a regular basis. She had me for sure, then."

Tim looked out at the drenched, cowering trees.

"Nothing was the same after that. Curtis seemed to know something was up, because he cooled off towards me. He went fishing on his own or with that muck-face, Bartlett, and I was cut out. But if I didn't have the king I had the queen, and one way or another I was going to cash in. I don't feel well."

"You don't look well."

"I need to get away from this place real bad. I need to get away now."

"You need to turn your life around."

"I know," the boy groaned. "But I can't do it here. I need to get right away. I need some help."

"And I need your story, fast. So far I haven't heard anything. You said I didn't know what I was messing with. Well, tell me."

Tim looked sideways at him. "What good will it do you? So you arrest some asshole, like you nearly arrested straight- arrow."

"Who?"

"The Indian, John Vincent, who made the mistake of saving my life. Now if you'd gone for Bartlett, that would be closer to my heart. But it still wouldn't solve anything. Uh, uh."

"If he did do it, it would solve who killed Curtis."

“Who killed Curtis... who killed Curtis... what difference? It won't stop what Curtis was all about. The people behind Curtis won't stop, or the people behind them.”

“Are you talking about the Order of the Rising Star?”

“The Order of the Rising Star was a kinky name thought up by Blake. He was somewhat weird after a lifetime on drugs. But the crazy title appealed to Curtis' big ego. Maybe he read too many of those cowboy novels every night. I mean, what else could he do? Anyhow, Blake knew how to get to Curtis, but he never really fooled him, know what I mean? Nobody conned Jackson Curtis. Nobody. Still he liked that title. Do you want to know why he liked that title?”

“Tell me.”

“First, because it stood for America. America is the rising star in the world. But there's another thing Curtis explained to me. The American flag has fifty stars on it, but on his flag there'd be only one, standing for America. He said the way it is now America is weak because it's divided into all those States of the Union and through the Senate they run Congress. And Congress puts a block in front of the President just about every time he even wants to piss. So Curtis would get rid of Congress. There'd be one government of topnotch businessmen and they'd run it like a big business. Like one big company, see? He said the U.S. would be the first country to be run this way, but then the one big company would set up branch plants all over the world. And soon each of these branch plants would get power the

same way as in the U.S., and they'd all be owned by the Daddy company. Guess who ends up running the entire world?"

"Probably a brewery."

"You're laughing. Try again."

"The Order of the Rising Star."

"Right on, except the real organization wasn't called this. Nobody knows what it's called, but it's nothing Blake could get near. If Blake thought he was using Curtis, his brain had really gone soft. Curtis was trouble, and I mean real *trouble*. Helen knew something about it, but didn't take it seriously."

"Why should she take it seriously?" Peter said. "To her Curtis was a rich crank dreaming of political power. There are dozens of these radical groups around. Besides, with Blake she was onto something more in her line."

"I'm not hearing you."

"I mean Blake's drug scheme."

"What drug scheme?"

"Blake wanted to set up a drug transfer at Loon Lake. Heroin brought in from Asia would be delivered to the States by small aircraft."

"Blake was a user alright, but I didn't know he was a dealer."

"He wasn't, at least not for many years. But with Curtis he saw his chance to set up again under a cover and make a killing."

“So that’s why the flying machine. They couldn’t afford to leave him hanging around a murder scene with his mouth open.”

“Not with his contacts.”

“I always wondered why he scared the underwear right off me. I’m sure Curtis didn’t know about Blake’s deal. And Helen never mentioned it.”

“Why should she? It was between herself and Blake. If she played her part by bringing him onside with this Rising Star idea, she was going to get a slice of the drug profits, and that’s where the real money would flow. Knowing what Curtis was like, she couldn’t be sure of getting a bean out of his estate. With Blake she could count the cash coming in in a business she knew and loved.”

“That lady was no cookie cutter,” Tim said with faint admiration.

“They were taking Curtis for all he was worth, Tim. They’d bought up the lake property with his money and now they were going to cut him out and have the setup they wanted.”

“Uh-uh, I don’t believe it. I mean I don’t believe they’d get away with it. Listen. Curtis was big, and this organization of his was monstrous. Never mind the drug operation. The moment Curtis heard about it, and he would—phhht.” He made a cutting motion across his throat, and then shuddered involuntarily.

“Or maybe your rising star was a falling comet,” Peter said. “If this organization of Curtis’ was so important why would he waste his time telling a pink-eared adolescent all about it?”

“He didn’t tell me all about it. Some I learned from Helen, but the biggest part I got on my own.” He put his head back on the seat and closed his eyes. “One night after dinner I went to my little wormhole next to Bartlett’s room to see what was going on. He was there alright, but Helen wasn’t. Guess who was there? This time his visitor was none other than old man Curtis. They were talking about the organization. They didn’t call it the Rising Star or any other name. They just used the word ‘groups’ a lot. They were talking about some new group that was applying to join which claimed over 400 members. Bartlett said he’d gone over to Portland to talk to them and they were all set up to go with the financing. He threw out a few names I never heard of and said one of these people had contributed half a million dollars. Curtis said the new group with its 400 members should put the organization over the 300,000 mark, but it wasn’t enough, he said, to get them off first base. His target, he said, was a million members. One thing he said pleased him was that the 342 groups they had in the bag were pretty well spread across the country and every one of them was a leadership group. Bartlett asked him if he saw Loon Lake as all that important in the scheme of things, and Curtis said it sure as hell was. He said they had to have a real—it sounded like praetorian guard, whatever he meant by that. Then he said ‘I need about a thousand trained killers.’ ”

“The Praetorian Guard,” Peter said, “was the name the Roman emperors used for the elite fighting unit formed to obey the emperor only.”

“That’s just what Curtis would go for, except that I don’t think he ran the organization. As I said, it was bigger than him, more like a Company.”

“But no doubt Curtis was aiming for the top,” Peter added, “and that could’ve been why the Loon Lake operation was so important to him. Here he could train a group of young believers who would answer only to him. What was Bartlett’s response?”

“Sort of—you know Baby Bartlett—he’s either swarming hot or ice cold. Anyway, he didn’t say much, just let the old man rattle on. But Curtis finally got to him. Right out of the blue he said, ‘I want you to leave Helen alone. She’s making visits to your room, and I can’t have word getting around, can I?’ Well, there was a deathly hush after that one. Then the old man froze my ass with his next shot. He said ‘I think Tim already knows about Helen and you. I only hope he knows enough to keep his mouth shut.’ This with his eyes glued to my sweating pores. Then Bartlett speaks up, ‘Maybe I’d better have a heart to heart talk with the little bastard,’ he says, sounding like ice scraping on ice. ‘You leave Tim alone,’ says old Curtis, ‘I’ll talk to him myself. Just keep one thing in mind, Jim. Helen is my property and if you step too far out of line, you’re finished, and you won’t even know it happened to you. Understand?’ I’m telling you the old guy sounded like nuclear meltdown—pure destruction. But Bartlett just said: ‘I hear you.’”

Tim was silent.

“And that was all?”

“Wasn’t that enough? Listen, that morning when I saw Curtis lying there on the dock I thought, well, you got to him first, Bartlett. Curtis made a big mistake about his old crony’s son. The difference was that Bartlett was vicious even for a Green Beret. When Curtis threatened him he signed his own death warrant.”

“So that’s why you ran off to Mabel Donahue’s. You figured Bartlett was going to come after you because you knew too much.”

“I was running for my life and Mabel was the only person I could trust within a hundred miles. I thought I’d go there and borrow her van, then drive to Vancouver.”

“You could have taken your Dad’s truck.”

“Uh uh. He won’t let me have the keys. I wrecked it once.”

“Instead, when you got to Mabel’s, you stayed.”

“I was out on my feet. All she did was lay me down and put a blanket on me. First sleep I’d had in three days.”

“Then you woke up about 5:00 in the afternoon and went to Moran’s. Why Moran’s? You couldn’t trust him, no matter what he told you on the phone.”

“I only slept maybe four hours tired as I was, and woke up sweating and with the shakes. I needed a hit real bad. And the only place I could get it was Moran’s. Anyway, I fought off the craving for a couple of hours, but it only got worse. I just had to go. I figured I could make a bargain with the old pop.”

“Such as?”

“I figured Moran might think you were after him. So I’d just say I’d do something to throw the great Inspector Gregory off the track.”

“Like what?”

“Like pointing the finger at someone else. Maybe give the Inspector a clue.”

“Pointing at whom?”

“How about my old man?” Tim snickered faintly.

Peter stared hard at the pale youngster.

“You really don’t care for your dad.”

“Don’t you understand anything? I just had to get a fix.”

“And what was Moran’s response?”

“He gave me what I wanted. Now I wonder why he bothered when he was about to spring free.”

“Probably to keep you quiet until the plane arrived. Then he’d make sure you were quiet for good.”

Tim stared at him. “That finally got to me.”

“Because he might come back after this thing had blown over. In the meantime you’d talk. Somewhere to someone you’d talk. There’s nothing a pro like Moran hates more than a talker. He probably wouldn’t kill you at the lake. He’d take you with him and dump you out over Idaho at 10,000 feet.”

Tim looked away with a shudder.

“You have a way with words,” Tim said wanly. “He’d’ve pulled that trigger in the barn, wouldn’t he?”

“If you hadn’t confessed? I don’t think so. Too messy with Mounties looking on. No. He’d’ve tied us all up and left, taking you with him. What interests me is why he even tried to get you to confess. He’d know such a confession wouldn’t mean anything, unless it was genuine.”

“What?”

“Oh yes, if it was the truth, that would signify.”

Tim’s head jerked towards Peter. “I don’t get it.”

“Once you confessed, he’d make you explain how it was done, wouldn’t he? All of it. The details. The sequence. Places and times. The how. Then if it all fitted together and made sense, we’d have you, wouldn’t we?”

Tim seemed riveted in his seat. “What are you getting at?” he said weakly.

“I’m suggesting that Moran really believed you were the killer. Was he right?”

“No. God no! Hey!”

“You went down to Moran’s to get a fix, yes, but also to get a lift with him out of this hole. That was part of your reward for killing Jackson Curtis, according to the plan worked out with your old partner, Blake Moran.”

“I tell you, that’s not it!” Tim was fumbling his words. “You don’t know...” he added feebly. “Oh God... you’ve got to believe me...”

“Then it’s time for you to give me something to believe. All of it.”

Tim's eyes were bloodshot and tear-filled. With the back of his hand he wiped at them. Then he spoke rapidly, sometimes incoherently, so that Peter had to make him repeat what he had said.