

## Chapter 21

Charlie Ross had collected everyone in the lodge sitting room, which smelled heavily of old, damp furniture. On the floor the grizzly bear lay deflated in his skin, his tattered arms outstretched, his glazed eyes staring upward, hopelessly.

Peter stood outside on the sundeck looking down at the lake. The rain had stopped, leaving a cold mist in the air. From downlake he heard the loon call out. At this distance, the cry sounded thin and wan like a lover calling out of the unfulfilled longing of his heart.

Charlie joined Peter at the edge of the sundeck that was gummy from the rain.

“I want you to stay back where you can see everyone, Charlie. You might have to move fast. Is Tim alright now?”

“Alright I guess. Looks like the ghost of Christmas past.”

“Let’s go in.”

Peter sat down in the lumpy chair nearest the yawning fireplace. In the corner an ancient clock ticked away. He had switched on all the lights

he could find, yet without quite dispelling the clinging gloom. On the sofa to his right Pat sat between Bartlett and Fern, and to his left, on another ancient sofa, was Ed Dunning, then Tim, and Mabel Donahue. John Vincent sat alone in a chair between the two sofas.

Peter stared at the tape recorder on the coffee table in front of him.

“In a moment I’ll be recording my comments summarizing this case. I must ask you not to interrupt me. There’ll be time for that later.”

He switched on the recorder and, after announcing the time, place, and persons present, he continued:

“The bullet through the head that killed Jackson Curtis on the morning of May 18<sup>th</sup> about 7:45 a.m. while Curtis was trolling for trout was fired by someone hiding in ambush on the shore. Now I’m not going to deal with the string of suspects we’ve had under investigation. It’s enough to say at this point that the testimony of Tim Dunning and Helen Curtis has established that Helen Curtis was involved in a plot to murder her husband, and that Blake Moran, owner of the ranch at the east end of the lake, was the real initiator of the plot that was designed to implicate Jim Bartlett, Curtis’ junior partner. Helen was to propose the murder of Curtis to Bartlett who, as it turned out, was reluctant to carry it through. However, he did not refuse outright. So, when Curtis was hit he rushed ashore to look for the 30.30 Winchester that had been previously hidden by him and Helen Curtis, for he realized that the gun carried his fingerprints. I’ll explain that in an

addendum. Anyway, he could not find the gun in the place where he had hidden it. All this had been worked out by Helen and Moran.”

“Believing that Helen had double-crossed him, Bartlett forced her to go with him to uncover the incriminating weapon. His plan, no doubt, was to get rid of it in his own way. But he lost control when Helen failed to find the rifle for him, and found himself in a net from which he felt he could escape only by telling us the facts, believing that they pointed to John Vincent.”

“Bartlett did not know until I started my investigation what it was that Tim Dunning had discovered from his perch in the hall washroom. Tim Dunning had found out about the murder plan, but he did not know that Moran was behind it. To him it seemed that the idea was Helen’s and that Bartlett was her partner in crime.”

“It turns out that neither Bartlett, nor Helen, nor Moran knew that another important clue had been left at the logical firing site; this was the 30.06 cartridge casing that seemed to implicate Ed Dunning in place of Bartlett.. Ed Dunning, according to his wife, Fern, and his stepdaughter, Pat, had taken his 30.06 with him when he went ostensibly to cut wood the morning of the murder. I checked this gun the same day and found that indeed it had been recently fired. But it seemed unlikely that Ed would leave such a clue as a cartridge case at the firing site or that he would then put his recently fired rifle back in his bedroom cupboard. There were other even

more conclusive reasons for writing off Ed Dunning as a suspect, reasons that I will come to shortly.”

“But if it wasn’t Ed Dunning himself, then who would be so anxious to incriminate him? Bartlett? But I’ve already said that the actual killing took Bartlett completely by surprise as the escapade with Helen makes clear, not to speak of the fact that he had no access to Dunning’s rifle.”

“That leaves those who did have access to Dunning’s rifle: Fern, Tim, and Pat. Fern had perhaps some motive to implicate her husband, if only so that she could get control of Loon Lake Lodge. But the Moran/Curtis association was already helping her in that direction. Certainly she had no motive for killing or being part of the killing of Jackson Curtis. Indeed, that would have wrecked the scheme that she was actively supporting—the scheme to make Loon Lake a training center for Curtis’ radical right wing military cadets. That idea appealed to her for in it she saw profit for the lodge. She would never otherwise have urged Ed to sell lakeshore property to the Order of the Rising Star’ Holding Company. On the contrary, she was using Blake to pin her own star on Jackson Curtis’ money and power. Even without knowing all this, Blake Moran and Helen being what they were would never have shared the murder plan with Fern, yet Fern would have needed to know about it in order to place the cartridge case where and when it was placed.”

“Then what about Tim Dunning? Perhaps it’s an understatement to say that Tim had no love for his father and out of sheer spite might have

placed the cartridge case where it was found. But if he disliked his father, he feared and hated Jim Bartlett far more and so would have had an even stronger motive to leave Bartlett in position as fall guy. But that assumes he knew the real purpose of the murder plan designed by Moran. In fact, he knew only about the plan ostensibly hatched between Helen and Bartlett, not the double-cross worked out between Helen and Moran. However, what Tim did know, according to his own testimony, is that the person who placed the 30.06 cartridge casing at the scene of the murder had to be his step-sister, Pat.”

A nervous tremor ran through the room. Everyone stared at Pat, who screwed her head around at an odd tilt, peering with hard, bright eyes at Peter. Fern’s hands leapt up as though to shield her, and dropped to her lap, lifeless.

“Pat hated two people, Helen Curtis and her step-father, Ed Dunning. She hated Helen for taking away the one love of her life, Kurt Koenig. But her feeling about her father was of a different order. Tim Dunning told me that when Pat was twelve years of age, her step-father raped her.”

Peter looked up at Ed Dunning who stared dimly, like someone underwater, at the wall opposite.

Fern nodded slowly. “It’s true. The beast raped my girl. I didn’t go to the police with it, but I made him sign a promise never to touch my girl again, never to go near her. And to leave me alone, too. From then on it was business only. God help me that I didn’t turn him in.”

There was only the sound of old rain dripping from the gutter onto the deck.

“We can understand Pat’s need for revenge,” Peter continued quietly. “She’d found out that Tim had graduated from hash to heroin, and that Helen was the source of supply. All she had to do was threaten disclosure in order to find out all Tim knew: about the meetings between Bartlett and Helen, and about the plan to murder Jackson Curtis. That plan involved incriminating Koenig or John Vincent, and it worked this way: as was their habit when fishing in the early morning, Jackson Curtis would drop Jim Bartlett ashore near Soames Creek to make breakfast. After Curtis had resumed trolling, Jim would go to the hollow log, take out the 30.30 which he and Helen had hidden there and assassinate Curtis when he was on the inside leg of his trolling loop. He would then return the gun to its hiding place from which it could easily be removed later for disposal, swim out to the drifting boat, and return home with the dead Curtis. He could say he had jumped overboard when Curtis was hit with a shot from the far south shore—a natural thing to do in the circumstances. Bartlett’s alibi, which he would only use if the police discarded the accident theory, would be the second shot that pierced the boat a few days before the fatal shooting. The police were supposed to assume that the same person fired the two shots, and since Bartlett was in the boat fired upon, he was not that person. This whole plan was Helen’s, not Bartlett’s, or rather it was Blake’s plan that

Helen presented as hers. And though Bartlett saw weaknesses in it, how would Tim know of Bartlett's private misgivings? Bartlett didn't say no."

"Pat wasted little time before exploiting her information. Within an hour of my arrival, she told me about the earlier shot to the boat because she wanted to remove any idea we might have that the death was an accident, and also because she wanted to swing suspicion away from Bartlett when we got to him. Naturally, I wondered why she gave me this information. Later, when she was very upset by Kurt Koenig's suicide, she accused Helen directly to me—but how could she know of Helen's complicity? And then, to make sure that her step-father remained our principal suspect, she stated that Ed took his gun with him the morning of the murder, and that he'd been carrying on with Helen, implying a conspiracy."

"This is how she set things up. Pat did not know the exact day planned for the murder, but heard through Tim that John Vincent had failed to pull the trigger, and that Helen was pushing Bartlett to do it. So the big day was imminent. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May she removed her stepfather's rifle from its closet—he being away for the day—and drove to where she could fire off a round. Later she returned the gun to Ed's closet after she'd removed the discharged cartridge. Perhaps she'd already surveyed the area around Soames Creek where the killing was to take place. In any case, there she found a likely firing site. Pat was smart and knew the sort of place the police would look for. When she'd found it she realized that a standing shot

wouldn't do because there wasn't enough cover for that. Nor could it be a shot from a prone position because there were too many clumps of grass and reeds to give a clear line of sight. It had to be a sitting shot, which many sharpshooters prefer. Having chosen the position, she carefully made the correct foot indentations, and placed the cartridge casing in clear view where the police could hardly miss seeing it. Only it puzzled us why Ed would be so careless as to leave the cartridge casing in such an obvious place, and then put his recently discharged rifle back in his own cupboard. On top of that, Pat made a serious error. When I put myself into the proper firing position, I found that the rifle was pointing into the lower branches of the surrounding tree. Ed Dunning could not have fired the shot from that position. Whoever did was about ten inches shorter. Someone about your height, Pat."

Pat straightened, eyes coldly blazing. "I didn't shoot the old bastard!" She glared around. "Can anyone prove I did?" But no one responded. "You're a fool," she said sneeringly to Peter. "You're a fucking idiot!"

Peter stared at the tape recorder reflectively as though he were listening to a faint but puzzling interference.

"The other problem," he began slowly, "was the 30.30 Winchester. We found it in the place where Bartlett said he and Helen had placed it originally. There were four instead of five shells in the chamber, and the rifle had been fired. We asked ourselves, naturally, whether this gun, rather than the 30.06 was the murder weapon. Before the murder, someone had



removed the 30.30 and then returned it to its hiding place some time after Bartlett had left with the dead Curtis. Was that person Pat? But how could Pat have known where the 30.30 was hidden? Tim didn't know. He only knew that it was hidden in a hollow log, and the woods are full of hollow logs. Pat only knew what Tim told her. No, Pat was not the person who removed the 30.30, nor did she commit this murder.”