

Chapter 22

Peter stared out the French windows. After the long rain a dry wind from the southwest had begun to stir in the trees.

He looked over at John Vincent.

“John, your motives for killing Curtis seem stronger than anyone’s: your affair with Helen, your hope for a reward, your hatred for Curtis, your fear for the Indian land. Besides that, you’ve lied to me. Can you give me any reason why I should not arrest you for the murder of Jackson Curtis?”

John looked steadily back at him. Charlie, standing at the side of the room, took a step forward.

“Because he did not do it.”

It was the quiet, firm voice of Mabel Donahue.

“No.” She shook her head slowly. “You’ve made a mistake. John did not do this thing.”

“You know this?”

“I know it. He was with me on the morning of May 18th having stayed the night. You see, John Vincent is my son.”

The phone in the lodge office was ringing faintly.

“Oh yes. In those days so far off when I was still young, I loved to climb in the backcountry with my dogs. One day by the side of a lake I met Paul Vincent. He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen, like the first man on earth, created by God’s own hand. I visited him often, and sometimes stayed for days. I told my father about Paul, but I don’t believe he ever understood, or could understand, not even that I was a schoolmarm already well into my thirties and had never found anyone to love. Paul’s own wife had died, and he was alone. Our love went on for four wonderful years. At the end of it, I went away to give birth to John.” She glanced at John with evident pride. “After I came back with him, Paul began living with another woman. I understood. He wanted someone to be at his side, not a fly-by-night as I was. And then he asked me to give up John who was only a few months old. I fought him, but gave up in the end. My father had died in the meantime, and I was alone and dependent on my teaching job on the Coast. I had little choice.” She was silent. The office phone had stopped ringing. “I never went back to Paul’s place, perhaps because I was afraid that if it should begin again it would never work. There were too many worlds between us. Paul understood. As John grew, he would send the boy down to me from time to time, often with little gifts, to stay for a bit. Yet John did not know that I was his real mother. As I said, on the night of May 17th John came down to visit me. He said to me that his father was very ill with cancer and would soon die, and that he knew now that I was his real mother.”

“So he stayed the night with you?”

She nodded. “He stayed the night.”

“And when did you get up in the morning?”

“I slept in a bit. You see, we’d talked until late. I guess it was about 8:30.”

“And was John up?”

“No, he slept in until about nine.”

“Miss Donahue, what makes you think your son was in his room at the time of the murder?”

She said nothing, looking at him.

Peter turned to John. “You did not shoot Jackson Curtis on the morning of May 14th as originally planned. As soon as you could, you telephoned Helen and told her what happened. She asked you to meet her over at Soames Creek, maybe that same afternoon of the 14th. There she told you it would be better if you did it from the north shore because then there’d be no chance of your missing—not that there was much chance of that anyway. But to place a shot from the north shore when Curtis was on the inner loop of his troll and only twenty or thirty yards offshore was like guaranteeing the result. So you agreed. Helen then showed you where the 30.30 was hidden because you wouldn’t need the .300 Ultra Magnum for this short shot and anyway she wanted the 30.30 removed from the hiding place Bartlett knew about. She gave you a pair of plastic gloves to wear and told you to handle the rifle carefully so as not to rub off Bartlett’s

fingerprints. After the shooting you were to return the rifle to a new hiding place in an old pine stump that Helen showed you. She said she'd contact you as soon as she found out when the two were going fishing again, which turned out to be four days later. That's the real reason you came down to stay with Mabel Donahue, you mother. She didn't know what you were up to, but could be counted on to back you up whatever happened. You left your room at about 6:00 a.m. Soames Creek is about four miles further on. You ran there, first on the road and then by trail and arrived shortly after 6:30 a.m. You removed the 30.30 from the hollow log, and then looked for a good firing position. You probably found the one that Charlie and I chose because it was the obvious location, but it was unsatisfactory because of the overhanging boughs. That didn't matter. You still had time to find another spot. With your shooting talent, you wouldn't have to be too fussy about position, as long as it was adequate to get Curtis on the inward loop of his troll. You could hear the motor of the boat, but it was far off on the outer loop. You got the rifle ready, levering a cartridge into the breach because one had already been fired."

Peter paused and looked over at John.

"Then what happened?"

John stared at the floor.

"Well?"

"It's your story."

"Do you want to tell the rest of it?"

“No.”

“There isn’t a jury that wouldn’t convict you, John. Will you tell me the truth?”

But John made no answer.

“You have to tell him, John,” Mabel said. “You didn’t do it.”

John was silent.

“I’ll tell him if I have to,” she said.

“No... I can’t...”

“All you have to tell me,” said Peter “is what you saw and did. Just what happened. Nothing else.”

John shook his head as though in disbelief, his eyes staring at something not in the room. Peter waited, feeling the tension.

“Helen wanted me to do it that first time on the 14th and I meant to. I had my finger on the trigger but I couldn’t do it...”

He stopped for a moment, then spoke in such a low voice they had to strain to listen.

“That same afternoon I met Helen in the place we always met at the west end of the lake and she drove me down to Soames Creek trail and we walked down to the lake. She said not to worry about the first time because she’d worked out something even better. She said Curtis was planning to go fishing with Bartlett on the morning of the 18th, because that’s how he did things, always liked to plan ahead. The rest of it was like you said. I was looking for the right place to fire from when I hear the shot. I crawled to

where I could get a view out over the lake. The boat was maybe 90 yards off. Bartlett was sitting in it, sort of crouched over, heading my way fast. He hit the shore and jumped out into the bushes. I could hear him crashing around. He was looking for that 30.30 but couldn't find it. After a few minutes he came out on the shore and looked around. Then he jumped back into the boat and headed up the lake keeping real close in to the shore."

"What did you do with the gun?"

"I put it back into the hollow log where I got it from."

"Why not in the new hiding place—the pine stump where Helen wanted you to put it?"

"It was further away and I knew the only reason she wanted me to hide it there was so Bartlett wouldn't find it when he came ashore. But he'd already come ashore, so it was safe."

They were silent for a moment.

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Do you think a jury's going to believe what you've just told me, John? That having come down to the north side of the lake with the intention of killing Jackson Curtis, and having your finger on the trigger for the second time, just at that magical instant some mysterious person fires a perfect shot from the far shore hitting the bull's eye on Curtis' head? It won't wash,

John. Do I have any choice but to hold you for the murder of Jackson Curtis?”

There was a sigh that seemed to come from outside the room.

“John did not do it,” Mabel said, shaking her head. “He did not do it.”

“Who did, Miss Donahue?”

“May God forgive me for this...”

“Don’t, Mother,” John said.

“I have to, John... You know I have to.”

She looked unwaveringly at Peter for a long moment.

“It was Paul Vincent who shot Jackson Curtis.”

No one spoke. It was as though they were all under water, holding their breaths.

“Paul Vincent,” Peter said, “is supposed to be dead—and before that, blind.”

“He is neither, at least not yet.” Mabel said. “How can you understand anything at all about this? Any of you. How can you understand about Paul? You cannot. You will think the same thing I did when John told me that his father was going to kill Curtis. I thought it was in retribution for destroying the land sacred to the Indians. Oh yes. I believed Paul acted out of the wrath of the Spirit to avenge an evil deed. That shows I’m only half a Christian—half of what Paul is who hardly knew the name of Jesus Christ. It wasn’t for retribution. John is Paul’s only hope for the future of his people. Because he’s half white he can bridge the gulf between the two

cultures. Maybe he can get the whites to understand and even accept the Indian view that nature isn't just put there for us to exploit. The land is truly sacred. It's part of the life of which we're all part. So John had this mission—and having it he must not be a spiller of blood no matter how justified, no matter how much Curtis deserved to die. It was Paul that had to kill Curtis, the evil one, to save his son who was to be the leader of his people.” Her eyes rested on Peter, measuring him. “In your law you may call him a murderer. But in the purity of his heart you can never touch him, my friend.”

John wept, head hanging.

Peter nodded to Charlie who turned and left the room by the back hall door.

“I knew it was your father who killed Curtis, John. But I couldn't prove it, not with any evidence that would satisfy a jury. So I had to get the truth out of you or your mother, and also your father.” John stared up at him. “Last night I radio-phoned your father and told him that on the evidence you were the most likely suspect, and that he might want to say something about that. He did.”

They turned as the hall door opened to frame the slight, white-haired figure of Paul Vincent. His face was like old parchment folded around a secret of great value. And his eyes gleamed as Peter remembered them, so many years before when he stayed that night of the storm at Paul's place.

The old man entered the room, walking slowly and stiffly, and sat down in the chair Charlie had brought in for him. He looked at no one but Peter.

“I have something to say to you,” he said at last. His voice creaked like old wood. “You told me you were going to arrest my son for killing the man called Curtis. So I came down here.”

“I wonder how you managed, Paul. You’re supposed to be blind, and also dead.”

“My Mabel said that. She said you must be dead. First, I must be blind, and then I must be dead so that the police will not arrest me. John agreed with her. Those two told lies about me because they wanted me to go on as I am. But soon I won’t be as I am. I will be dead from cancer as the doctors call this demon eating my stomach.”

Without changing their direction of gaze, his eyes clouded over.

“I sent John to visit his mother that night.”

“That would be May 17th.”

“I guess so. Then, before dawn, I started out. I was carrying the long gun.”

“The .300 Ultra Magnum.”

“I guess so. I reached the lake after first light. I knew Curtis would be out on the lake with a blue hat on...”

“Who told you that?”

“I asked John when this Curtis would go fishing again. He wouldn’t tell me because he knew what I was thinking. So then I asked somebody else who showed me Curtis out on the lake with another man. He had his coat turned up around his neck and he was wearing a blue hat. I knew then.”

“This someone else you asked, who was he?”

The old man said nothing.

“John?” Peter asked.

“My father is a shaman. He can see things far away or before they happen.”

Peter wondered what they would make of that comment back at HQ.

“Go on,” he said to Paul.

“Before dawn I got there.”

“That would be on the outcropping opposite Soames Creek?”

“Yes. I waited. The mist was on the lake. Then I heard the loon calling. It was calling the mist to rise and let the light in. And then the boat was there, coming out from the mist on the other side, and there was light now, lots of light. It was Curtis with the other man. I waited. They trolled, coming to me, coming, coming. Then they turned downlake. I knew he was dead when. I raised my rifle. Curtis came into my sights. He was very dead then.”

He was silent.

“Is there anything else you want to say, Paul?”

“No.”

“I have something to say.” It was John.

“Go ahead.”

He spoke slowly, yet with gathering assurance, dark hair fallen across the bronze of his forehead. “My father is no murderer. The white man, Curtis, was the murderer. He killed all the living things up there—trees, animals, birds, everything—and my father started to die then, too, after the fire. I could see him going. He didn’t care anymore. He didn’t want to live. But even the fire wasn’t enough for Curtis. He was going to do other things my father knew about but would not tell me. I wanted to kill Curtis. I would have done it that first time, but my father wouldn’t let me pull the trigger. He stopped me somehow. And then he did it to make sure there would be no more Curtis for me to shoot. All this because he wants me to lead our people, and I don’t know where to lead them, or even how to begin.”

He was silent, staring at the floor.

“Is that the way it was, Paul?”

“You heard him,” the old man said. “Listen to the Chief.”

Charlie stretched under his blankets and yawned mightily.

“It hasn’t been fun for old Charlie. The one beauty in this case gets her knees bashed up, and I didn’t even get an afternoon on the lake fishing for trout.”

Peter was propped against his pillows scribbling his report. A night wind had risen, sweeping the branches of a poplar against the cabin.

“It’s just as well, Charlie. Somebody might have taken a pot shot at you from the far shore, and how could they miss?”

Charlie sighed. “In my compassion for that scrawny piece of flesh you call a body, I’ll ignore your jealous obsession with me; in return you will tell Charlie how you fixed on old Paul.”

“For starters I knew he was never blind.”

“And how did you come to know that?”

“The first thing I did when I met him was to put out my hand to shake his hand, and he took it. Also, John talked about him as though he wasn’t quite right in the head, but what he said made sense to me. So there was a cover-up. Why? Then when Jim Bartlett forced Helen to go with him to find the rifle, I was sure Bartlett wasn’t our man, though he may have been involved. To get out of it, Bartlett had to tell the truth. He showed me where they were when the shot was fired. If the shot had come from the nearer north shore, he’d have known it by the volume and direction of the sound, in which case he wouldn’t have gone ashore looking for the 30.30 because he’d know it had to be in the assassin’s hands and he’d be walking into a bullet. So the shot came from the far south shore. That also makes John’s story correct—that he was on the north shore trying to get up the nerve to finish off Curtis when he was pre-empted. Plus the fact that he put the gun back in the original hiding place instead of in the pine stump as directed by Helen. And furthermore, being on the outer loop and to the west of Soames Creek, the boat wasn’t in the right position for a shot from the north shore—

in fact impossible from the site you and I picked out. From there the boat wouldn't even be in view. So the shot had to be fired from the far south shore."

"I noticed you didn't mention any of this when you charged John with murder."

"Now, Charlie, I didn't charge him exactly. I just asked the question-- how could I avoid charging him?"

"Which was all you needed to get Mabel pointing at Paul. Pretty tricky, Peter."

"It's a tricky profession, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Oh, I'm above all that," Charlie grinned. "So what with Mabel and John telling lies about the old man's blindness and death, you figured they were covering up for him. What else?"

"If the shot came from the far shore and we rule out both Bartlett and John, the only other person capable of hitting a 'moving brain at 300 yards,' as Helen described, has to be a top marksman. Paul was certainly that. Remember, he taught his son how to shoot. Plus, of course, Paul's strong motive, which was mainly to shield his son."

"So you got in touch with Paul and told him the police were going to arrest his only son. That brought the old man out of the bushes, sick as he was, and wrapped up the case. Okay. One other thing: Pat's role in this. How did you get on to her?"

“Right at the start, when she told me about the hole in the boat. How did she know that and why did she tell me? Then her accusations against Helen and her stepfather were signposts pointing to herself. I couldn’t see a strong enough motivation for her to do the actual killing, but if she knew that something like that was planned she was quite capable of using it for her own purposes.”

“With Tim as the channel,” Charlie added. “Maybe that boy’s learned something at long last. I couldn’t even shake a pinch of sass out of him tonight.”

“No wonder. He got involved with Blake who was a real downer. And then he came to believe that Pat was the murderer and that she was working for her mother. A real witches’ nest. He let all that spill out yesterday afternoon. He felt like a black cat on a breaking bough and it was a long way down.”

Charlie rolled over and lay still. Peter turned off his light and scrunched down on the bed.

“Not a nice case,” Charlie muttered. “The good guy turns out to be the killer. Where’s the justice in this world?”

“Paul was the justice, Charlie. Though he didn’t think of it that way.”

“Well, one thing for sure, he got the right guy when he got Curtis.”

“People like Curtis never seem to realize that you don’t mess with a man like Paul Vincent. Curtis wouldn’t understand that this lake and all the surrounding country is Paul’s domain. I don’t mean Paul thinks he owns it,

anymore than an eagle thinks it has legal title to its territory. But it's still Paul's domain, meaning that nothing happens there that is outside his knowledge. It's as though the land was an extension of his own body. For that you have to see better than any eagle."

"And what kind of bird would that be?" Charlie murmured.

"A loon."

"I might have known you'd say that," Charlie mumbled, half into a yawn. "And what would a loon know?"

"The first time I met old Paul I was twenty years younger. I was hunting for deer and we came across Paul's cabin. It got late and I stayed the night. Paul told me some things I'll never forget. He said the Indians thought that the white men were demons who had come up from the underworld. That's why we're white, you see, from being so long in the dark."

"You don't have to tell me," Charlie muttered.

"He told us about the herds of elk that used to roam this country, and about the geese filling the sky for days in the spring and fall. He told us about the loon, too. To Paul the loon is the wise one because it sees everything: things above and things below. You see, the loon is both a diver and a flyer. It's at home deep under the water or high in the air or just floating on the surface of the lake. So a wise man becomes like the loon. He can see everything, the height and depth, what's on the outside and what's on the inside. When I went up to his cabin that last time, Paul was singing

something to himself. I recognized it as the song of the loon. I'd heard him sing all those years before when I spent the night there. It's known only to a few shamans. I heard it from a northern Dene Indian once, and an old Inuit named Quill gave me a version of it. Quill told me it was a key to their secret knowledge. I don't know anything about that. But I do know one thing, Charlie. Jackson never had a chance. From the moment he set fire to Paul's woods he was a dead man. And yet, in a way, it wasn't Paul's doing. His main thought was to save his son. He'd probably tell you it was the loon's doing. But I suppose I'd better not put that in my report. What do you say, Charlie?"

But Charlie had nothing to say. From the sound of the deep breathing across the room, Peter knew that Charlie was beyond the song of the shaman, or the cry of the loon.