

SUNDOWN ON TOP OF THE WORLD

A Hunter Rayne Highway Mystery

by R.E. Donald

Excerpt:

In spite of how tired he was, Hunter had lain awake much of the night thinking about the conversation he'd had with Bart over dinner, and having flashbacks to his years in Whitehorse as a young Mountie. He'd asked his old colleague about the case of the blood-smeared trapper's cabin he'd worked his first year in the RCMP, whether they'd ever found a body, or whether they'd ever concluded there was foul play involved.

"Refresh my memory," Bart had said.

"A man named Fred Klimmer called it in." Hunter paused, recalling details he hadn't thought about for years. "Klimmer was a trapper with a concession close to the missing man's, roughly north of Johnson's Crossing on the Teslin River. I didn't like the man – Klimmer, I mean. What bugged me the most was how he seemed to be lusting after the man's girlfriend, April. What was the man's name?" With the objectivity of the elapsed twenty-odd years he suspected that his own feelings for April had fostered that dislike. He looked up at the ceiling, searching his memory. "Blake. Martin Blake. Although his name might as well have been John Doe, as it turned out."

Bartholomew Sam was leaning back in his chair, his beer almost untouched, his eyes never leaving Hunter's face. Perhaps in spite of himself, Sorry seemed to be listening with interest. He had ordered a pint of draft beer – averting his eyes from Hunter as he did so – and drank half of it the first time he put the glass to his lips, then pushed it away as if to keep himself from drinking it all at once.

"It was late October or early November. The cabin door was open, snow drifting in. The missing man kept a trap line and had a dog team. The dogs hadn't been fed for days, so Klimmer brought some fish for them." Hunter described the blood, damage and scratches that made it clear there had been violence, probably death, possibly the work of a grizzly. "Evidently a young woman from Michigan named April Corbett had been living there with Blake for several months. According to Fred Klimmer, Blake wasn't such a nice guy and he didn't know why she stayed with him. There was no sign of either one of them, alive or dead, except the blood."

"So what was the theory?"

“In spite of the grizzly, there was no way to rule out murder or murder-suicide. We were looking for evidence, either way.”

“Was it a woman’s blood or a man’s or both?” asked Sorry.

“Back in the 70’s, all we had was ABO testing. All the lab could tell us was blood type, which was type A. Given almost half the population was type A and almost half was type B, it wasn’t much help.” Hunter turned to his former colleague. “Ring any bells yet?”

“Starting to. It wasn’t a case that I got actively involved in, but I can recall hearing about it. Was there a vehicle belonging to one of them?”

“No vehicle found at the scene, or nearby, which was suspicious in itself. The road to the cabin was almost non-existent, so it’s entirely possible that a vehicle could have been parked off site for the winter, but none was ever reported. A British Columbia driver’s license was found in Blake’s belongings, but it was a fake. Klimmer thought he’d seen Blake driving a Ford truck, but we found no record of any vehicles registered in the name of Martin Blake in British Columbia or the Yukon. April was known to have had a 1964 Volkswagen.” Hunter took a long pull on his beer. “It was white, with flowers painted on it. A hippie car.” He pictured April and her hippie clothing: loose, flowing dresses and tunics, bell-bottom pants, leather sandals, colorful bandanas.

“Maybe Blake drove off in her car?”

“No reported sightings of the Volkswagen since then, as far as I know.”

“No tracks?” Sorry must have been finding the discussion more interesting than he’d expected.

“Fresh snow since it happened. No sign of tracks except for Fred Klimmer’s from his first time on the scene before he called it in.”

“Maybe the woman killed Martin and took off in her own car. Women do kill. It’s been known to happen.”

“You can’t rule that out. We contacted the girl’s family in Michigan – she’d held a job in Whitehorse that summer and had given her employer information on her next of kin – and talked to her father. It wasn’t a notification, since there was no way to really say she was dead. All we had to go on was her picture on the wall and Klimmer’s word for it that she had even been living there – so we just asked if anyone had heard from her. Her father basically told us to take a hike, that she’d been dead to them – his word – since she ran off with a ‘damned hippie’ a few years before. All we could do was request that he contact us if he ever heard from her. Might be worth looking for her again, or checking to see if her family ever did report her missing.”

Bart leaned forward, centered his beer glass on its coaster, his face thoughtful. “Then again,” he said, “at that time of year especially, it could be the grizzly, or grizzlies – could be a mother and yearling cub

trying to fatten up before denning – broke into the cabin while they were sleeping and killed them both before they could get to a rifle. Grizzlies drag their kill off and bury them in leaves and dirt.”

Hunter nodded slowly. “Of course, we considered that. We searched the adjacent land, with no success. But if neither one of them left the cabin alive, what happened to April’s car? Or Blake’s truck, if there was one?”

“If there was one,” repeated Bart.

Sorry took a slug of beer, wiped drops off his mustache with the back of his hand. “Maybe the fucker hid the car on her so she couldn’t leave him, if he was the asshole that trapper guy thought he was.”

“Also possible.”

“When was that again?”

“1972. Early November, I think. Around the first snowfall.”

“So we’re talkin’ almost twenty-five years ago. What’re the chances you’d ever solve this now?”

When neither Hunter nor Bart answered, Sorry continued. “Would there still be blood for testing? They can test the DNA now, can’t they?”

Hunter shrugged. He thought it unlikely.

“If the girl was living there, wouldn’t there have been clothes and stuff. You know, female stuff left behind?” asked Sorry. “Or ID? A wallet?”

“No ID or wallet. There was some women’s clothing. We assumed it belonged to April, but there was no way to prove it.”

“Was there a rifle left at the scene?” asked Bart.

“Under the bed. Loaded.”

“Just one?”

“Just the one.”

“Loaded for bear?” Sorry laughed at his own suggestion. Hunter half smiled.

Bart didn’t smile at all. “Not like a trapper or hunter to have just one, but always possible. Lends a little weight to the theory that Blake killed the girl, took his other gun – or guns – and went on the run.”

“Plus, if it had been a murder-suicide, the rifle would have been out in the open,” Hunter said.

“Any reason why you’d suspect a murder-suicide?”

Hunter shrugged. “Looking at all the possibilities, the usual suspects.”

“How about the guy who called it in?” asked Sorry.

“If he did it, there was no reason for him to call it in. Killers do that if there’s a reason for suspicion to fall on them, in order to divert suspicion elsewhere. He had no prior record, neither here nor in Manitoba where he was from. Also he had no obvious motive and there’s no way we would ever have connected him to it if he hadn’t called us.”

“Were there any forensic clues?”

“Bears eat everything they can get that time of year,” said Bart. “What they don’t finish, the wolverines will clean up, bones and all. Pretty safe there wouldn’t be much left to autopsy, even if we’d found some remains.” He shrugged. “If Fred Klimmer hadn’t called it in, and the bears hadn’t been there, could be no one would’ve found the bodies for months.”

Hunter had to concede that he was right. Who knows how long it could have been before anyone else had happened by the cabin.

“You said there were dogs. Wouldn’t bears stay away with a bunch of dogs around?” Sorry asked.

“Sled dogs are kept chained up. I’ve known a bear to kill a chained dog and make a meal of it. They can yank them right off their chains and drag them away. Besides, there was no question that a bear had been there. I saw the scene myself, remember?” He paused before musing, “If it had been Fred Klimmer, he might’ve called it in for the sake of the dogs. Funny how some men think nothing of killing a fellow human, but don’t like to see an animal suffer.”

Bart countered with, “If that were the case, he could have just taken the dogs. No one would’ve been the wiser.”

Hunter saw the scene again in his mind: the blood on the bed and the floor, the scratches and destruction throughout the cabin, and April’s photograph on the wall. And he recalled how he and his colleague and friend, Ken, had shared similar discussions over and over again that winter and for years afterward. The last time they’d rehashed the case was in the year before Ken’s death. Ken remembered seeing Blake in Whitehorse previously. Ken’s theory had always been that April couldn’t have been living with a ‘loser’ like Blake, at least not for long. “Wouldn’t matter to her more than a week or two that he was a good fuck, if that’s what attracted her in the first place. The guy was probably looking for a drudge to cook and clean for him, as well as keep his bed warm. April was a free bird, remember? She never would’ve stood for it.”

Hunter had found part of Ken’s speculation offensive, but still fervently hoped that he was right. It had been an intriguing case, but was now as cold as a January night in Old Crow, and Hunter had accepted that he would never know the answer.

Before they’d left this morning, Bart had made them coffee and seen them off. “So you keep an eye out for my person of interest, and I’ll see what I can do about finding the Martin Blake file,” he’d said. “The case is so cold it’s probably iced over, but you never know.”

Hunter had smiled sadly and shook his head. “I’m not holding out much hope.”

Bart just smiled that spooky smile, as if he knew something Hunter didn’t.

“You never know,” he said again.