

Chapter 3

“I suppose you will want to know why I came to Canada,” Koenig said, throwing another stick into the wood stove, and then replacing the lid.

He was dark haired with light skin and grey eyes. His head, which was well shaped in profile, appeared surprisingly narrow from a front view.

He shrugged. “Why do Europeans come here? For the opportunity. For the new life....” He interpreted Peter’s stare. “Perhaps you are thinking that it has not worked out too well for me. This hut, and my lowly position.” He spoke with apparent assurance. “The fact is,” Koenig continued, “that for me this is my opportunity.” He smiled slightly. “I don’t want money or power like most of you, but only to be left alone to be what I am in myself.”

He spoke with only a slight accent and with the deliberation of a self-taught man—someone who had somehow found the time to reflect and to read.

“You’ve been in Canada for how long?”

“For twelve years.”

Koenig rose to stir the thick stew that was beginning to show a little steam.

“And what have you been doing in those twelve years?”

Koenig did not answer immediately. He tasted the stew with care. Then he nibbled on it, still holding the wooden spoon in front of his face.

“Odd jobs,” he said between nibbles. “I’ve worked in logging and mining camps. I’ve done a little cooking too!” He smiled over the spoon.

“I’d like a complete list, Mr. Koenig—places of work, names of employers, dates of starting and termination—all the way through those twelve years.”

Koenig put down the spoon, got a plate from the cupboard and began to ladle out the stew.

“Do you want some stew?” he asked quietly. “There’s plenty.”

Peter shook his head. “Thank you, no. I don’t need the list tonight, Mr. Koenig. Tomorrow morning would be fine.”

“I don’t know how exact...”

“Just be as exact as you can. We’ll be checking it out anyway.”

Koenig nodded and sat down with his plate, then slowly buttered a thick piece of bread.

“Have you always had the same name, Mr. Koenig?”

Koenig continued buttering and said in a low voice: “I’ve never had any need for any other name.”

Peter waited while Koenig took a small mouthful of stew.

“Have you ever faced a criminal charge?”

Koenig did not answer, but began to chew slowly.

Peter pursued it: “There would be no point in lying, of course.”

But Koenig shook his head.

“Never under arrest?”

“No,” said Koenig. But his voice was muffled, down in his throat.

Peter stared at the other man for a long time.

“And how long have you known Mrs. Curtis?”

With his free hand Koenig drew an imaginary line on the table and crossed it several times. He seemed unable to speak.

Peter took a chance. “She visited your cabin—she came often.”

Koenig sat very still. That was it, then. Peter stood up and came around behind him, pacing the length of the floor slowly, back and forth. Finally, he stopped to look down on the back of Koenig’s head. At this moment he disliked himself and the training that required him to break a human down emotionally so that confession would come readily. But he had no choice. He spoke softly.

“I understand, you know. An attractive woman like Helen Curtis married to an old man. You here, alone....” He could see that Koenig was holding himself in, and could imagine the lump of stew collected half way to the man’s stomach. “You’re only human like the rest of us. Given the chance, who wouldn’t do what you did?”

Peter removed a chair from the end of the table and sat down close to Koenig. He saw that the muscles of the man's jaw and neck were taut.

"It's terrible what a woman can do to a man if she wants to," Peter continued quietly. "I have a general idea of what happened. It can happen to anyone, Kurt. I know that. You're no criminal, really—technically maybe—but not as a human being. As a human being you're just bloody unlucky...."

"Christ!" Koenig half pushed, half hurled his plate across the table, and buried his face in his hands.

"Christ, oh Christ....." he was crying.

Peter spoke gently. "You killed Curtis because of her, didn't you?"

Trembling, Koenig removed his hands from his face, staring as though at something horrifying in front of him. His mouth worked soundlessly.

"That's all right, Kurt, there's no hurry. We've got all night."

Koenig sat holding his clenched fists at his forehead, eyes tightly closed, tears running down his face. "She...." Koenig began, but could not continue. Peter rose and set about making coffee. In the course of his police work, he had heard so many life stories, but not one had a happy ending.

Koenig said that he was born in 1967 and that his mother died when he was six. Nothing was ever the same after that. His father, who had lost a leg in the war, ruled the family with autocratic rigor and Kurt's aunt, who moved in to look after the family, totally approved. The household consisted of Kurt, Kurt's sister, Paula, four years older than he, and his brother, August, a year younger. Then one winter Kurt's aunt died, and in the spring

Kurt's sister walked out of the house after a quarrel with her father. Kurt never heard from her again. Eventually, life with the paranoid old man proved impossible for him also. When Kurt forgot to latch the door one night his father in a violent frenzy drove him from the house. He was only fourteen, but knew that he would never return home.

Koenig did not like to recall the years that followed. He lived as he could—washing dishes in cafés, cleaning windows, sometimes begging. He was a lonely vagrant, a wanderer in search of the warmth missing from his life since his mother's death.

Kurt's situation improved when he found work in a bakery run by a widow Kessler who told him to stay away from her three daughters. They had other ideas. Kurt was now seventeen and handsome in a sinewy sort of way. At least, so Carla Kessler, the second sister, believed. Soon they were making love in secret, but there is no secrecy among sisters. The youngest, Marlene, had her eyes on the lad, too, for she was tired of contemplating the flour on her arms. But Kurt cared only for Carla. One day in a jealous fit Marlene told Widow Kessler about the nightly forays in the attic room, and the widow fired Kurt without notice. That was bad enough—losing his job within three months of starting it—but losing Carla was insupportable. He arranged to see her, and they met whenever possible, in parks and under bridges, anywhere secluded enough for lovemaking. One night she failed to show up. He went to Widow Kessler's but Carla would not come out to him.

The oldest daughter, spindly Elizabeth, talked to Kurt at the door. It was so sad, she said, but Carla had become engaged to another man.

So began the circle of love and abandonment from which Kurt never escaped. Women were attracted to him, and usually made the first approach. He responded, becoming more and more emotionally involved; but for the women it was never more than an adventure, and they soon put an end to what they had begun.

When he was twenty-eight Kurt decided to quit Germany and try his luck in a new land. He had seen a film on Canada and decided that people there must be closer to nature, and therefore more genuine, more capable of loyal devotion. That was a mistake. Within three weeks of his arrival in Toronto he had taken up with a woman who soon left him a brief note of regret. He traveled west to Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Vancouver, restless and unhappy, unable to settle down.

Unfortunately, he had been drinking that night in Vancouver when he stopped to talk to a prostitute. He walked along with her because he needed to talk to someone.

Two policemen blocked them.

“Hello, Jane. Back from Seattle already?”

“Leave me alone,” she said and tried to push her way past them.

The policeman in front of her shoved her back roughly, and Kurt lunged, swinging at him. In a moment, he was in a hammerlock, the police menacing him. Kurt stamped on the policeman’s boots and kicked at them,

but they forced him to the ground. Within minutes the van arrived. He got six months for assaulting the police officers.

Nothing seemed to matter anymore. In prison he met Janos, an older man. Janos was Hungarian, skillful with a knife, and an accomplished burglar. He had come over in 1956 after the Hungarian uprising because he literally believed in individual freedom. Consequently, he spent most of his life in jail. During those six months Kurt learned Janos' trade of breaking and entering, and he did not fail to put his new skill into practice on his release.

At first, he was successful. He bought expensive clothes, put a down payment on a car, and avoided emotional entanglements. Then, one night five months later, while burgling an apartment on the top floor of a high-rise, he heard a key in the lock. He hid himself in a closet meaning to make a dash for the door. But the tenant had heard him and threw open the closet. They fought. His opponent was over fifty, heavily built and surprisingly strong. He managed to force Kurt down on his back, pressing his thick forearm into Kurt's neck. Kurt felt himself going under. With his free hand fumbling in his jacket pocket, he managed to get hold of a small spring knife that he sometimes used as an aid in opening locked doors. He thrust the knife at the man. It entered the side of his neck.

Kurt ran. Fifteen minutes later, mingling with the crowd on Granville Street, he thought of the man's look when he fell over him, the surprised look, the blood spurting, and he rushed into a phone booth to call an

ambulance. In the paper the next morning he read that the man was on the critical list in hospital. Kurt considered giving himself up, but as it turned out there was no need to make such a decision.

An old woman who sat all day and most of the night in the front room of what had once been an impressive Edwardian mansion, and who never missed anything that happened in the street outside, had seen Kurt run by and get into his car. She had always known that crimes were taking place all around her, and for once she was right. She gave the police an adequate description of the car and the first four numbers of the license plate. The call went out.

Kurt was arrested next day. Luckily, the man had lived, and the police testified that the evidence pointed to a fight in which Kurt was defending himself, at least initially. On the other hand, there was his police record and the plain fact that he had dangerously wounded a man while carrying out a crime. The judge sentenced him to three years.

Kurt served two years before going out on parole. The first day after his release he read in the paper an advertisement for a handyman to work at a summer resort in the Interior. No references were requested. He replied and got the job, mainly, he realized, because he was willing to accept the sub-standard wage offered. What mattered to Kurt was to get away to the clean northern air, far from the rottenness of the city. He was determined to straighten out his life.

Kurt fell silent, staring at the few large lumps of what remained of his stew, as though they might hold a clue to the mess that was his life. Then he looked up.

“That’s when I met Helen Curtis.”

Their love affair began three days after she appeared one evening at his cabin door. She stood there looking up at him and what he saw in her eyes frightened him. She possessed him utterly and he gave himself completely. He thought constantly of her warmth and beauty, and remembered only moments of gentleness.

Kurt was at last silent, looking at the table.

“She is not bad, really,” he said, shaking his head slowly, “it’s just that she’s had a rotten time of it. I could not begin to tell you, Inspector, how that man, the dead one, Curtis, treated her. Unbelievable. He was, how shall I put it, sick—sick about sex, and brutal too. She told me she could not stand it anymore, that she was breaking up. She said that she had thoughts of suicide, that it was the only way out.”

“Why didn’t she get a divorce? Or just leave him?”

“You see, he would not let her go. And if she tried—well, she was afraid of him. He was very powerful, a rich man with many friends.”

He looked up at Peter. “That was when I decided to kill him. I had to release her from that...monster. And I did.”

Peter was looking out the window now. Darkness had come into the room. From a distance drifted the cry of the loon—haa-hooo!—the long

drawn-out call. He had heard the Indians say that the loon's cry was that of a human calling from some other, darker world. And he could almost believe it.

"Alright, Koenig, how did you do it?"

"I bought a 30-30."

"Where?"

"From an Indian—he is called Vincent—John Vincent. I met him once out hunting."

"Didn't he need the rifle?"

"I guess he needed the money more. Besides, he could use his slugs in his shotgun."

"Go on."

"I picked a spot. I knew about the fishing plan from Helen."

"Picked a spot—where?"

"You know, opposite Soames Creek">

"On the south shore."

"Yes, where else?"

"Did you really expect to hit anything from there?"

"I was going to try."

"Are you a good shot?"

"Quite good." But he sounded unsure.

"You would have to be an expert."

"I was lucky."

“Did you fire only one shot?”

“Only one.”

“Did you fire a shot on any other day?”

“No.”

“Where is the gun?”

Kurt was silent, looking at the table.

He said, “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? It’s your gun isn’t it?”

“I lost it. It must have been stolen.”

“Come now.”

“It’s not here. I don’t know where it is.”

Peter stood up abruptly.

“Alright Koenig, he said, “I’ll want your confession written out and signed by you describing how you killed Jackson Curtis. All the details. You can give it to me in the morning. In the meantime, don’t leave this cabin. Constable Turner will be keeping watch.”

Koenig sat with bowed head, looking at his hands.