

Chapter 8

Bartlett was seated on a log near the head of the trail, smoking, when Peter joined him.

“So you didn’t arrest him?”

“That’s right.” Peter was thinking of the steep descent on his lame foot.

“I thought the case against him was pretty strong.”

“You did?”

Bartlett stomped his cigarette into the sandy soil.

“It’s still smoldering,” Peter said, pointing to the half buried butt.

With an angry twist of his boot, Bartlett obliterated it.

Peter started an awkward but surprisingly swift sideways shuffle down the mountainside.

They were soon at the lakeshore, climbed into the outboard and headed for the lodge. At full speed it was less than a ten minute run across to Dunning’s float.

Constable Turner was waiting for them. He looked grave.

Peter climbed out. "What's wrong, Turner?"

"It's Kurt Koenig," said the Constable. There was a troubled look in his eyes. "He hung himself."

Peter stared.

"Pat Dunning found him this morning. He'd hung himself from a ceiling beam."

"It looks like the guilty man is not Vincent, after all," said Dunning, coming up.

The Constable explained: "Koenig left a note. It seems to add up to a confession."

Koenig had tied a rope around his neck, climbed on a chair, thrown the line over a ceiling beam, secured it, and then kicked the chair away. Nylon rope slips easily.

He had left a note on his table addressed to Helen Curtis. It read:

Dear Helen,

There's no point going on with this farce. I am guilty, that is what they'll say for sure when they know my record. Anyway I don't care anymore. I just want to be free from you all. Humanity is sick.

Kurt

They had cut Koenig down and placed him on a plastic sheet in his bedroom. His eyes were open and seemed to look beyond at something profoundly interesting. Peter asked Constable Turner to wait in the other room and he stood there with the corpse staring at him. He would have liked to ask it a few questions. What farce were you referring to in your note, Koenig? The farce that was your life, or something else? But your life was no

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farce. A pathetic tale, perhaps. Something else, then? Was it the role you felt you had to play for her sake? That would be a farce alright. To take the rap and to be the fall guy. Worse than a farce since you knew that you were being set up, yet went along with it anyway, right to the end and over the brink. Is that love, Koenig? Peter closed the man's eyelids. Who can say what love is?

He heard insistent voices outside. Constable Turner opened the door to say that Pat Dunning wanted to speak to him.

"I'll be right there," Peter said. He took a sheet from Koenig's bed and spread it over the body.

"He did *not* do it!" Pat Dunning burst out. "Helen Curtis did it!" Her fingers clawed the air in the direction of Helen Curtis' room in the lodge.

Peter was surprised at the change in Pat. Hair disheveled, eyes swollen, she was shaken with violent emotion.

"Was he protecting her?" Peter asked.

"Protecting her? From what? Why would he protect *her*?"

"If he loved her, he would protect her by doing this."

She began to shake her head, tears filling her eyes, and for a moment her voice was too full to speak. "He didn't love *her*. He thought he loved her because she... she knew how to hold him. But she was only using him." She was much softer now, almost pathetic. "You've got to believe that. This woman is bad—totally bad."

“Kurt was to be her partner? He was to carry out the killing?”

“But he wouldn’t, you understand. He couldn’t kill anybody... I knew...”

She broke down, sobbing helplessly. Here was another possibility he had not considered: that all along Pat Dunning had been in love with Kurt Koenig. Peter had thought of her as something of a flirt, without believing her brother’s crude allegations. Yet, he had completely missed seeing her as a desperate girl fighting for her man, fighting to break the spell that Helen Curtis held him by. How much did she know? She must have known Kurt had awakened to the fact that Helen Curtis was using him and cared nothing for him. Did she know, too, that he loved Helen in spite of it, and could not exist without some recognition of that love? Did she know that his death, the manner of his death, might have been a final bid for such recognition?

“Why didn’t you tell me your suspicions earlier?” he asked her.

“I was going to... I thought I’d gain your confidence first with that about the shot fired at Bartlett’s boat. I mean, when you discovered it was true.”

“What did Helen Curtis know about Kurt?”

“Probably everything.”

“Did you know everything?”

“Not everything.”

“Did you know that Kurt Koenig had a criminal record?”

Her eyes tried to focus on him. “No.”

Briefly, he outlined the facts of the case. She listened wonderingly.

“Do you know why I tell you this?”

“Not really,” she faltered.

“You see, Helen Curtis knew that Koenig had a criminal record, and with that knowledge she could blackmail him.”

“But he still refused to kill for her,” she murmured.

“And when the killing occurred,” Peter added, “He knew that his record would condemn him. He chose to take his own life.”

Her eyes began to glow through the tears. She nodded slowly as if what Peter had told her confirmed something she already knew.

She left, then, swiftly. Peter stood up and walked to the window. Heavy rain clouds had moved in from the east and hung just above the mountains. In the warm stillness no birds sang.

There was a knock on the door and Sergeant Charlie Ross stuck his beefy head inside.

“Grand to see you,” Peter said. “Timed just right, too.”

Charlie was a massive barrel-chested man with whom Peter had shared a posting at Rat River, in the area now called Nunavut, and who had been transferred to criminal investigation the year after Peter.

Coming in, he sat down carefully, as though afraid he might break something.

“Corporal Hill delivered your goods to the lab,” he said, with his vaguely owlish expression, “and I got a plane into Kamloops. Managed to steal one of the Detachment’s cars. Mrs. Broderick’s story checked out. She said she slept in till 9:00 a.m. and when she woke up saw that the alarm clock had been set for 8:00 a.m. I didn’t think she was lying.”

He looked at Peter through the fringe of his eyelashes.

“I’m here to stay with you, the Beaver says, until this is cleared up. Was it accidental?”

“No.”

Charlie looked pleased. “Well, then, some of the information I’ve dug up should help.” He riffled the pages of his notebook. “Where do I start?”

“What do you have on Jackson Curtis?”

“I talked to his attorney, a huffy sort called Edward T. Everett-Smith. One thing for sure: Curtis was not one to squander his resources. His estimated net worth is about seven hundred and thirty million dollars spread around in investments, trusts, and properties. The only asset of his that relates to this neck of the woods is something called Star-Rise Holdings.”

“Curtis owned it?”

Charlie stared at his notes. “He controlled it, though not in the beginning. At the outset it was split three ways between Curtis, who put in cash for his third; Edward Dunning, who put in all his property along the lake, except for the lodge itself; and the same with one Blake Moran.”

“So this Star-Rise Corporation owned the lake, at least the livable north side.”

“Well, Star-Rise didn’t have it all in the beginning. They had to buy out the other property owners over the years, which they did, with the exception of one—uh—Mabel Donohue.”

“Oh yes, the Christian.”

“The what?”

“Dunning said she was born-again.”

“Some people have all the luck.”

“You said Curtis eventually got control.”

“Yeah. Apparently Dunning sold his shares to Curtis piece by piece, until Curtis ended up owning Dunning’s third.”

“That leaves Blake Moran with the remaining third. How about the lodge?”

“That stayed in Dunning’s name, but it was mortgaged heavily to Curtis and Dunning was behind in his payments. According to Mr. Everett-Smith, Curtis had threatened to foreclose on the lodge. Looks like he wanted the whole kaboodle. Do you want to hear about Kurt Koenig?”

“Not particularly.”

“What? But he’s your man. He’s got a police record; nearly killed a man once.”

“I know, but he committed suicide.”

Charlie pouted. “And didn’t commit the crime?”

“No. How about the financial status of Jim Bartlett?”

“It’s complicated. Apparently, this Bartlett had a shadow partner involved in land speculation. Bartlett is being probed by Internal Revenue. Looks like there’s a holdout somewhere.

“The Beaver is really grinding his teeth over this one, Peter. Jackson Curtis was a big power: a money bags for the Republican far right. So the Beaver is being pressured by the Commissioner who’s being pressured by...”

“I know that,” Peter interrupted. “The Beaver said he might have to come up here and take over the case.”

Charlie stared at him, his heavy eyebrows arched. “Oh, come now.”

“It’s true.”

“You two trying to run this case? Do fire and water mix?”

“He’d run it.”

“Yes, and he’d have arrested Kurt Koenig before the poor lad had a chance to hang himself.”

Peter went over to the bedraggled sofa and lay down. He closed his eyes.

“No wonder Curtis gave orders around here,” he said.

“You look tired.”

“One thing about the Arctic was how beautifully flat most of it was—not like this country. Is there anything from the lab?”

“Not much, so far. One thing for sure, Curtis didn’t even have time to know he was dead,” Charlie said with commiseration.

“Passing so suddenly into darkness...”

“What?”

“Nothing. A fragment from De Quincy. About sudden death.” It was from a passage he thought about having read at Cathy’s funeral. Her death was sudden enough, though it took four months. Peter lay with his hands folded over his rather gaunt frame, his eyes closed. The opaque look of her eyes just after she died shocked him. Not unlike the eyes of Kurt Koenig, or even Jackson Curtis. Death has no favourites. “You know what they say about sudden death in the English Prayer Book?”

“No,” said Charlie, with a sigh.

“ ‘From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death—Good Lord, deliver us.’ ”

“Amen,” said Charlie piously.

“Let’s look at the facts of this case up to now, Charlie. Three days before the murder, according to Bartlett, a shot was fired at him or his boat from the south shore when he was out fishing. He was off Soame’s Creek. Neither he nor Dunning told me this—Pat Dunning told me—and the holes in the boat were patched over.” Peter leaned over and picked up a sheet of paper from the side table, and tossed it to Ross. “Those are the measurements and rough sketch of the positions of the holes in the boat. So we come to yesterday morning when Bartlett and Jackson Curtis were fishing off Soame’s Creek....”

“According to Bartlett,” Charlie interjected.

“Yes, and at approximately 7:45 a.m., about fifteen minutes before they were to head in to shore so that Bartlett could make breakfast while Jackson continued fishing, a shot was fired from the south shore—distance approximately three hundred yards to the boat, which was about eighty yards from where Soame’s Creek enters into the lake, according to Jim Bartlett.. Jackson died instantly. I questioned Ed Dunning, Helen Curtis, and Jim Bartlett. They said that the shot that killed Curtis must have come from some joker trying to scare tourists, or a stray shot. When I Pat Dunning told me about the business with the earlier shot, both Dunning and Bartlett changed their stories and said that they believed it was the Indian.”

“What Indian?”

“John Vincent. He lives up on the plateau on the south side with his old father. Before I went up there to see him I questioned Kurt Koenig, who told me his life story and confessed to killing Curtis.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t the one.”

“He wasn’t. There were two shooting incidents and Koenig knew nothing about the first one. But the two incidents had to be closely connected. Both took place within a three day time span. Both shots were fired, apparently, in the same locality. Also, Koenig, from all reports, was a poor shot, and he couldn’t tell me where his gun was.”

“What did he say happened to it?”

“He just said it disappeared.”

Charlie frowned. "Why would Koenig confess?"

"As his last act on earth, he wanted to protect Helen Curtis, and so prove his love."

"Helen Curtis?"

"Koenig's last in a long line of hopeless love affairs. She was twenty years younger than her husband."

"I see."

"Sure you do, Charlie. Now, if Koenig did not kill Curtis, he must have had a good reason for believing that Helen did, or that she was directly implicated. John Vincent cleared that up this morning. According to him, Helen had brought them both into a plot to murder Curtis. She gave Vincent money for a new high-powered rifle and for this he handed over his 30.30 to Koenig. They were to get Curtis in a crossfire when he was out on the lake, and then sink the body. Koenig, however, bowed out at the last moment, and finally John did too, but not before he had his finger on the trigger five days ago."

"Why didn't he fire?"

"He said he just couldn't pull that trigger."

"And you believed him?"

"Curtis was killed yesterday, not five days ago."

"Maybe he fired and missed and that was the shot that went through the gunwale."

“Vincent’s story is that he was supposed to shoot when Curtis was out alone in his boat. He knew from Helen that Curtis would be fishing early in the morning *alone* five days ago. Now, what you’re suggesting is that he didn’t fire on that day five days ago, but the next day when Bartlett was out fishing without Curtis, though Vincent has a pair of binoculars and knows that Curtis always wears a bright blue cap when he’s out fishing. So he knows it’s not Curtis. Could you tell me why he would fire at Bartlett? Not only that, but his shot is away off, hitting below the gunwale of the boat, an amateur shot. Not like him at all. It just doesn’t add up.”

“Then who did fire that shot?” Charlie asked. “I mean, the one that went through the boat.”

“That’s it,” Peter said. “So let’s get back to our story. The point is that if John Vincent is telling the truth, then Helen Curtis is implicated. And this conclusion is supported by Kurt Koenig’s false confession, which otherwise appears without motive.”

“Helen Curtis,” Charlie breathed, as though the words themselves might convince him. “She shot him?”

“I’m fairly certain she didn’t,” Peter said, “but it looks like she’s implicated.”

“How can you say ‘it looks like’ if you believe Vincent? It seems to me pretty certain.”

“If Koenig or Vincent fired the killing shot then she would certainly be implicated, but I’m assuming they didn’t.”

“Are you suggesting a third party acting without her knowledge?”

“With or without her knowledge.”

Peter sat up on the edge of the sofa.

“So what’s your plan?”

“How do you do it with pheasants or grouse, Charlie? You course the field until you start them up. Let’s start with Jim Bartlett, Ed Dunning, and Tim Dunning. They all had motives of sorts, though perhaps we don’t know how strong these were. Blake Moran is another possibility, and maybe Pat or Fern Dunning. Anyway, Jim Bartlett wanted to knock Jackson Curtis off his throne as head of the firm. There’s no doubt about his ambition to get ahead. As sole head of the firm he would have control of a lot more money, and it may be that; your information about tax troubles and a shadow partner is relevant here when we fill in the blanks. Finally, his prize might be Helen Curtis and her inheritance which could be worth over seven hundred million dollars.”

“Is there evidence of anything between them?”

“Not yet. There should be something between them, and I believe there is, but there is no hard evidence of it yet.”

“And Ed Dunning?” asked Charlie.

“What you got from Curtis’ attorney gives Dunning a motive.”

“I don’t quite see how,” said Charlie. “Let’s see. Curtis’ death could put Mrs. Curtis in the driver’s seat. She’d have it all.”

“And if Dunning can’t make the mortgage payments?”

“He can’t. We looked into his credit standing. About his only asset is this lodge, which is eighty percent mortgaged, and just enough cash flow to meet operating expenses.”

“So he’d probably lose it,” said Peter. “And, Charlie, the one strong impression I have of the man—otherwise he’s a shadow figure—is his attachment to this place. Look at the record. He came up here eighteen years ago and built it up cabin by cabin... all that sweat and hardly any return... in fact, borrowing to keep afloat. Nothing else seemed to matter to him. His family couldn’t stand him, and he couldn’t stand them. I think he married just to have somebody to do the cooking. His whole ego is tied up in this place, in the real estate.”

“There are worse hang-ups.”

“Comes the time when Jackson has had enough. He wants his monthly payments. More than that he wants to own the whole lake and decides to call in his loans. At that point Dunning faces the imminent loss of everything that matters to him.”

“No motive for murder if somebody else gets the same power.”

“But that somebody is Helen Curtis. If they are partners in getting rid of Curtis, then of course it would be Dunning’s job to pull the trigger...”

“And Helen Curtis’ to tear up the mortgage,” added Charlie.

“Setting up a fall guy, if possible, such as John Vincent or Kurt Koenig.”

“You mentioned Tim Dunning. Is he a suspect?”

“I wish he were,” Peter said.

“Motive?”

“To destroy his father, point the finger at him.”

“Oh, come now.”

“He’s already told me that his father is the guilty man.”

Charlie stared at him. “What kind of son is that?”

“Wait till you meet him, and you’ll understand. Still, it’s remote—
unless there’s another reason.”

“How old is the kid?”

“Eighteen.”

“Could there be something going on between him and Helen Curtis?”

Peter gave him a look of profound distaste. “How could she? She’s a
she-wolf and wolves go after big game. Dalliance with children would
interest her only as a means to an end.”

“But if she got this Tim to do her killing? That’s her end.”

“Tim may be a venomous little bastard, but he’s nobody’s fool.”

“Sometimes I think you’re too rational,” Charlie observed.

“Tell that to the Beaver.”

“I mean these motivations can’t always be pinned down. They’re
murky as hell. Even the person who commits the crime doesn’t always know
why he did it.”

“You mean find the guilty party first and then worry about
motivation?”

“Sure.”

“Charlie, you’re right, and we do that by raising the pressure on this crew until somebody breaks. You can start with Tim Dunning.”

Charlie groaned. “Why don’t I ever learn to let you win the arguments?” Peter smiled at him sweetly. “Alright, what’s my approach?”

“First of all, we want to find the missing gun. Tim could have it or know where it is. Don’t try to hide that you’re looking for it. And then pour it on, Charlie. I want him thinking he’s under deep suspicion, along with Bartlett and Dunning.”

“What are you going to do?”

“An end run on Ed Dunning through Mrs. Dunning.” He looked at his watch. “In an hour and a quarter dinner will be served. We give the impression that the case is pretty well solved, and an arrest is not far off. And, as compensation for dealing with Tim Dunning, I’ll let you sit next to Helen Curtis.”

“That’s more like it.”

“I assure you your feeling will be one of acute discomfort.”

Charlie grinned.

“You’re the arm of the law, Charlie, remember that. And when she puts her hand on your knee you don’t tremble, you don’t even blink. That’s the price of being a Mounted Policeman.”

“Sometimes I think the price is too high,” Charlie muttered.

“Of course you don’t mean that,” said Peter mildly.