

Chapter 17

Peter arrived at Clinton at 4:10 to see Helen Curtis. The doctor in charge of her case had said that the visit should be kept short, especially since the patient was to be transferred that evening to the Vancouver General Hospital to undergo surgery.

Dr. Cooper, a rather squat man with an important expression met Peter in the hospital waiting room.

“We’ve given her something for the pain, so she might get drowsy. I assume you’ve got the man who shot her up like this?”

“Yes, we have.”

“Good for you.” For a moment Peter thought he might be trying to pat him on the head. “Just try to avoid too much stress. I believe she’s gone through more than enough already. She’s on heavy medication.”

“She’s used to it.”

The doctor looked surprised.

Peter was shocked by her appearance. It was like a fairy story where the beautiful young princess suddenly turns into the horrid old witch. Her skin looked like putty, and her eyes had lost their luster, looking dully up at him.

“So Ed talked to you,” she said in a low, flat voice.

“Ed said you have something to tell me.”

“Ed.” As though the name alone expressed everything about the man.

“He’s sure you’re going to charge him with murder.”

“Maybe he’s right.”

“What’d he tell you?”

Peter outlined Ed’s account of the day he found himself a member of the Order of the Rising Star.

“What was this Order all about?”

“An organization of big businessmen,” she said without interest.

“Jackson was their leader. It was just a glorified Boy Scout deal as far as I could see. Bring young Americans up to Loon Lake where they could run around in the bushes and build muscles into brains.”

“There was more to it than that.”

“So Curtis thought. The men of business were going to take over America—no more crap about equal rights and fair deals. The three Bs—brains, brawn, and bucks—they’d rule. But he left out the fourth B and that was the important one.”

“What was the fourth B?”

“Bullshit, which is what holds the other three together. How do you get millions of people all waving their flags at the same time or making their Heil Hitlers all together? You feed them bullshit. Curtis wasn’t much good at that. He had an idea but no ability to put it across. To get people to go for an idea you need some zip, some image, some hype. That’s where Blake came in. There’s a pack of cigarettes on the table. Give me one, huh?”

Peter lit a cigarette for her. She inhaled deeply, shutting her eyes.

“You know what I really need.”

“I know.”

She took another long drag, letting the smoke out as she spoke.

“Blake was in the merchant marine when he was twenty and in jail when he was twenty-two. Then for another twenty he was in and out, mainly trafficking, but you name it and he did it. Real name: Cy Cutler. You can check the records. Anyway, along came a manslaughter charge, so he cut across the border and changed his identity. He got work helping this old rancher, Sam Welburne, who owned the spread that Blake now calls his. Then the old man’s health got worse. So Cy—I mean Blake—talked him into a partnership saying he’d do all the work. It wasn’t too long before Sam popped off, and little wonder when you consider the amount of arsenic Blake had been giving him. So, as agreed, the whole property became Blake’s.”

She dragged on her cigarette and stubbed it out, though hardly half smoked.

“What do you know about me?”

“According to Bartlett you were born Genevieve Deneuve, had a tough family life, became a hooker name of Jenny Den, then a model called Helen Alban specializing in wealthy clients. Finally, you married Jackson Curtis, he being wealthy, elderly, and impotent. That’s about it.”

“True, except it leaves out the main thing: I was a heroin junkie. Yeah. It started when I was seventeen and on the street. But what you don’t know is that the time came when I decided to break the habit. I hated the goddamn junk because it held me down in the gutter. I hated it. Can you understand that with your cop’s mind? And it took me six years to break it, but I did. I don’t know anyone else who ever did that.”

For just a moment, Peter thought he saw a gleam of triumph in her eyes, but then the total dullness returned.

“I was on my own for years—that’s an eternity in a junkie’s life—and then I came up here and met Blake Moran. Yes, he was another junkie. It was the last thing I expected to find in the northern bush.”

She stared out the window, and then closed her eyes. After a few moments Peter wondered if she had fallen asleep.

Then she spoke in a dull voice: “That was the end for me. When he got me back on there was no turning around.”

She opened her eyes, looking vaguely toward him.

“Give me a cigarette. Like me Moran had been a junkie most of his life, even in prison. Up here he’d take a trip every now and then to junkie’s paradise in Vancouver to stock up.”

“That would take some cash,” said Peter, giving her a cigarette and lighting it.

“Oh, he had cash. Not a lot, but enough. For one thing old Sam had left him a few pieces of property here and over towards Big Bar. For sure he had a few scams going. One thing he wouldn’t do in this part of the world was traffic. He knew better than that. He was waiting for the big haul.”

“So he just gave it away.”

“To me, yes, using me to get to Jackson. I still remember when I told him about Jackson’s organization. It wasn’t called the Order of the Rising Star then but the Society for a Free Enterprise World. Talk about Dullesville. Jackson liked the title because it spelled FEW. He said that was right because the few were going to rule, not the many, who’d always mess things up. I let him know that unless he did something more than hold businessmen’s meetings, he’d never get his FEW out of the board room. But when I told Blake about Jackson’s big dream his eyes lit up like it was the dawn of a new day. The old con was back in business with a vengeance.”

She closed her eyes again and seemed on the point of going to sleep despite the cigarette burning between her fingers.

“So Blake added some hype to Jackson’s idea,” Peter prompted.

Her eyes opened. “He did more than that. He showed Jackson how to make the idea take off. He proposed that Curtis set up a center at Loon Lake to train young recruits for his Order. Give them uniforms. Give them guns. Give them an enemy—Big Government, what else? —all liberals being communist dupes or sympathizers. Let these brainwashees be the leaders who go back to the States and start their own training groups. It would work like a wave gathering other waves. The time would come when nothing would stand up to it... Well, Jackson went for Blake’s idea one hundred percent. He loved it.”

“And you fanned the fire.”

“More than that. I was the bridge between Blake and Jackson. I held them together.”

“And once Curtis was won over,” Peter added, “you made it look to Blake as though Curtis was going to leave him alone on the far side of the bridge, with nothing to show for his trouble. That would annoy Blake. After that it wasn’t too hard to talk him into Jackson’s murder.”

She inhaled slowly and let out a long trail of smoke.

“The murder was Blake’s idea, not mine. One afternoon I drove down to his place when Jackson was out fishing. This was just after I got hooked again. Then out of the blue he said to me that Jackson would have to go. Now that the lake property was his, he’d served his purpose, and it was time for Blake and me to cash in. You see, my marriage contract would give me the one-third piece of the Star Rise Company owned by Curtis. I’d then call

on Ed to pay his debts and pick up the lodge on default. That way Blake and I would have the lake to ourselves.”

“Where would that leave Fern?”

“Where do you think? Out on the roadside with Ed Dunning.”

“She didn’t know about Ed borrowing from Jackson?”

“That’s right. If she had known she might have seen through Blake’s scheme. She never knew that I pushed Ed into a mortgage with Jackson, who was more than willing to advance the money once he saw that he was throwing a net over the lodge. Without being pushed from both sides I doubt that Ed would have caved in. He moves slow, but he’s not stupid.”

Stubbing out her cigarette, she folded her hands in front of her and stared out the window at the sooty column of smoke rising from the hospital incinerator.

“Blake had just one goal in mind and that was to run a big drug operation out of Loon Lake. You know that heroin comes in from South Asia, mostly by boat. The problem is for these boats to remain invisible, so they like to come in to some part of the coast that is so remote even the crows feel lonely. Then the shipment is to a transfer point, also remote. The stuff targeted for the Canadian market stays, but the biggest portion is sent Stateside by small aircraft, and dropped at prearranged points. But I guess you know all this.”

“Go on.”

“What Blake wanted was to set up a transfer point at Loon Lake, but he had to have credibility with the mob, and that meant the right location, total control and a good cover, not to speak of personal connections and the trust of the mob. Moran née Cutler was known to them from way back, and since coming north he’d kept up his contact through Vancouver connections, although he’d been careful to do no small-time trafficking, so the police knew nothing about him. But until Jackson came along he didn’t have the control or the cover. Using Jackson’s money he was able to grab all the lake property except for Mabel Donahue’s piece, and it was just a matter of time before that lady would sell out or else find herself getting just too sick to hang on. The Indians on the south side were taken care of by the fire and would go for a lease; at least that’s what we thought. I’ve already told you how the Dunnings were handled. The remaining problem was Jackson. He knew nothing about the drug trafficking.”

“What about the adequate cover?”

“Jackson’s grieving widow would dump the Order of the Rising Star idea which was only useful to get Jackson’s money applied to the lake property. Instead, we’d set up a summer camp for abused children, or some such worthy project, which would last for only a month or so each year—not enough to interfere with our real business.”

“And Bartlett. How would he fit in?”

A look of distaste crossed her face.

“He wouldn’t fit in. He’s a street-wise straight. He wants to make it big in the straight world, which means he has to suppress his instinct to cut throats. When his fuse shorts, he’s just a punk despite all that fine schooling. Look what he did to me. I knew I was taking a risk messing with him. But Blake designed the killing to make it look like Bartlett’s work. So I had to go along with it.”

“What did Bartlett know about the drug operation?”

“He knew I was on the hook, and he smelled a real downer in Blake. I think he suspected that Blake and me had some kind of deal between us, but he didn’t know what it was. He only knew he wanted no part in anything to do with Blake, who was pure poison. In that he was smart. I said he was street-wise.”

“Okay, so Blake worked out the plan to kill Jackson Curtis and you helped him set it up?”

“You expect me to deny it? If you only knew how I hated Curtis, that old patch of scar tissue. The only thing I disliked about Blake’s plan was that Jackson wouldn’t even know what hit him, more’s the pity. Sure, I helped Blake. I more than helped him. I pushed him to do it. Get it done, I told him. Get it done. Because he had such an elaborate plan, though I helped him there, too.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“He kept saying, don’t make it so easy that the police won’t believe it, or so complicated that they can’t figure it out. All the police want is a nice

clean case in court. He figured if the police didn't go for Kurt Koenig, they'd fix on John Vincent. But just in case the police got really smart the ideal fall guy was Jim Bartlett. He had to be taken care of one way or another anyway. So we worked out the first shot to the boat. You already know how I did that."

"So Blake shot him with the 30:30."

"That's right."

"Where from?"

"Ask Blake. From somewhere along the shore there."

"Then he put the 30:30 back in the hollow log."

"No. We figured Bartlett might look for it there after the shooting so he could get rid of the evidence. We had this other hiding place picked out. Only Blake didn't put the gun back there. I was a fool to think he wouldn't double on me, one more time."

Peter closed his notebook.

"Why are you telling me all this? You've just made yourself an accomplice to first degree murder."

She was silent for a moment, staring dully at him.

"What do you care?"

He shrugged: "Maybe I shouldn't care."

"I won't ever go to prison," she said, "if that's what you're worried about. Not dear little Jenny. I'm going to float high just once more, so high I'll go right out of sight. But Blake Moran will go to prison. Maybe this time

he won't be able to get what he lives for, even behind bars. They'll put him into solitary. That's what I want. I want him to just sit there in the hole with nothing to take. The junky's hell."

Her eyes searched nowhere in particular.

"Once I had a chance. I was out on a limb, but I was okay. Blake had to cut me down. He had to do it to me. He had to screw my life. That's real murder."

Her eyes sought to focus on him.

"Don't you care about a real murder?" she asked.