



# All For One

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery

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IT WASN'T THAT CHARLIE DIDN'T like young people. He believed firmly that they should wear their hair any way that pleased them, that they had the right to adorn their bodies however they chose, that their music was their business, as were the movies they watched, the videos they memorized. Their vigor and passion, their frontal approach to problems, all that he could appreciate and applaud, but he really didn't want to work for them, he was thinking that afternoon in May as he watched a young trio in his driveway. It was obvious that they were arguing even if their words didn't carry to him at the window in his living room.

A young woman, Teresa Coultier, he assumed, since she had called earlier, and two younger men had emerged from a Land Rover and started to approach the house, then stopped when she turned on them both, apparently to lay down the law. The younger of the two men nodded meekly enough, but the other one was showing an attitude. Charlie didn't care much for young people with an attitude. The trio seemed to come to an agreement and the procession resumed. He went to the door to admit them. "Ms. Coultier?" he said. "Come on in. I'm Meiklejohn."

She shook hands with him and then pointed to one of the young men and said, "This is my half brother Michael Andreson. And this is my half brother Nathan Coultier."

She was in her twenties, and very pretty, slender, small-boned, with deep-set blue eyes and long black hair. He could see the resemblance between her and each of the brothers, both apparently younger than she was; Nathan had her lovely eyes, and Michael had her peaked eyebrows and black hair.

He ushered them to the living room; Constance walked in from the kitchen to be introduced, and they all sat down, the three young people in a line on the sofa, Constance in the wing chair, and Charlie in his morris chair, from which he regarded them without much enthusiasm. It was a warm day, and they were flushed and sweaty, dressed in jeans, running shoes, T-shirts.

"All right," he said. "What's the problem

"It's very complicated," Teresa Coultier said. "Will you just listen to the whole story before you ask anything?"

"Can you tell it in half an hour?" he asked.

Teresa flushed. Michael started to speak and she jabbed him with her elbow. “Yes. My stepfather is trying to kill me.”

Charlie didn’t groan out loud; he knew he didn’t make a sound, or change his expression, any more than Constance did, but he groaned inwardly. “Go on,” he said.

Teresa looked from him to Constance, to him again, apparently startled at their lack of response. Nathan glared at Charlie, and Michael drew in a deep breath but did not interrupt when Teresa continued. “My grandmother is very old, ninety-two, and she is very ill, in a hospital in Paris. When she dies, a large estate will be distributed to her heirs. I’m one of them, and Michael is another. I believe my stepfather killed my brother and my sister, and tried to kill me last summer, and again two weeks ago. So my part of the inheritance will pass on to my mother and to Michael, and my stepfather will control it.”

“She’s talking about your father?” Charlie murmured to Michael when Teresa paused.

Michael nodded; he looked belligerent and eager to talk but maintained silence, probably under orders.

“What happened last summer?” Charlie asked.

“There was a fire in the guest house where I was staying. I had to jump out of a second-floor window, and I broke my arm and my leg in two places.”

“You think it was an arson fire? Where is the guest house?”

“It’s on his property, and yes, of course it was arson!”

“Was there an investigation? Do the police think it was arson? Does the fire department?”

Her face tightened and she shook her head. “They seem to think I left a fire screen open, sparks flew out, something like that But I didn’t.”

“Okay,” Charlie said. “What happened two weeks ago?”

“I was shot at in my car. And the police call that a random shooting, but it wasn’t. He did it.”

“Why?” Charlie asked bluntly. “If he wanted you out of the way, why wait almost a year to try again?”

“It’s complicated,” she said.

“Let me tell this part,” Michael said.

“Is that what you were arguing about in the driveway? Who would tell which part?”

Teresa nodded unhappily. “I didn’t want Michael to have anything to do with calling his father a murderer.”

Charlie was watching Michael. He was a long boy, with long legs and arms, not yet filled out, as if he hadn’t quite stopped adding height. His legs were stretched out before him and he seemed to be fascinated with his shoelaces, but there was a telltale tendon in his neck, and tendons showing on the backs of his hands. As relaxed as a guy facing a firing squad.

“Someone should tell us,” Charlie said when the pause seemed to extend long enough.

“Trying to decide where to begin,” Michael said, and drew in his legs, sat up straighter. “Okay. Her father is Jeffrey Coultier, and my dad is Sam Andreson. They were in the army together in Berlin back in the fifties, where they met Marie Lanier. She was working for the French government. They all became friends, and both of them wanted to marry her, but she picked Jeffrey.”

He spoke with few pauses, no backtracking, as he covered the brief history. Marie and Jeffrey had come to the States, settled in his hometown, near Oyster Bay, and he returned to school to finish his education. They had Gary, Suzette, and Trish—she poked him with her elbow again, and he corrected himself—Teresa. When Trish was two years old, Marie divorced Jeffrey and married Sam, and a year later he, Michael, was born. Both families lived just outside of Oyster Bay.

“Grandmother was pretty sore over her daughter marrying an American,” he went on, more slowly now. “She had lost her husband and three sons during World War Two, and her only surviving child was leaving the country. She set up a trust fund for the grandchildren, twenty thousand dollars a year when they reached twenty-one, and at twenty-five they would receive a very large settlement, and eventually, when she died, split the estate, half for the grandchildren, half for Marie.”

“What kind of money are you talking about?” Charlie asked when Michael stopped.

“A million dollars, what Trish will get next August and I’ll get in

a few years. I'm twenty-one. When Grandmother dies, there will be a lot more."

Charlie whistled, then glanced at Nathan, who shrugged.

"She doesn't care if my dad is alive or dead," Nathan said. "She probably never even heard of me. I have zilch coming."

"I'm twenty-four," Trish said then in a low voice. "I want to live to see twenty-five." She sounded like a frightened child.

Nathan took one of her hands, and on the other side, Michael took the other. They looked very young, lined up on the sofa, holding hands.

After a moment, Charlie said brusquely, "You've made some drastic accusations; let's have some facts. Tell us about Gary. How did he die?"

Trish nodded and drew in a breath. "Seven years ago, he brought a girl home to celebrate his engagement. They were going to be married on his twenty-fifth birthday in July. There was a dinner party. Later on, he decided to go see Dad, our father, Jeffrey, and he ran off the road and was killed." She said this rapidly with no inflection, as if she were reciting a boring history lesson.

"He had been drinking?"

"Not that much!" she cried. "He never drank much. But they said the autopsy showed a high level of alcohol, anyway. Legally, he was drunk. I didn't believe it then and I don't now!" She pulled her hands loose from her brothers', and clasped them together tightly.

"Okay. Suzette. How and where?"

"Two years later," Trish said, but this time her voice broke. Michael put his arm about her shoulders, and Nathan looked at her uncertainly, as if he wanted to pat her or put his arm around her, too, but wasn't quite sure just how to do it.

"She was really upset by Gary's death," Trish said after a second or two. "They were close; I was five years younger than Suzette, but it was never the same. She missed Gary. Anyway, she had an apartment in New York and a job with a magazine, and she was getting better. When she didn't turn up at work on Monday and didn't answer the phone, one of her friends went to see what was wrong. She had died on Saturday night, they said. Overdose. Possibly suicide. She was twenty-four." Trish ducked her head,

opened her clenched hands, closed them again harder.

Michael looked at Charlie. “Last June, Trish was home, my dad’s home, Sam’s. She had got her master’s from Johns Hopkins, and we had a little party for her, just family and a couple of friends. There was a problem with the plumbing upstairs, and Dad suggested she might want to stay in the guest house because plumbers would be there early the next morning. You have to understand,” he added quickly, “that wasn’t punishment, but more like an honor. We all used to sneak in there and play when we were kids. I was a little jealous, to tell the truth, that he was letting her use it. After dinner, we sat around and talked awhile, and Mother went to bed.” His voice faltered. “She hasn’t been very well these past few years.” Then he continued: “Trish, I, and a friend, Rita Glenwood, went on to the guest house. We made a fire in the fireplace and talked for a couple of hours, listened to music, and around midnight Rita said she had to be on her way, so we left and I drove her home. At four in the morning, the yardman woke up smelling smoke, and he yelled and got everyone up. When I got downstairs, I saw the guest house burning. The fire department got there about five minutes later, and one of them found Trish unconscious on the ground.”

Charlie felt the cold knot that paradoxically came with fire. Trish looked frozen in place, hardly even breathing. Michael’s arm was still around her shoulders; he had drawn her closer, and Nathan had moved in closer on the other side. “No smoke alarm?” Charlie asked.

“They said it had a bad battery,” Michael said flatly.

“Okay. Trish, had you been drinking that night?”

“Hot chocolate,” she said.

“When I heard she was going to stay in the guest house, I brought chocolate and milk and cookies, stuff we always liked when we were kids,” Michael said.

Charlie nodded and asked Trish, “You went on to bed when your brother and his friend left?”

“Within a few minutes. Later, I woke up coughing and choking. My room was filling with smoke. When I touched the doorknob, it burned my hand, and I ran to the window. I couldn’t get it open. The lights were out, and there was a glow from the bathroom, but

it was too smoky to really see anything. Then I stumbled over my suitcase. I grabbed it and swung as hard as I could and the window broke. Flames came through the door and one of the walls then, and when I looked down, flames were coming from the windows on the first floor, and I just jumped.”

And damn lucky you didn't kill yourself doing it, Charlie thought. He nodded. “Okay, two weeks ago. What happened?”

“I was driving from the train station to my father's house. I stayed there after I got out of the hospital—”

Suddenly, Nathan blurted, “He was afraid for her to go back up there. We all were. No one said anything, or why, or what we were afraid of, but we were. Dad had a fit when she said they were expecting her to come back. They stayed home; I changed my plans. I was supposed to go to Michigan State; I went to Stony Brook instead. No one argued. We all knew we didn't want to go away, be away. We wanted her home with us.” He was flushed, very red.

Trish put her hand on his arm. “Take it easy,” she murmured, and turned to Charlie. “They had planned to take their sabbaticals together and go to England, but they stayed home with me instead, Dad and Lorraine, I mean. And Nathan went to school every day and was home every night. And no one ever said anything, never raised a suspicion, pointed a finger. It was just a feeling of uneasiness. Anyway, the shooting. I went to New York City that day and left my car at the station. It was dark and raining when I got back, so I was driving pretty slowly.” She looked down at her hands again and spoke very fast now. “Then he shot at me; I didn't know what it was at first. The rear window shattered, and the windshield cracked all over. I could hardly see through it, and I realized it was a shot. I sped up and drove the rest of the way home as fast as I could. Dad called the police.”

Charlie gazed at her unhappily. “Did you see any lights following you?”

She shook her head, not looking up.

“And no one followed you home, or shot at you again?”

She shook her head again.

“Ms. Coultier, exactly what do you want me to do?”

“Are you kidding?” Michael demanded. “Look into it.”