

A close-up photograph of a white cat's face, focusing on its right eye which is a vibrant green color. The cat's fur is soft and white, and its whiskers are visible. The background is dark and out of focus.

Sister Angel

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery

Kate Wilhelm

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DINNER HAD BEEN EXTRAORDINARILY good, Charlie thought with contentment, even if he had cooked it himself. From the kitchen there now came the soft chugging of the dishwasher at work; closer, the clink of cup on saucer, a pop from the fireplace or a hiss; even closer, the nearly inaudible purr of Ashcan, who had settled on his lap instantly when he sat down. Outside, silently, the snow was piling up. He sighed again and opened his eyes.

Candy was sneaking up on the cream pitcher on the coffee table. Her forequarters were low to the floor, her rear up high, and the white tip of her tail twitched like a semaphore flag.

“Ridiculous cat,” Constance said. “That’s how she hunts, signaling, Here I am!” The cat reached the table. “Candy!” Constance said, not raising her voice. Candy now discovered that her right hind leg was filthy and started to wash it.

Gretchen laughed. “It was so strange to think of you and Charlie stuck way out in the country, but it’s kind of nice. I like it.” She glanced at her husband and added quickly, “Not for myself, of course.”

“We’re two hours out of New York,” Constance said.

“And the village is lovely. The people, now that the tourists have gone, are very nice to us. They still don’t trust us, or include us when *they* say ‘us,’ but it will come.”

“Maybe,” Gretchen said. She lifted her cognac and swirled it. “Is Charlie going to sleep now?”

“Probably. Are you, Charlie?”

He opened his eyes again and winked at Constance. “Tough day down at the south forty,” he drawled.

How good it was, Constance thought then, to see him so relaxed, so content. During the year since his retirement, he had become younger-looking; the lines were melting away, the mask dissolving. The real difference was in his eyes, she thought, considering him; they had been turning hard, impenetrable, and now the deep brown was softening again, reverting to how his eyes had been when they first met at college over twenty-five years ago, before he had become a New York City cop. He was watching her watch him, she realized. She tried not to smile, shook her head almost imperceptibly, and turned to Gretchen, but not before Charlie raised an eyebrow and

practically leered at her.

She heard the hint of laughter in her own voice now. “Okay, we’ve wined you and dined you and later we’ll even bed you down. Can’t go out into the storm, my dears. Your turn. You said there was an urgent problem you had to discuss. Give.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Dutch asked suddenly before Gretchen had a chance to speak. He ignored her stiff glance of reproof. Dutch was in his late forties, a very tall, heavy man who had been an athlete in school and had kept in shape since. He was an engineering consultant, with clients throughout the world. He was leaving again the following day, Gretchen had mentioned when she called.

Gretchen was trying to contain her anger by studiously pouring herself more coffee, looking at her cup, the coffee carafe, anything but her husband. It bemused Constance to find that she had slid from her country hostess role into her professional psychologist role effortlessly, against her will even. Here she was observing, taking mental notes.

Dutch scowled at the cat in the middle of the room, still grooming itself. “It started back last summer,” he said. “At her cousin Wanda’s house in Connecticut. Vernon and Wanda Garrity. Only Vernon is dead now, and Wanda thinks he’s haunting her. And *she*”—he poked his thumb in the direction of his wife—“thinks I’m to blame.”

“I never said that.”

“You all but said it a hundred times.”

“Wasn’t Vernon Garrity the inventor?” Charlie asked lazily. “I didn’t know he was dead.”

“That’s the one,” Dutch said. “He showed us some cats he was working on last summer.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Here’s a guy who invents million-dollar gadgets for the government, for industry, and in his spare time he plays with mechanical cats.”

“What happened last summer?” Charlie wished he could close his eyes again and take just a small nap. He had spent the morning splitting firewood and now it felt good to be tired, full, and warm before the fire, too good to ruin by talking about ghosts. Still, trying to connect a man like Vernon Garrity with ghosts had turned on a

switch in his head and sleep switches had been shut down.

“You know how many times someone asks if you believe in ghosts and everyone says no and then they all spend the evening telling one improbable story after another without ever giving you anything you can hold on to. Noises, feelings, precognitions, fears. Bullshit!” He glanced apologetically at Constance. “Sorry. But that night, it got to me. I’d only met Vernon a couple of times, and there were things I really wanted to talk to him about. Anyway, at dinner he says, ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ And I said something or other that squelched the topic.”

“What you said,” Gretchen remarked, almost casually, as she studied the design on her coffee cup, “was that only idiots take seriously the superstitious fears of women, children, savages, and lunatics.”

He flushed. “I don’t know exactly what I said, but whatever it was, the topic was dropped and wasn’t brought up again. And now his widow is haunted, and *she* thinks it’s my fault.”

“Wanda didn’t get a chance to talk to Vernon again about what was on his mind,” Gretchen went on when Dutch stopped. “The next day, she drove back to New York with us, and the day after that, before she returned, he was killed. And now, six months later, she is getting messages from him, she says.”

“How was he killed?” Charlie asked.

“He was walking on the beach and someone hit him in the head with a rock and robbed him. No one was ever arrested.”

“Didn’t I meet Wanda years ago? She was a little girl,” Constance said then.

“She’s thirty-five now. Maybe at a slumber party at my place? She was at our house a lot.”

Constance and Gretchen had been in college together, had been friends, had parted and lost track of each other for many years. Gretchen’s call had been a surprise to Constance and, she admitted to herself ruefully, she had looked forward to gossip about mutual friends and enemies from the past. What she was hearing now was not at all what she had had in mind.

“Don’t forget Brother Amos,” Dutch said. “And Sister Angel.”

“Please. I’m getting to that. Brother Amos calls himself an

evangelist. He claims that Vernon is in touch with him, and he tells Wanda what Vernon says. Angel is his daughter, a teenager. He calls her Sister Angel.”

“Nasty can of worms,” Charlie commented, shaking his head. “People who want to hear from the dead always find a way. Not much you can do about it.”

“I said she should see a shrink.”

“Well, she won’t,” Gretchen snapped. “She claims that Brother Amos has told her things that no one on God’s earth but she and Vernon could have known. She isn’t hysterical or crazy or disturbed in any other way.”

“So you want Constance to go talk to her.” Charlie glanced at Constance with what was almost an evil grin. She understood the message: Now it was her turn to explain that she was retired, not taking private cases, busy writing a book and being a country housewife.

“Aunt Louise,” Gretchen said carefully, “asked me to get in touch with both of you. She wants someone to investigate Amos. And she wants Constance to talk sense into Wanda.”

“For the first time in her life, Aunt Louise has money in the family,” Dutch added dryly. “And she wants to keep it there.”

Gretchen nodded. “That’s part of it, of course. The way things are going, Brother Amos is likely to be the main beneficiary of Vernon’s death. And, of course, Brother Amos is a fraud.” She took a deep breath. “I have a letter from Wanda agreeing to cooperate with both of you, agreeing to pay your fees. She isn’t any happier about this than the rest of us. But neither can she deny that what Amos is telling her is authentic.”

Later, propped up on pillows in their king-sized water bed, Constance said thoughtfully, “It’s so weird that no one even thought of investigating Amos MacHugh until Gretchen mentioned it.” Charlie was undressing slowly, methodically, as he always did. She laughed. “What a pair they are, Gretchen and Dutch.”

He shook his head. That was not the way to live, forever snapping at each other’s heels. Looking at Constance now, he saw the woman in her forties, but he also saw the girl he had fallen in love with,

had married twenty-five years ago, and he could not decide which woman he was more attracted to, and, unable to decide, he thanked his good luck in having both in one package.

“You know we won’t be able to convince Wanda that Amos is out to get her money, don’t you?” He got into bed, making waves that bounced her up and down.

“Probably not. But you may turn up something to shake her faith in what he’s telling her. Maybe that’s all we can hope for.”

Charlie groped for her under the covers, grinning his most wicked grin. “That’s not all that I’m hoping for, cutie. Make eyes at me in front of company, will you, shameless blond hussy?”