



Torch Song

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery

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CHARLIE HAD FINISHED CUTTING up the apple trees he had felled back in February. Delimiting, debranching, disjuncting, disarming—he grinned—at least sawing them into manageable lengths; he surveyed with satisfaction the mess he had made. “Get ‘em before the sap rises,” his neighbor Hal Mitchum had advised, “and you can burn the wood come fall.” They were old, tired trees that yielded too little to stay and caught every disease known to the apple kingdom, and worse, they threatened the well-being of the half dozen new ones he and Constance had planted. He had gotten them before the sap rose, and then rain and snow had alternated week after week and Constance had said, “Charlie, you can’t just leave them all spring, all summer. They’ll be covered with brambles and weeds the day after spring comes. And you can’t drag them out after the daffodils are up,” she added in a way that warned she meant it. She had planted the daffodils and probably knew where each one was, when it was due.

“Why don’t you just hire someone to come in, do the job, clean up, and be done with it?” he said, mimicking her very well. He should have answered, Because you don’t hire someone every time there’s a little job to do, not when you’re supposed to be retired. But she would have nailed him on that one; there had been a couple of pretty lucrative jobs he had done in the past six months.

He started down the slope toward the barn to get the tractor fired up, find a chain, start hauling the butchered trees to less sacred ground. Slipping and sliding on a layer of snow over a layer of ice that rested uneasily on a layer of oozy mud, he made his way without a glance toward the house until he had nearly reached the barn. Then he stopped when he saw a man emerge from the barn and another one watching his progress from the back patio.

He shifted the chain saw and continued to walk. City men, dressed in topcoats, the nearer one in shiny black shoes that definitely were not meant for snow and ice and mud.

“Hey, Charlie,” the man at the barn said. “Carl Pulaski, remember me? We met twelve, fifteen years ago.”

Charlie had never seen him before. “You just dropped by for a little visit?”

“Sort of. In the neighborhood, remembered you, knew you were

around here somewhere. I'm with ATF, you remember?"

Charlie passed him to enter the barn. He glanced around swiftly but couldn't tell if anything had been moved, touched, or added. Pulaski followed him in.

"Gee, Charlie, Mr. Meiklejohn, I'm sorry you don't recall our meeting. That would have made this easier." He held out ID.

"Yep, Carl Pulaski, says so right there," Charlie murmured after a glance at it. He headed for the rear of the barn, where coils of rope and lengths of chain hung on pegs. "Thought you guys were all south for the winter—Waco, someplace like that."

"I'm in the area on official business," Pulaski said stiffly. "My associate and I want to talk to you."

"Well, I'm pretty busy right now. Like to get that wood hauled before it snows, rains, or sleets, or all three. Why don't you tell me what you want, and I'll remind you that I'm not official anything these days, and we'll both be able to get on with our work."

"Why are you on your high horse, Meiklejohn? You know you can make this as hard or as easy as you decide."

"See, Carl, when I was a wee lad, my mother taught me that if you want to pay a visit, you ring the doorbell and wait for someone to answer it. If no one shows up, you go away. You don't go snooping around outbuildings."

"We're investigating the Fircrest fire, Charlie. We need to talk to you."

Now Charlie studied him with interest. Pulaski looked frozen. His face was lean and very red at the moment. About fifty, give or take five, bareheaded and gray, pale blue eyes; he looked very earnest, sincere, like an accountant about to tell you how badly you screwed up your tax forms last year.

"What about the fire?" Charlie asked. "I know what was in the papers. You can probably still get them at the library."

"Let's go inside the house and talk," Pulaski said with an edge in his voice. "My feet hurt from the cold, and my hands are numb."

Charlie shrugged and nodded. He led the way, secure in his heavy boots now that the ground was level. Pulaski had trouble with his footing. At the patio, the second man waited. "My associate, Cy Gorman," Pulaski said, starting for the sliding door.

Gorman kept his hands in his pockets.

“This way,” Charlie told them, and led them to the back porch entrance, where he began to pull off his boots. He looked pointedly at Pulaski’s feet, and the agent took off his shoes. Gorman’s shoes were clean; he had had enough sense to stay on the walk, which had been cleared about a hundred times that year. Inside the back hall, Charlie hung his jacket on a peg; they kept their coats on.

He took them to the living room, where he poked a smoldering log into life, added another one, and drew aside as both agents crowded closer.

Gorman was softer-looking than Pulaski, and younger. His face was pudgy, pink from the cold, and he took in the room and Charlie with darting glances that didn’t seem to linger long enough for anything to register. He was blond, with thick dark eyebrows that looked pasted on.

“Anytime,” Charlie said, settling into his morris chair. He motioned toward chairs, the sofa. Ashcan, the cowardly gray cat, had gone rigor mortis-stiff when they entered the room, had blended invisibly into the covering of an overstuffed chair. Now, when Pulaski approached, Ashcan moaned and fled. Pulaski pretended not to notice, but his lean face tightened and became sharper, as if he suspected Charlie had set him up for a fright. He took off his topcoat and tossed it on the couch, sat down, and stretched out his legs toward the fire. Gorman, still standing on the hearth, shrugged out of his coat and held it. They used the same tailor, Charlie decided, and the tailor had stock in charcoal worsted. Even the ties were the same inoffensive blue-gray.

Deliberately, Pulaski said, “We’re conducting an official investigation of the arson fire at the Fircrest Nursing Home during the night of March tenth. Where were you that night?”

Charlie shook his head. “Wrong approach. See, first you tell me why you’re here asking questions, why ATF is involved and not the locals, and then we’ll see if I can give you answers.”

The other one was mute, Charlie thought then. Actually, he thought dumb, then changed it, because no one in his right mind would suggest the ATF could do anything dumb at the moment, not with tanks and heavy artillery out in force in Waco. Gorman

was watching him closely, not moving, not speaking. Charlie decided to ignore him. Instead, he watched Pulaski wrestle with an interior dialogue.

At last, Pulaski said, "I'm going to give it to you straight, Charlie. We looked you up; we know your record, your background, your years as an arson investigator, then homicide, everything that's public knowledge, and more. There are mixed feelings in the agency about you, your reasons for quitting on fires, where they say you were very good. Problem is, we got a tip three days ago, a woman from the nursing home who called to report that she saw a man toss something in a car trunk that night, minutes before the fire broke out. A white car. She got three of the numbers, and the computer came up with a match for your license. That's why we're here. Where were you that night?"

"My license and how many others have those numbers?" Charlie murmured. "She called you in Washington? Not Werner Kolb over at Fircrest?"

Pulaski glanced at Gorman before he answered. "Yeah, she called us."

"That's some savvy lady," Charlie said. "Course, you guys have made it big in the news department; that might explain her knowing about you. Got her on ice?"

Pulaski set his mouth in a firm line. "I'm asking the questions, Charlie. What about Wednesday night?"

"Here."

"With your wife, I suppose."

"I think I had a dancing girl in that night. You're sure the caller was a woman?"

This time when Pulaski glanced at Gorman, Charlie was watching to catch the signal, too. A slight shake of his head, easy to miss, easy to spot now that he was looking for it.

"Loosen up, Charlie," Pulaski said. "This is a preliminary, that's all. Someone calls in a tip, we check it out. You know that."

Charlie shook his head. "Uh-huh. Like the FBI checking out a tip on a local shooting. Give me a break, Pulaski. You got a whispery voice on the phone with a phony tip, you did a background check, and three days later here you are. You don't have

the caller; you don't even know if it was a man or woman. What are the other dates you're interested in?" He was satisfied when Gorman's eyes widened, then narrowed.

"We haven't mentioned any other dates," Pulaski said altogether too fast.

Charlie stood up. "You'd better move a bit away from the fire," he said to Gorman. "Your britches will scorch there."

Gorman took a step away from the hearth. "They said you were quick," he said, breaking his long silence. His voice was thin and high. "You figured we're looking into serial arson fires?"

"I figured," Charlie admitted.

Gorman nodded, then, keeping his gaze on Charlie, he said, "Give him the dates."

Pulaski rattled off five dates, the first one a year ago in February. "Can you prove where you were on any of those nights?" he demanded when he'd finished.

"If all those fires started between three and four in the morning, probably not. Can you?"

"No one said when they started," Gorman said quickly.

Charlie was glad then that Pulaski was doing most of the talking; Gorman's voice was already an irritant. He shrugged and glanced at his watch, checked it against the mantel clock, and nodded. "Gentlemen, it's been interesting. Now I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to get the hell out of here. Chores to do, you know how it goes."

Pulaski got to his feet, crossed the room to pick up his coat, and put it on. "It isn't just arson fire; it's also murder. Four people have died, others injured, some of them seriously, including two firemen, millions in damages..."

"Will you consent to a polygraph test?" Gorman asked.

Charlie gave him a look of disgust. "No." He said to Pulaski, "You picked him too green. Toss him back out in Wyoming to ripen on brush fires a year or two." This time, Gorman's face flushed, and there was a gleam for a moment in Pulaski's eyes. "Come on, out the way you came in, or you leave your shoes here." He walked before them to the kitchen, out to the porch, and watched Pulaski put his shoes on, tie them. They left without another word; he

watched until they rounded the side of the house, and then he went to the living room, where he continued to watch until they appeared in the driveway, got in a black Chevy, and drove off. Pulaski drove.

By then, Ashcan had come out from hiding, and Candy was in the living room sniffing around, first the hearth, then the chair where Pulaski had sat, the couch. Charlie watched the orange cat as she stood on her hind legs to smell the couch cushion.

Slowly, deliberately, Charlie opened his fists and flexed his fingers. Those sons of bitches, he thought, believed their cock-and-bull story.