

THE CROOKED ANGEL

Fair warning, Charles Cutter's Michigan-set murder mysteries featuring attorney Burr Lafayette are addictive. The author draws readers into Lafayette's cases with such ease they realize too late that even a writ of habeas corpus will not release them from the book until the last page is turned. Burr is not a criminal lawyer and only occasionally and reluctantly represents accused murderers. In the present case, his ex-girlfriend talks Burr into defending Brian, her sister's husband, who is accused of murdering his first wife. The trial takes place in Petoskey before a cantankerous judge and a prosecutor who hopes a conviction will launch his political career.

Lafayette is sure there is something odd in charging Brian with murder six years after his first wife's death was ruled accidental. His girlfriend, her sister and the accused all have trouble with the truth, and the prosecutor puts winning before the rule of law. The novel boasts a captivating courtroom drama full of striking twists and turns, great repartee, wonderfully odd minor characters, and a stunning denouement played out against the beautifully drawn backdrop of the Little Traverse Bay area.

Burr's law partner calls him, "half a step short of brilliant." The same could be said for this fourth in the series featuring Burr Lafayette, who is not half a step short of being an utterly fascinating character. As always, a Charles Cutter mystery is grand entertainment.

– Tom Powers, *Michigan in Books*

In *The Crooked Angel*, sleuthing attorney Burr Lafayette gets entangled in a dubious murder charge brought six years after the death. When Burr reluctantly takes up the defense at the insistence of a former lover, his motives aren't entirely pure. But what about hers? Burr outflanks a conniving prosecutor and an inept judge, only to realize that someone just might be trying to kill him, too.

With tight dialogue and a light touch, Charles Cutter's latest tale explores manipulation and misdirection, with compelling characters not always who they would seem to be. And as always, the tale is spiced with Burr Lafayette's ironic take on a legal system that seems just a little too cockeyed.

Not one to take the easy path when there's a way to complicate his life, Lafayette proves to be an entertaining champion in this exploration of truth, crime and consequences.

– Ben Beversluis, screenwriter of *From Wilderness to World Class*, and communications consultant

The fourth installment of the series takes the flawed lawyer-hero back to the 1980s, when he defended a man on murder charges despite never having handled a criminal trial.

The book is full of twists and surprises, enough to keep you turning the pages and needing to read just one more chapter.

Like the other Lafayette books, the courtroom scenes sparkle with Burr's often-wry interior commentary. Lawyers and non-lawyers will delight in how the evidence unfolds and how Cutter shades the presentation to create drama and uncertainty.

Cutter has a sharp eye for detail, and *The Crooked Angel*, set mostly in Petoskey, evokes a keen sense of place for that lakeside town and northern Michigan.

– Paul Fletcher, Editor, *Michigan Lawyers Weekly*

THE CROOKED ANGEL

A BURR LAFAYETTE MYSTERY

Charles Cutter

MISSION POINT PRESS

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The Crooked Angel is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents portrayed in this novel are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, alive or dead, events and locales are purely coincidental.



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*For
Christi*

*“If only there were world enough and time enough,
lady, this coyness be no crime.”*

Andrew Marvell
To His Coy Mistress

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, December 17, 1977

Brian Dunn stood in his shirtsleeves, shivering in the cold. He watched his house from the sidewalk across the street. The snow had started falling again, and it softened the light in the picture window, blurring the edges of the Christmas tree lights, the old-fashioned kind. Big bulbs—red, blue, green, yellow, orange, and white. The kind that didn't blink.

They'd strung the lights, wrapped the garland and hung the ornaments. Brian was on the stool trying to straighten the angel when Claudia decided she didn't like the garland. The fight about the garland had stopped everything, and that's why the angel was crooked. Brian had gone down to the basement. Claudia followed him down, and that's where he'd left her, lying at the bottom of the stairs.

Chad, their sixteen-year-old son, came out of the house sobbing and covered in blood. The next-door neighbor followed him out. She put her arm around his waist and walked him over to her house.

The Christmas tree in the window started to teeter, swaying back and forth. Once, twice, three times. Then it tipped over.

Brian thought the paramedics must have knocked it over with the gurney.

The cop came out and walked to his patrol car. He turned off the flashers, then waved at Brian to come back across the street.

Brian started back just as the coroner came out, the paramedics behind him wheeling the gurney with Claudia inside a body bag.

Earlier that day, they'd slipped into the woods on a two-track north of Harbor Springs, just east of Larks Lake Road, near the prison. They

weren't supposed to cut their tree until Sunday, but Claudia said she had to do something at church so they'd moved it up a day. Brian had still wanted to go on Sunday, but Claudia had said no. He hoped Saturday would work out.

Brian was just over six feet. He looked like he had been an athlete, but his stomach stuck out beyond his chest. Short, sandy hair, thinning in back, retreating in the front. Gray eyes, broad nose, straight but yellow teeth, square jaw, red face. He was good looking, but the extra pounds had rounded and softened his square features.

It had started snowing when they parked in the clearing where the tree was. He'd had his eye on it all deer season. It was a white pine, about eight feet tall. He'd have to cut about a foot off the bottom to make room for the angel.

The tree was on state land, which made cutting it illegal, except that around here nobody thought very much about cutting your own Christmas tree on state land. Which was, after all, public.

Chad built a fire before they cut the tree. He sharpened sticks to roast marshmallows and melted snow for hot chocolate. Brian spiked his with peppermint schnapps, which Claudia didn't like.

Brian thought she was getting skinnier every day despite the fact that she ate like a horse. The more she ate, the skinnier she got. And the fatter he got. It was almost as if what she lost, he gained. He thought she'd gotten meaner, too. Skinnier and meaner.

Chad said the Christmas tree prayer Brian had made up years ago. *"Great Spirit, the season of darkness is upon us. Our earth is without life. Give us your gift of life through the eternal green of this tree. We accept this gift mindful that, as we take the life of this tree, we take it into our home so that the green of its needles reminds us of past summers and gives us hope for the new life of spring. For your gift of life, we give our thanks. Amen."* Claudia thought the prayer should have been about the birth of Jesus.

After the hot chocolate and marshmallows, Chad smothered the fire with snow. The steam smelled like ashes. Brian threw the tree in the bed of the pickup.

They started back up the two-track. The pickup skidded in and out of the two-track. The tree bounced up and down in the truck bed.

“Brian, slow down,” Claudia said. “You’ll shake all the needles off before we get home.”

Brian had seen her looking at the bouncing tree through the outside mirror. He’d seen the bouncing, too, but hadn’t paid any attention to it.

Claudia had been softer when they had met, attractive in a mousy sort of way, with shoulder-length black hair. But now it was salt and pepper, mostly salt. He wished she would color it. She had thin lips and no eyebrows to speak of. She rubbed them when she was anxious, which was most of the time.

“We could have bought a tree in town,” she said.

“No, we couldn’t,” Chad said. “We’ve always cut our own tree.” He sat in the middle, between the two of them. Black hair stuck out underneath his stocking cap. He looked like a taller, leaner version of Brian, except for his hair, which was like his mother’s used to be.

By the time they got back, it had stopped snowing. Brian parked in the driveway and hoisted the tree out of the pickup. Chad dragged it across the snow and into the garage through the side door. Brian cut off the bottom foot of the tree and then a foot of branches. Claudia would make a wreath out of them. He pounded the butt end of the trunk into prongs in the bottom of the Christmas tree stand. He stood the tree up and Chad twisted the screws into the trunk. Brian smelled the sweet smell of the sap as it oozed out.

Brian shook the rest of the snow off the tree and carried it into the house. Chad had found the Mitch Miller Christmas album and it scratched away on the record player they used once a year while trimming their tree.

“You’re ruining the carpet,” Claudia said.

“It’s just water.”

“No, it’s not. There’s mud on that tree and on your boots, too.”

Brian looked down at his boots and then at his footprints. He started back toward the door.

“Stop. Stop right there,” Claudia said. “There’s just more mud if you go back. Stand right there and take them off.”

Brian’s ears turned red and he felt them burn. “Claudia, just how am I supposed to do that?”

“I don’t care how, but I will not have my carpet ruined over a Christmas tree.”

“For Christ’s sake, Claudia, what am I supposed to do?”

“Don’t talk like that.”

Brian took his boots off and handed them to Chad, who took them to the garage. Chad disappeared into the kitchen and buzzed back in with three glasses of spiced wine on a tray. Each glass had “Merry Christmas” on it in red and green letters. The wine smelled like cinnamon and cloves.

Brian reached for a glass, stumbled. His wine splashed onto the carpet. Chad ran back into the kitchen.

“Don’t say a word,” Brian said. “Not a word. We’ll clean it up.”

Chad ran back in with a pan of cold water and a sponge. He soaked up the wine, then rinsed out the carpet. Brian hoped it was clean enough to avoid buying Claudia new carpeting. She left in a huff.

Brian and Chad started decorating the tree by themselves. They wound the lights around the tree. Then Chad strung the faded gold garland all around. Then they hung the ornaments.

Claudia stormed back in. “My God that garland is ugly. Take it off.”

“We always put this garland on,” Chad said.

“It’s so old and faded,” she said.

“Let’s put the angel on now,” Brian said. “Then we’re done.”

“Take off the garland.”

“Claudia, we always put this garland on.”

“It’s ugly.”

“I’ll take it off,” Chad said.

“Let’s just put the angel on and call it good,” Brian said.

“Chad, take off the garland.”

Brian took the garland off the tree, then he took their Christmas angel out of its box. He climbed on a stool, put the angel on top of the tree and climbed down.

“The angel’s crooked,” Claudia said.

“I’ve got an idea,” Brian said. “You be the angel this year. I’ll shove the tree up your ass, and you can sit up there for two weeks.”

Brian opened the door to the basement. He started down the stairs, slamming the door behind him. He ran his hand along the fieldstone

wall on his way down, the fieldstones rough to the touch. He stopped and looked at one of the rocks, pink granite with gold flecks.

He sat on a stool at his workbench. He thought he'd be safe down here. Claudia never came down to the basement since he'd moved the washer and dryer to the room off the kitchen.

He saw his deer rifle leaning against the wall, right where he'd left it after Trevor brought it back. He picked it up and laid it on the workbench.

The gun was dirty and had started to rust. The clip was still in it. He thought it was just like Trevor to return a loaded rifle. The clip looked like it was full, but it was spring-loaded, so he couldn't tell for sure. At least the safety was on. He pushed the catch that held the clip in the gun and pulled it out. He racked the bolt to make sure there was no bullet in the chamber.

He wiped off the stock with a towel. Then he worked linseed oil into the stock with his fingers. He spilled some of the oil onto his shirt.

Claudia will give me hell for this.

He poured gun oil on a rag. The smell of the oil reminded him of the electric train his father had given him when he was nine. He ran the rag up and down the barrel, rubbing away the rust.

Chad bent his head down the stairs. "Mom wants you."

"Tell her I'm busy."

"She said she wants you right now."

"Just tell her I'm busy."

Chad left. Brian went back to wiping down the barrel.

Claudia came to the doorway and yelled down the stairs. "Goddamn it, Brian. I said I wanted to talk to you."

"Listen to yourself. You're a bitch, a raving bitch." He started cleaning around the trigger.

"You will not talk to me like that."

"For Christ's sake, Claudia, give it a rest."

"I hate you. You know that, don't you?"

"Leave me alone."

Claudia started down the stairs.

"Don't come down here."

She looked over at him. "What are you doing down here?"

The gun went off. The crash deafened him, and his ears rang. The rifle fell to the floor.

Then he saw Claudia. The bullet had ripped through her side and thrown her against the wall. She lay in a pool of blood at the foot of the stairs. Blood dripped off the fieldstone. She stared at him, her eyes fixed.

CHAPTER TWO

Six Years Later

Burr knew the wind had shifted when one of the shutters on his cabin had started banging. It only talked to him when the wind blew hard from the southwest. He'd never fixed that shutter because that wind brought good news — big waves on Lake St. Clair that blew the ducks off the lake and into the marsh.

An hour before sunrise, they bucked the chop in the Johnson River, the decoys rolling around the bottom of the boat. Burr slowed down and shined his light on the bank until he found a break in the cattails that marked the entrance to Walpole Marsh. He turned off his light, beached the boat, pulled it over the dike and motored to Holiday Pond.

It started to snow, a fine, light snow, but the wind blew hard, and the snow stung Burr's face. Clouds covered up what was left of the moonlight, but he could see orange off to the east. This would be a day when it never really got light. A gray December day.

He dropped Victor and Zeke, his aging yellow lab, off at the blind, set the decoys, then hid the boat in the cattails.

Burr Lafayette was in his late forties. He'd duck hunted since he was twelve. His first hunt had been with Victor. At one time, Burr had been six feet tall. He was still lean. He had sky blue eyes, a hawk nose, strong jaw and straight white teeth. His hair, the color of an acorn, was thinning just a bit in back. He had a few grays, but he pulled them out as soon as they came in.

He slipped over the side of the boat and slogged back to the blind, his waders sinking in the muddy bottom, the rotten-egg sulfur smell blowing downwind. He climbed into the stake blind and sat in a rusty folding chair, Victor on one side, Zeke on the other.

Burr reached into his bag and handed Victor a pack of Players,

honoring a chief with a gift of tobacco. Victor Haymarsh was sixty-five and looked it. Short, stocky, leathery. A black ponytail streaked with gray.

Victor handed Burr a cigarette. Duck season ended in a week and so would his smoking.

It was almost light. Three ducks buzzed the pond. Zeke quivered. Burr looked down, hiding his face, and called. He turned his head and tried to see out the corner of his eye, careful not to spook them. Two mallards and a black duck. They circled downwind. He called again. The ducks fought their way upwind and circled the decoys. Burr called softly. The ducks cupped their wings, rocking back and forth, spilling the wind from their wings.

“Mark,” he said under his breath. He stood and swung the shotgun through the lead duck, a drake mallard. It splashed in the pond. The black duck sailed into the cattails after he shot it.

“Zeke, fetch.”

The dog launched himself into the pond and retrieved the mallard. Burr gave Zeke a line and sent him into the cattails. He and Victor smoked another cigarette.

A marsh hawk flew low, flat circles where the duck had gone down.

“If Zeke doesn’t find it, that hawk will,” Victor said.

“He’ll find it.”

Detroit was across Lake St. Clair, just twenty miles to the southwest. Here though, in Ontario, a ferry ride across the St. Clair River, it was a different world. Not really Canada but Walpole Island, the largest freshwater marsh on the Great Lakes. The unceded land of the First Nation, the Council of Three Fires — the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Pottawatomie.

Zeke swam out of the cattails with the black duck in his mouth.

Zeke’s head jerked up. Burr looked across the pond and saw Suzanne in his boat, poling over to the blind.

“That one, she’s a beauty,” Victor said.

“Damn it all.”

She hid the boat and climbed into the blind. Her parka and her waders hid her curves, but Burr remembered all of them. She was just shy of six feet, a head taller than Victor.

Victor nodded at her and left.

Burr watched him slog through the marsh to his boat. Victor hitched himself into his boat, stiff-legged, and left.

His knee must be bothering him again.

“Why did he leave?” Suzanne said.

“Because you came.”

“I didn’t mean to chase him away.”

Suzanne had her hair in a ponytail, a little shorter than Victor’s, but very black. Green eyes and pouty lips.

Perfectly lovely.

“How did you find us?”

“It’s too rough to get out to the lake.” She sat in Victor’s chair, loaded her over-under, locked the barrels into the stock and checked the safety.

Burr lit a cigarette. Suzanne took it out of his mouth and smoked it. He lit another.

“Don’t you want to know why I’m here,” Suzanne said.

“No.”

“There’s been a terrible injustice.”

Burr ignored her.

“A man has been arrested for murder.”

I don’t want to know anything about this.

“There was an accident in Petoskey six years ago. And now he’s been arrested for murder and hauled off to jail.”

“An accident?”

“The police broke into his house in Grosse Pointe and hauled him off to jail.”

“I thought you said Petoskey.”

“The accident happened in Petoskey, but now he lives in Grosse Pointe.”

“I’m not a criminal lawyer.”

“You’re a trial lawyer. You know how to do it.”

“Not anymore, and I’m not qualified to do this.”

“You are perfectly qualified.”

Burr looked over the tops of the cattails. Some of the tops had gone to seed. The wind blew them off and it looked like snow.

“You practically grew up in Petoskey.”

“Summers only. And it was Harbor Springs.”

“As a favor to me,” Suzanne said.

“I’m all out of favors.”

Suzanne had walked into his life four years ago. He’d been looking out the windows of his office but not really looking at much of anything. Her scent reached him before he knew she was there. Rose. It had been rose, but smoky underneath.

He turned and saw her framed in the doorway. Striking. Not beautiful. Maybe thirty. Tall, narrow waist, long legs. A jet-black ponytail and pouty, wine-red lips. She had green eyes. The iris of her right eye had gold flecks. Not beautiful, maybe not even pretty, but she took his breath away.

She’d arrived unannounced, the way she always arrived. A copywriter for a big Detroit ad agency. She’d been sent from New York to Detroit to work on a car account, and she hated Detroit. Suzanne had written the copy that had gotten the agency sued, so they hired Fisher and Allen. Burr ran the litigation practice from the 36th floor of the Renaissance Center in downtown Detroit.

She stuck her hand out. “Suzanne Fairchild.”

Burr lost his place. Speechless, which, for Burr, was nothing if not unusual. “Are you Mr. Lafayette?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

“The agency said you need to talk to me.”

“Please. Have a seat.” She started to sit at one of the side chairs facing his desk.

“No, not there. Please, on the couch.” He pointed to a leather couch fronted by a glass coffee table and flanked by a matching chair.

“Are you all right, Mr. Lafayette?”

Burr absolutely was not all right. He couldn’t concentrate. His

partners protested duck season as it was, but Suzanne Fairchild would be taking things too far. And then there was Grace.

Suzanne knocked down a drake mallard in the cattails. Burr gave Zeke a line and sent him.

“He’s a great dog, even at nine. But I’d never name my only son after a dog,” Suzanne said.

“You don’t have a son, and he’s not nine. He’s eight.”

Zeke-the-dog splayed his front legs on the floor of the blind, his back legs still in the ooze. He presented the duck to Burr.

“There is no greater honor than to be Zeke’s namesake. Besides, Zeke-the-boy likes it.”

“What a way to go through life. Zeke-the-boy because there already is a Zeke-the-dog.”

“Suzanne, I can’t help you. I’m not a criminal lawyer. I don’t do criminal work, and I don’t know anything about criminal law.”

“Please.”

“Jacob and Eve wouldn’t hear of it.”

“He’s going to be charged with murder. By now, he probably has been. His wife is hysterical.”

“He has a wife? Does he have a name?”

“Yes, he has a wife. And she needs someone to help her.” Suzanne reached into Burr’s coat and took out a cigarette. She pulled her parka over her head and lit the cigarette out of the wind.

His Jeep skidded on the way back to the ferry, fishtailing on an icy spot. A Grand Wagoneer, blue with fake-wood sides and a rear window that didn’t work right. It fogged up with Zeke in the back.

I love this Jeep.

Burr turned along the St. Clair River, Suzanne following in a white Explorer. They drove onto a ten-car ferry with twin diesels and painted-over rust.

There was ice in the river, and they had to wait for it to clear. When the ferry finally left for Algonac, Suzanne climbed in beside him. The windows had fogged up. Suzanne rubbed a porthole on the windshield and looked out.

“We’re only half an hour from Grosse Pointe. Just help me get the bail posted. That’s all.”

“Can’t do it, Suzanne.”

“Please, Burr.”

“Hire a real criminal lawyer. Or get a public defender.”

“His wife is scared to death. She hasn’t heard from him since Saturday night.”

“Almost two days,” Burr said.

“Just help me get him out, then you can get back to your esoteric appellate practice.”

“I don’t have time.”

“You can’t be that busy if you’ve got time to hunt on a Monday.”

“Who would pay?”

“They would.”

“Do they have a name?”

“They’d pay. Over time.”

Who is they?

“It’s not my scintillating mind you want. It’s my fee schedule.”

“That’s not it at all,” Suzanne said. “They have money. Well, some money.”

“I don’t work for free.”

“So it’s just about money.”

“It’s not just the money.”

“He’s been jerked out of his life and all you can think about is money.”

“Why do you care about this so much?”

She got out of the Jeep and slammed the door. Burr watched her in the rearview mirror.

There’s something she’s not telling me.

The ferry docked at Algonac. After they cleared customs, Suzanne climbed back in the Jeep.

“Please help me. Just this one thing.”

“I thought you moved back to Manhattan.”

“I did. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Brian and his wife.”

“His name is Brian?”

Suzanne looked away, then nodded.

“Just who is Brian’s wife?”

As if I didn’t know.

