

UNDER THE ASHES

by

Charles Cutter

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

—William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*

CHAPTER ONE

Nick sent the soup back, not that there was anything wrong with it.

“You are so fussy,” Molly said.

He swirled his wine. The thin, red pinot noir ran up and down the glass.

“Please don’t send the wine back,” she said.

He took a sip, set his glass down and stood. “I’ll be right back.”

Molly looked at him. “You don’t have to go. They’ll do just fine if you leave them alone.”

“Maybe it will be hot enough when I get back.” He pushed back his chair and left.

The waitress, a tan college-age woman in the green and white uniform of the Arboretum, rushed back to their table. “Is everything all right, Mrs. Fagan?”

Molly smiled at her. “Everything’s fine. Nick had to go to the car for a minute. He’ll be right back.”

The waitress started off.

“When you bring it back, make sure it’s too hot to eat.”

The waitress nodded.

“Ask Rudy to make me a martini,” Molly said. She set her glass down. “Never mind, I’ll ask him myself.”

Molly made her way through the tables to the bar in the back of the Arboretum, every table full on the Saturday night of Memorial Day weekend. She had long legs that looked longer in her heels, maybe a little too fancy for Harbor Springs, but she liked the way she looked with bare legs, cream heels and a belted sapphire dress that ended nicely above her knees. It was barely spring here, fifty degrees and a northwest wind, but it was sunny, and Molly didn’t care if she was hurrying summer.

She sat on a stool at the oak bar and looked over at the lounge full of resorters waiting for their tables. There was a black baby grand across the room.

The Arboretum was nothing fancy on the outside, just a yellow, single-story block building with a flat, tar-paper roof covered with gravel, which was only important because killdeer nested there every spring. The patrons insisted that the birds be protected, which annoyed Sammy Fairley, the

owner, but was probably good for business. The walls were covered in floral wallpaper with big, gaudy, orange and yellow and pink flowers. There were potted trees and shrubs everywhere.

Rudy stood in front of her and smiled. A big smile full of the biggest, yellowest teeth Molly had ever seen. She found a cigarette in her purse. Rudy lit it for her.

“Did Mr. Fagan go out to the car again?”

Molly nodded.

“He just won’t let it rest.”

“No, he won’t,” Molly said.

“That’s why it’s such a great radio station.”

Molly thought there were other ways to make it a great radio station, but she didn’t say anything.

“The usual?” he said.

She looked over at the baby grand. “Is Hoagy playing tonight?”

Rudy nodded.

“Do you think he’ll take requests?”

“As long as it’s not *Stardust*.”

“Would you ask him to play *Heart and Soul*?”

“He’s in the kitchen with Cat.”

Molly took a twenty out of her purse and set in on the bar in front of Rudy.

“I don’t think it’s easy being Hoagy Carmichael, Jr.” Rudy picked up the twenty and disappeared through the double doors to the kitchen.

Molly Fagan was tall, all of five ten, over six feet in heels and looked like a dancer. She had shoulder-length black hair, green eyes, a thin nose and full lips. She liked pink lipstick, and if her teeth were a little crooked, no one cared.

Rudy came back smiling his yellow-toothed smile.

It was all she could do not to turn away again.

“A very dry, very dirty gin martini on the rocks. With Bombay Sapphire. Like your dress,” he said.

She nodded.

Rudy filled a rocks glass with ice. “There’s a guy that comes in here, drinks exactly the same thing. Big-shot lawyer. Or at least he was. He’s got an old sailboat in the harbor.”

“Really,” Molly said, not really interested.

“Supposed to be a great trial lawyer. Or at least he was,” Rudy said again.” He poured two generous shots in the glass then he picked up the vermouth.

“Half a capful,” she said.

Rudy poured half of the capful in the glass and threw the rest in the sink. He filled the rest of the glass with olive juice then speared four big cocktail olives with a toothpick and stirred the drink. He set the martini in front of her.

Molly took a sip.

“Nick sent the morel bisque back again, didn’t he,” Rudy said, not asking.

Molly took a big swallow, then nodded.

“Was there anything wrong with it?”

She shook her head.

“I hope Cat doesn’t find out.” He smiled at her again.

Molly wished Rudy would leave. She could go back to their table, but she didn’t want to sit by herself, and there was no way to know how long Nicky would be gone.

“I hope he isn’t here for the veal morel. Cat used the rest of the morels in the bisque.”

“Nicky brought his own morels.”

“One of these days, he’s going to push her too far.

”The Arboretum was a fine restaurant, maybe the finest in northern Michigan, for one reason. Cat Hahn, the seventy-year-old chef. No one could get along with her, but she knew how to cook. Busboys, waiters, waitresses, dishwashers, prep cooks all lived in fear. Somebody got fired at least once a week. She had freckles, fiery red hair, and a wicked smile. Sammy had to give her a piece of the restaurant to keep her, and she acted like she owned all of it.

Cat was famous for her morel bisque. It had a cream and sherry base and a hint of something that made it tangy. No one really knew what it was, and Cat wasn't telling. She was the diva of the kitchen, and it was all Sammy could do to keep the peace, which meant keeping Cat happy, which was a full-time job.

Rudy started to say something just as Hoagy Carmichael, Jr., made his entrance from the kitchen. He had on a blue blazer and gray linen pants. The diners clapped. Hoagy sat at the grand piano and lit a cigarette.

Rudy took him a scotch. He smiled at Molly and played *Heart and Soul*.

Earlier that day, Nick had walked down the two-track with a mesh bag. He'd taken 131 south, past Boyne Mountain, and turned on a dirt road, then another and another, each one narrower and more rutted than the one before. He ended up on No Grouse Road and parked in a patch of ferns next to a two-track. He had listened to the radio for ten minutes, switching from station to station. It had been all he could do to turn off the radio. He had to go to the station, even if was Saturday, but he was going to get away even if it was only for an hour.

Nick took his mesh bag and started off into the woods. The woods smelled green, like new leaves and wet soil. There were a few hemlocks, but mostly tall, old maples, oaks, beeches, and ash. They were just starting to leaf. They'd keep the woods in the shadows until October, but today the sun crept past the leaves and lit the woods. There were a few spring beauties, adder's tongues, and bloodroots still blooming where there had been early sun, but the forest floor was covered with trillium, bright-white, three-petaled flowers.

But he wasn't there for the trillium. He was there for the morels, but he usually found them where the trillium grew, especially under the ashes.

The black morels were long since gone and it was late for the whites, but it had been a cold and rainy spring, and he thought he might find some here. He hadn't told anyone about this place, not even Molly, and he'd made sure no one had followed him. He knew it was silly to be so secretive, but morels were morels.

He wandered through the woods scuffing up last year's leaves, brown and rotting. It would be another month before there was enough green to cover them up. He found a few whites under a beech tree, a few more near a towering white ash, but not enough for a meal. Cat had told him she'd make him veal morel tonight if he brought his own morels. Nick loved Cat's morel bisque but there was nothing like her veal morel.

It had been a bad season for morels. Too dry, too cold, then too wet, but it had warmed up two days ago and rained last night. Nick thought that, if there were ever going to be morels this year, it would be today.

He found a few more at the edge of a clearing, but he didn't have anywhere near enough. He found a patch of morels, but he thought they looked like false morels, poisonous but not fatal. He picked one of the mushrooms and broke off a stem. It broke off cleanly at the cap. The stem of an edible mushroom ran up under the cap, covering the stem like a hood.

The edible morels, the black, white, and caps, had a light, nutty flavor that made them the most sought-after mushroom on the forest floor. They were only found in old forests in the north and not very often there. They couldn't be commercially grown. A once-a-year delicacy with snob appeal. And scarce. Especially this year.

Nick kept going. He was half a mile off the two-track when he found what he was looking for. The ash grove was where he'd remembered it, down in a small valley with ferns in a clearing to the north.

And there they were. White morels. A few clumps of spongy, light-brown mushrooms. Some almost six inches. He pinched them off at the base and put them in his bag, careful not to pack them tightly.

After he filled the bag, he walked back and forth through the patch, swinging the mesh bag ever so slowly. Just enough to release the spores so that, weather permitting, he could harvest them again next year, if no one else found this place.

Nick left the patch, found the two-track and hurried back to the car. He had a few stops to make before dinner.

Nick came back into the Arboretum. He said something to Sammy at the maître d's station who handed Nick the phone and stepped away. Nick made a call, then sat down at their table. He looked over at Molly, still at the bar. She tried to ignore him, which was impossible, then took herself and her martini back to their table. He stood and pulled out her chair for her.

Nick was almost a head shorter than Molly, even with his lifts. He had a full head of black hair, styled every week, dark eyes, square jaw, and a dazzling smile. He was short, very short, and he liked tall women.

"Sorry, baby," he said.

Molly wiped the lipstick off the rim of her glass but didn't say anything.

"I had to hear what Jack was saying in and out of the stop set."

"Did you have to do it now?"

"It's what I do."

She put her drink down. “It’s Saturday night. You just had the biggest month in the history of the station. Can’t you just leave it for a couple of hours?”

“Jack can’t keep his mouth shut.”

“He is a disc jockey.”

“No one wants to hear about Bayview’s production of *Fiddler on the Roof*.”

She brushed a stray hair off her face. “It’s what’s important here.” Sometimes it was hard to be with Nick.

“Not to our audience.”

Nick had signed on WKHQ-FM two years ago. It had the biggest signal in northern Michigan – Traverse City to the Bridge to Cheboygan to Grayling and back. No one here had ever heard anything like it. It was far and away number one in audience and billing, but his competitors hated him, his employees were terrified of him, and some days Molly didn’t like him much either.

She put her drink down. “You fired him, didn’t you?”

Nick didn’t say anything.

“That’s why you were on the phone.”

Nick started to say something, but Molly cut him off. “If you have something to say that our listeners would rather hear than Michael Jackson or Mick Jagger, say it. Otherwise, shut up and play the music.” She lit another cigarette.

“Do you have to smoke?”

Molly put her cigarette in the ashtray and took a sip of her martini. “Who’s coming in?”

“Tommy.” Nick waved at the smoke.

“Who else did you call?”

Nick started to say something, but the bisque came, steaming, and too hot to eat.

They each ordered a Caesar. Molly ordered the planked whitefish and another martini.

“I’d like the veal morel,” Nick said.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Fagan, but we don’t have any more morels,” the waitress said. Molly dug into her purse and took out a plastic bag. “Nick found these this morning.”

“I’ll take them to Cat and see if she’ll make it,” the waitress said. She reached for the bag.

“I’ll take them to her,” Molly said.

The waitress left.

Molly turned to Nick. “Did you have to fire him on a Saturday night?”

“Baby, you know I love you.”

“You love KHQ more.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Who else did you call?”

“No one.”

Molly didn’t believe him, but Nick’s bisque had cooled enough to eat, and he started in on it without answering her.

It was creamy, with pieces of chopped morels, butter, sweet vermouth, salt and a pinch of nutmeg.

“This is spectacular,” Nick said.

“I’ll be right back.” Molly got up and took the bag of morels into the kitchen. She found Cat looking over the shoulder of one of the prep cooks, a terrified young man who couldn’t have been more than eighteen.

“That’s not how you do it.” Cat yanked the knife out of the cook’s hand and started chopping. “Like this.” She tossed the knife at him. He missed it, and the knife fell to the floor. Cat turned to Molly. “There’s no customers allowed in here.”

Molly smiled at her. “I was hoping you’d make veal morel.” She tried to hand the bag to Cat, but she turned her back on her and walked away.

Molly caught up with Cat at the salad station. “Please, Cat. Just this once.”

“It’s not just this once, and you know it. And I’m sure it’s a trade. The answer is ‘no.’” She turned her back on Molly again.

“I’ll take care of it, Mrs. Fagan,” Sammy said. Fairley was a thin, sallow man, short with a black comb over. His smile took up most of his face. He was always smiling, which annoyed Molly, but she thought it was probably helpful for the owner, who was also the maître d’ to have a smile

that wouldn't quit. He took the bag from her and shooed her out of the kitchen. She walked back to their table.

The waitress brought their salads.

Molly drank her martini and picked at her salad. "Who else did you call?"

Nick looked up from his salad. "No one."

She still didn't believe him. The waitress cleared their salads. Molly ordered a glass of Chardonnay then took something out of her purse. "I'm going to check on the veal morel." She disappeared into the kitchen then came back to their table. The waitress brought Molly's whitefish and Nick's veal morel.

Cat served the whitefish on a maple plank, topped with thick lemon slices, dusted with paprika and served inside a ring of Duchess potatoes.

She cut off a piece. It flaked on her fork.

"How is it, baby?"

"It's almost too pretty to eat."

Nick cut a slice of the veal medallion and soaked it in the morel sauce. Cabernet, cream, flour, butter, and morels, mostly morels. The Cabernet gave the morels more bite than the bisque and added a touch of cherry and vanilla.

"This is heaven," Nick said.

"If you cut me a slice of your beloved veal, I'll know you really love me."

It was all he could do to cut a slice for her. He passed her a fork full of veal.

She shook her head "no."

"I thought you wanted some."

"I was testing you."

Nick ordered the Baked Alaska for dessert. Baked Alaska wasn't his favorite, but he thought fire always made things taste better.

Molly ordered a glass of sauvignon blanc. She thought it was probably too early in the season for it, but it was Memorial Day weekend, and it was a short season.

The waitress poured the brandy on the Baked Alaska and lit it. Nick took a deep breath and blew out the flames. His face turned red, and he fell face first into the Baked Alaska.

CHAPTER TWO

Burr woke up when his sunglasses slipped down his nose and the sun got in his eyes. He sat up and pushed the glasses back up his nose. Zeke woke up, wagged his tail and tipped over Burr's beer.

"Damn it all."

The beer ran around the radio, down onto the cockpit sole, down the drain, and into the harbor.

"Zeke, that's a waste of a perfectly good Labatt. But it was a little warm."

The aging yellow Lab looked up, then put his head back down.

Burr went down below, took another Labatt from the icebox and climbed the companionway stairs back to the cockpit. He propped himself back up and opened the beer. He took a swallow and looked past the Spindrift's stern toward the boats tied up at the main dock.

It was the Fourth of July in Harbor Springs, the biggest holiday of the year. The city was packed and the marina was full. Burr had a buoy in the harbor, but he'd managed to get a slip for Spindrift at the Harbor Springs Marina for the weekend.

A smile and a hundred-dollar bill go a long way. Mostly the hundred-dollar bill.

A soft wind drifted in from the southwest. It was seventy-five and mostly clear. A cloud covered up the sun every now and then. Burr smelled the lake, the sand, and the cedars on Harbor Point.

He ran his hand along the top of the gunwale in the cockpit—silky, varnished mahogany with four coats of Valspar. It would need a light sanding and another coat before the summer was over. He looked over at the teak deck, nicely oiled, which gave it a wet look, then past the tiller and the boom crutch to the stern.

"Smooth as silk."

Spindrift was a 1940 wooden, thirty-four-foot cutter-rigged sloop. The cabin leaked when it rained, and the hull leaked all the time, which is why he had two bilge pumps. Spindrift had a main salon, forward cabin and a midships galley. She was no *Kismet*, his last boat, but then *Kismet* was about five miles due west, on the bottom of Lake Michigan in two hundred feet of water, more or less.

He looked up at the mast, all forty-seven feet of it. Spindly pine held up by more rigging than on a clipper. He took a swallow of his Labatt then laid back down.

"Mr. Lafayette?"

She has a pretty voice, but it's never good when someone calls me 'Mr. Lafayette' when I'm on a boat.

Burr hid behind his sunglasses and pretended he hadn't heard her.

"Mr. Lafayette?" she said again.

Burr ignored her.

This never works.

"Mr. Lafayette?"

Burr thought it might be worth a try to pretend he wasn't Burr Lafayette, but he hadn't had much luck with that either.

I give up.

"Yes?" he said, not turning his head.

"Did I wake you up?"

"No, I was just enjoying the day by myself."

"My name is Molly Fagan. I'm sorry to bother you, but the harbormaster said I'd find you at slip 62."

A hundred dollars should buy a little privacy.

"Could we talk for just a minute?"

Her voice was clear and musical, maybe a bit husky. Burr still hadn't turned his head, but he did like her voice.

She must be an alto.

"Please, Mr. Lafayette. It's important."

"It's a holiday weekend. Can't it wait until next week? Or the week after?"

"No, it can't."

Burr looked at her. She was a vision of beauty. Black hair tied back in a ponytail. Green eyes with a hint of pink lipstick. Tan legs in a khaki skirt that didn't leave much to the imagination.

If I'd known she looked like this, I'd have looked at her right away.

"Yes?" he said.

“Mr. Lafayette, I need your help.”

“I’m on vacation.”

“My husband is dead, and I need your help.”

Burr ran his hands through his hair, front to back.

“Mrs. Fagan, I’ve very sorry for your loss, but I’m afraid I can’t help you.” He took a swallow of his Labatt.

Burr wasn’t a criminal lawyer, but he’d been dragged into more than one murder trial, and he had no intention of being dragged into another one.

“He wasn’t murdered. He had a heart attack.”

“That’s something,” Burr turned down the radio.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Mrs. Fagan, I’m sorry for your loss,” he said again, “but I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“You don’t even know what I want.”

He looked back up at her. “That’s right, but if it involves someone who’s dead, I can’t help.”

“It’s about life insurance.”

At least it’s not about murder.

“I really do need your help.” She grabbed a piling, climbed aboard and sat down next to Zeke. She scratched behind his ear. He put his head in her lap.

Traitor.

“Who’s this?” she said.

“Zeke,” Burr said. “His name is Zeke.”

“He’s a handsome fellow.” She scratched behind his ear again.

He’d purr if he could.

Molly looked at Burr. “My husband and I were at the Arboretum over Memorial Day. He had a heart attack there and died a week later.”

“Did he fall into the Baked Alaska face first?”

I shouldn't have said that.

“It’s one thing to not want to help me. It’s quite another to make fun of me.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Fagan. I eat there all the time. I couldn’t help but know.

She sat up straight and put her hands in her lap.

That diamond is as big as a cocktail olive.

“We had life insurance, but the insurance company is refusing to pay. That’s all the money I have. The rest is tied up in the business.”

Burr turned down the radio.

“We got him to the hospital in time, but Nicky had high blood pressure.” She looked at Burr looking at her diamond and put her hand over it. “From all the stress. He had a massive heart attack a week later and died in the hospital.”

“Mrs. Fagan, in addition to all the other things I don’t know anything about, I also don’t know anything about life insurance. There’s a library somewhere full of what I don’t know about life insurance.”

“Sammy told me you were the best lawyer he knew.

Thanks, Sammy.

“And he told you I had a boat here.”

Burr had helped Sammy with a food poisoning case and a liquor commission violation. Sammy was always short on cash and let Burr eat and drink for free.

Molly ran her hand along the smooth-as-silk gunwale. “I thought it would be ...” she looked around “... newer.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t do insurance work.”

“Just what kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an appellate lawyer.” Burr took another swallow of his beer. “Now.”

Burr had been the head of the litigation department at Fisher and Allen, one of Detroit's best firms. He had been, perhaps, Detroit's best commercial litigator but had given it up, as well as his marriage – but not his son – over a client. A provocative client. A striking woman almost young enough to be his daughter. Over an affair that hadn't turned out. He'd been a fool and he knew it. After the year it had taken to ruin the prior twenty, he moved to East Lansing and started an appellate practice. Complicated, esoteric litigation punctuated with oral arguments that had made him famous in select legal circles. It had gone swimmingly except for the money part, which, of course, was the most important part.

Molly leaned back against the gunwale. "An appellate lawyer." She scratched Zeke's ear again. He yelped.

"I'm so sorry, Zeke," she said.

"I'm sure I can help you find someone who can help you."

Molly looked at her hands but didn't say anything.

With a diamond like that, there must be some money somewhere.

Burr picked up his beer, thought better of it and put it back down. He looked across to the other dock. Boaters, resorters and tourists everywhere.

Molly didn't say a word. Neither did Burr. They sat there, the two of them.

Molly cracked her knuckles.

That's attractive.

Can I get you something to drink?"

She looked up at him. "I'll have a Labatt."

She has good taste.

Burr went below and brought her a beer.

The widow Fagan sipped her beer. "Thank you."

"Sure."

"It's very nice sitting here."

"It is."

Molly reached past Zeke and turned up the radio. *No One is to Blame* was playing. “What station is this?”

“106 FM.”

“What do they play?”

“Top 40.”

She smiled. “Aren’t you a little old for Top 40?”

“I love Top 40.”

Burr had grown up on Top 40 when CKLW was king. Now in his late forties, he was six feet tall, or at least he had been, and still lean. He had sky-blue eyes, straight white teeth, and a hawk nose. sunburned and peeling from Memorial Day to Labor Day. His hair was still the color of an acorn in autumn. He had a few gray hairs, but he pulled them out when as soon as he found them. His eyebrows arched when he spoke.

Molly turned the radio down. “That was my husband’s station.”

“He owned KHQ?” Burr ran his hands through his hair, front to back.

“Do you do that when you’re nervous?”

Only when I’m flummoxed.

He turned the radio back up. KHQ played *Beat It*.