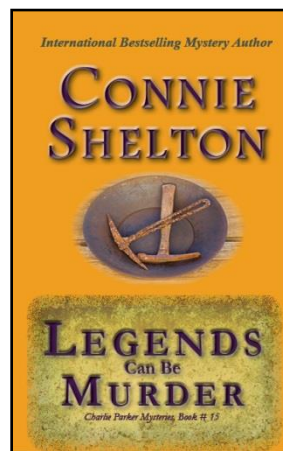


## Sample Chapter

### Legends Can Be Murder

#### The Charlie Parker Mysteries, Book 15

By Connie Shelton



### Chapter 1:

It makes no sense to finish a journey from New Mexico to Alaska by driving south, but that's the way it is. Or at least the way it happened for me as I reached the outskirts of Skagway, scanning the unfamiliar scene—seaport, mountains, ocean vessels—looking for a heliport where my husband should be awaiting my arrival. There it was, a flat stretch of tarmac with a half-dozen helicopters sitting like inactive insects resting on bright yellow H's on the ground. I pulled over near them, spotting our JetRanger's familiar blue and white paint scheme among the others, and looked at the pickup truck's trip odometer before shutting off the engine. Three thousand and ten miles from home. It felt so good to get out of that vehicle.

The dog apparently agreed. Freckles hopped to the ground and ran circles around me. Drake had been sitting around the FBO awhile; I saw him walking toward me across the airstrip from the tiny fixed base operator's office with a shorter male figure beside him. We'd made the journey more or less together, switching off between who drove and who flew every couple of days. I will make note here that he cheated near the end, by cutting off the final big loop into the Yukon and flying straight west from Morley Lake while I drove the paved two-lane the rest of the way.

Alone with his aircraft he could have done the journey cross-country in half the time, I felt sure, but we'd plotted a course that would take us through towns where he could get jet fuel and I could count on a comfy hotel bed each night. We managed it in eight semi-grueling days, although I certainly couldn't whine about the spectacular scenery. You really can't believe this place until you've seen it.

"Hey, babe," he said. "What took you so long?"

I growled and he gave me a wink. He turned to the man beside him.

"This is Chuey Martinez, hon, head mechanic for Kerby's operation." He stood half a head shorter than Drake's six feet, and was slightly on the stocky side, with dark hair showing at the edges of his ball cap.

"*Only* mechanic," Chuey said with a smile that showed square, even teeth. "But two ships aren't all that hard to manage." He stuck out his hand and the warmth of it reminded me that my own hands, along with my arms and face, were quite chilly.

I reached back into the pickup for my fleece jacket. When we had packed our things in Albuquerque, where the June weather consisted of unrelenting sunshine and temperatures well into the nineties, it was hard to imagine that I would want thermal underwear, turtlenecks and a coat. Drake, however, had a lot of mountain flight experience and lives with a motto that you can never take too much warm clothing. Catching sight of a large round thermometer on the side of the building, I had no trouble believing the fifty-five degree reading.

Chuey caught me looking. "When the sun drops, be ready. It's supposed to be forty-five tonight."

Even Freckles must be feeling it. She'd settled beside me and was leaning against my legs.

"Have you touched base with our landlady yet?" I asked Drake.

He shook his head. "Didn't have her number. Plus, Kerby's been briefing me ever since I got here. His first group will be ready to head out in the morning."

Kerby Allen was the owner and operator of a business here called Gold Trail Adventures. We'd been shifted over to him when our original job of hauling seismic crews fell through. Secretly, I thought taking people out to look for gold sounded way more exciting than hauling loads of heavy equipment anyway. Once we settled into our rental house I would find out the rest of the details from Drake. I pulled a folder out of the glove compartment which held all our travel information.

"Roberta Gengler," I said. "That's her name, and I have the address and phone number right here."

I had begun looking for housing last fall and was a little surprised to find that many properties were already leased for the coming summer. It seemed that Skagway, where the normal population was fewer than a thousand, tripled in size with seasonal workers and gained tenfold when the cruise ships were in port. I'd snagged the first place I could get that was an actual house and allowed dogs; many of the seasonal workers were lucky to find dormitory-style housing provided by their corporate tour-company employers or a room in someone's home. Some of the brave college-aged ones tried tent

camping, but I knew good and well I would not be up for that for the span of our four-month contract. It was probably too much to hope our place would be charming; we'd be happy if it was comfortable and weather-tight.

"Berta's a good gal," Chuey said. "I think you'll like her. And she's got a daughter that's not bad at all." He gave a little eyebrow-wiggle in Drake's direction.

"Let's give her a call, see if we can unpack the truck before dark," I suggested.

Chuey noticed the town map in my folder and stepped closer to point to it. "Here's Berta's place. I think the rental is also on State but I'm not sure. Grocery is right here. Gas station there."

The town was laid out on a neat grid, five streets wide and nine or ten long, with a railroad track leading from the dock area and going away into the mountains somewhere. Everything Chuey pointed out was within a few blocks, easy walking distance.

We said goodbye to the mechanic, Drake saying he'd be back in the morning, and climbed into the truck where I pulled out my phone and called Mrs. Gengler. Six minutes later we were driving up outside a low cottage on Main Street, which seemed oddly named given that the part we saw was residential. A woman waited on the walkway that led from the street. Her short-sleeved shirt and cotton capris attested to the fact that she was thoroughly acclimated to Alaska summers. She wore her chin-length brown hair in a blunt cut that framed her face with breezy curls, and blue eyes edged with laugh lines went along with the bright smile she sent our way.

"Charlie and Drake? Welcome to Skagway." She shook hands with Drake, paused a second and pulled me into a hug. I knew I would like her when she caught sight of Freckles and knelt to give the dog a hug too. Our brown and white spaniel/shepherd mix can be a handful, but at a year old she's settling down a bit. She wagged her entire body at Roberta Gengler's attention.

"Everyone here calls me Berta," the landlady said as she pulled out a small key ring. We followed as she unlocked the front door, chatting the entire time.

"It's two-bedroom," she said, "even though you said you only needed one. But I'd appreciate it if you don't take in another renter for that second room, not without checking with me first. You've got use of the whole house. The backyard is fenced for little-bit here." A gentle tickle at Freckles's forehead. "And there's a garage. I can't say what-all junk might be in there but you're welcome to move it around if you need to. I think your vehicle will fit inside if you like. Or just leave it in the driveway. Doesn't matter."

She led the way through the living room—where I noted a stone fireplace, small sofa and two armchairs, and a lonely-looking plain coffee table—into a small kitchen where the white paint seemed to have been freshly done.

"You got your basic furniture, plenty of kitchen utensils, dishes and such. I did tell you about bringing your own linens?"

I nodded. I'd even remembered to label the box. With Drake's auxiliary helicopter gear, I'd been allocated space in the truck for our two suitcases and two boxes for anything and everything else I might need. Considering that I was still somewhat on call with the private investigation firm where I'm a partner with my brother Ron, my must-haves included a computer and an assortment of necessary business files. It didn't leave much space for household stuff, but then again, I felt sure I could get any absolutely necessary item here in town.

"I live right behind," Berta was saying, pointing out the kitchen window toward a thicket of shrubbery and a dark brown metal roof. "My house faces State Street. You need anything, you can either walk around the block or just duck through that thin spot in the bushes." She jabbed her finger. "Just left of that Sitka mountain-ash tree there's a gate."

I nodded vaguely, completely unclear which tree she meant, hoping we wouldn't have to go dashing for help anytime soon.

She turned with a raised eyebrow and placed the keys in Drake's hand. I took it to mean this was the moment to ask any questions.

"Internet service?"

"Yep. The router's at my place but you'll get a decent signal over here. Password's written on the inside cover of the phone book." She tilted her head toward the refrigerator, where an ancient wall phone hung adjacent and an actual printed telephone directory sat on the counter. "No movies on the computer after seven at night. That's my time and something about both of us trying to watch a movie at once messes up my viewing."

I assured her that wouldn't be a problem as we walked back toward the front door. Drake paused to examine the thermostat on the wall and Berta went over a couple of quick instructions. I was happy to see that we didn't have to rub sticks together or keep a woodstove burning.

Two minutes later she'd disappeared and we found ourselves alone in our new little Alaskan abode. I stepped over to Drake and wrapped my arms around him. It felt good to be together on solid ground once again.

"Unless you really want to cook tonight," he said, knowing full well that I wouldn't, "how about if we unload the truck, get the dog settled in, and then find someplace that can fill us with food and drink?"

Well, he didn't have to repeat that invitation.

Boxes accumulated in the driveway and we separated the helicopter gear from those that would be going inside. I read labels and directed them to different rooms, the whole process taking less than an hour. It felt like early afternoon but my stomach said 'hungry' and the clock told us it was nearly seven p.m. when we finished. Drake set up the dog crate, where Freckles sleeps at home or away, while I located her food and filled a bowl. One thing about dogs, as long as they know they'll be fed, they can

turn nearly anyplace into a home. Her little tummy filled, she accepted my bribe of a treat and went happily into her crate.

Freckles had stretched her legs by zooming around the fenced backyard while Drake and I unloaded the truck, but after a week on the road both of us really needed a stretch, too. We decided to walk until we found dinner. Broadway, the main commercial street through the center of town, was only two blocks over so we began by heading there. It didn't take long to find a lively spot that combined restaurant, bar and music in a long room filled with people who definitely looked more local than tourist.

There was that moment when the noise level dropped and a few dozen eyes turned toward us—the you're-new-in-town syndrome—but it quickly passed. After all, residents here were accustomed to their lives being invaded by a new crop of outsiders each day throughout a season that must begin to feel way too long by autumn.

We found a small table against a dark-paneled wall. The long bar in Zack's Place was made of the same shiny dark wood, lined with a dozen backless stools which were now at a hundred-percent occupancy, occupied predominantly by bearded men in plaid and women with tight jeans and equally tight Henleys. Beer in green bottles with a label I didn't recognize seemed the beverage of choice. Otherwise, the room held an assortment of four- and six-top tables and I noticed conversations freely taking place between them. Aren't small towns great?

"So," I said to Drake, once we'd settled and ordered drinks, "you've met the new boss ... tell me what we'll be doing."

He took a swig of the green-bottled beer he'd decided to try. "Kerby Allen started Gold Trail Adventures to appeal to city dwellers who want to try roughing it a bit and think they'll get rich in the process. When you think about it, not all that different from those intrepid souls who came up here in the 1880s for the original gold rush."

Skagway had been the starting place for the huge stampede into the Yukon. It had quite the colorful history but all I'd heard up to this point was that we would take people out gold prospecting. I'd pictured long troughs of water with a sprinkle of gold dust seeded in, although from the brochures it looked as if those sorts of touristy operations existed without need of a helicopter to take the customers very far from town.

"Kerby owns some cabins up in the mountains, various places, or maybe he's leasing them ... I'm not sure at this point. Anyway, each cabin is furnished and stocked with food and some basic mining tools. We get a GPS programmed with the waypoints, we drop the folks off. One of Kerby's guys meets them, gives a little orientation and shows them how to use their gold pans, then we fly out and leave the customers to fend for themselves for the next week or two. They buy the one-week or the two-week 'adventure' depending on their stamina and budget."

"But isn't it risky to just leave them alone like that?" My plate of halibut and chips had arrived and I had to stop a second to dip one of the crisp potatoes in ketchup.

“They’ll be provided with satellite phones, in case of emergency. If they can’t handle it, we’ll pick them up.”

I had a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of being left alone in the land of grizzly bears without something more than a phone for a lifeline, but then again I’ve sort of turned into a wuss as I’ve become a little older. My idea of roughing it now is a twelve-inch TV in a motor home. I’ve seen those reality shows where families struggle along, repairing their ancient tractor or generator with duct tape and paper clips, and there has never been the slightest appeal in that. But it takes all kinds.

Drake was probably reading my mind as all these thoughts flitted through, but he wisely stayed occupied with the fish, which was so tasty that neither of us had the inclination to fill the time with talk. I was nearly finished eating when I looked up to see a woman about my age approaching our table.

“Hi, you guys must be Charlie and Drake. I’m Mina.”

I must have had a blank look on my face.

“Berta’s my mom.” She tucked a strand of straight brown hair behind one ear and held out her hand. She wore little makeup but had a smooth complexion that certainly didn’t require it, and I was admiring the quality of her haircut and the golden highlights among the chestnut strands when she spoke up again. “Welcome to Skagway.”

We invited her to join us.

“Just for a minute,” she said, taking the third chair and setting her phone and a small spiral notebook on the table. “I’m on deadline for a piece on how to make your garbage cans bear-proof.” She rolled her eyes. “Wilbur hired me for the ‘crime beat’ but that’s a laugh. The worst crimes around here are drunks peeing in alleys and, once in awhile, somebody speeding down Alaska Street. If a real crime ever happened around here everyone in town would know about it well before the paper came out with the news.”

I found myself laughing but was interrupted by Mina’s phone.

“Uh-oh, gotta go.” She glanced at the readout, did the eye-roll thing again, told us to stay in touch, and breezed out the door.

I turned to Drake. “Maybe we should head back. Freckles has to be wondering what’s happened to us.”

### **Praise for the previous Charlie Parker mysteries:**

“Readers can only hope the likable characters, fast-paced plots and local color will continue in another installment.” —*Albuquerque Journal*

“...a delightfully complex mystery.” –*Romantic Times* (4 out of 5 stars)

“...the best of the series...” –*Midwest Book Review* (on *Memories Can Be Murder*)

“...a female sleuth with an original slant to her methods...” –*Small Press Magazine*

“Charlie is slick, appealing, and nobody’s fool—just what readers want in an amateur sleuth.” –*Booklist*

“Charlie is a fabulous amateur sleuth.” –*Midwest Book Review*

“A good story and a challenging puzzle.” –Robert O. Greer, *National Public Radio*

“Down to earth and very readable.” –*Library Journal*

“Tension is fast-paced in this involving account.” –*Midwest Book Review*

“An impressive debut mystery.” –*Albuquerque Journal* (on *Deadly Gamble, The First Charlie Parker Mystery*)

**Where to Buy (book may be pre-ordered up to November 15, 2014):**

Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/Legends-Murder-Charlie-Parker-Mysteries-ebook/dp/B00N6UOHX2>

Barnes & Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/legends-can-be-murder-connie-shelton/1120315515?ean=2940046143164>

Kobo: <http://www.kobobooks.com/ebook/Legends-Can-Be-Murder-Charlie/book-2sQtwwlbKkG57BdG1XIhtQ/page1.html?s=FeRkAGTFREWSy4stI9E5jA&r=1>

Apple iBooks: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/legends-can-be-murder-charlie/id915114569?mt=11>