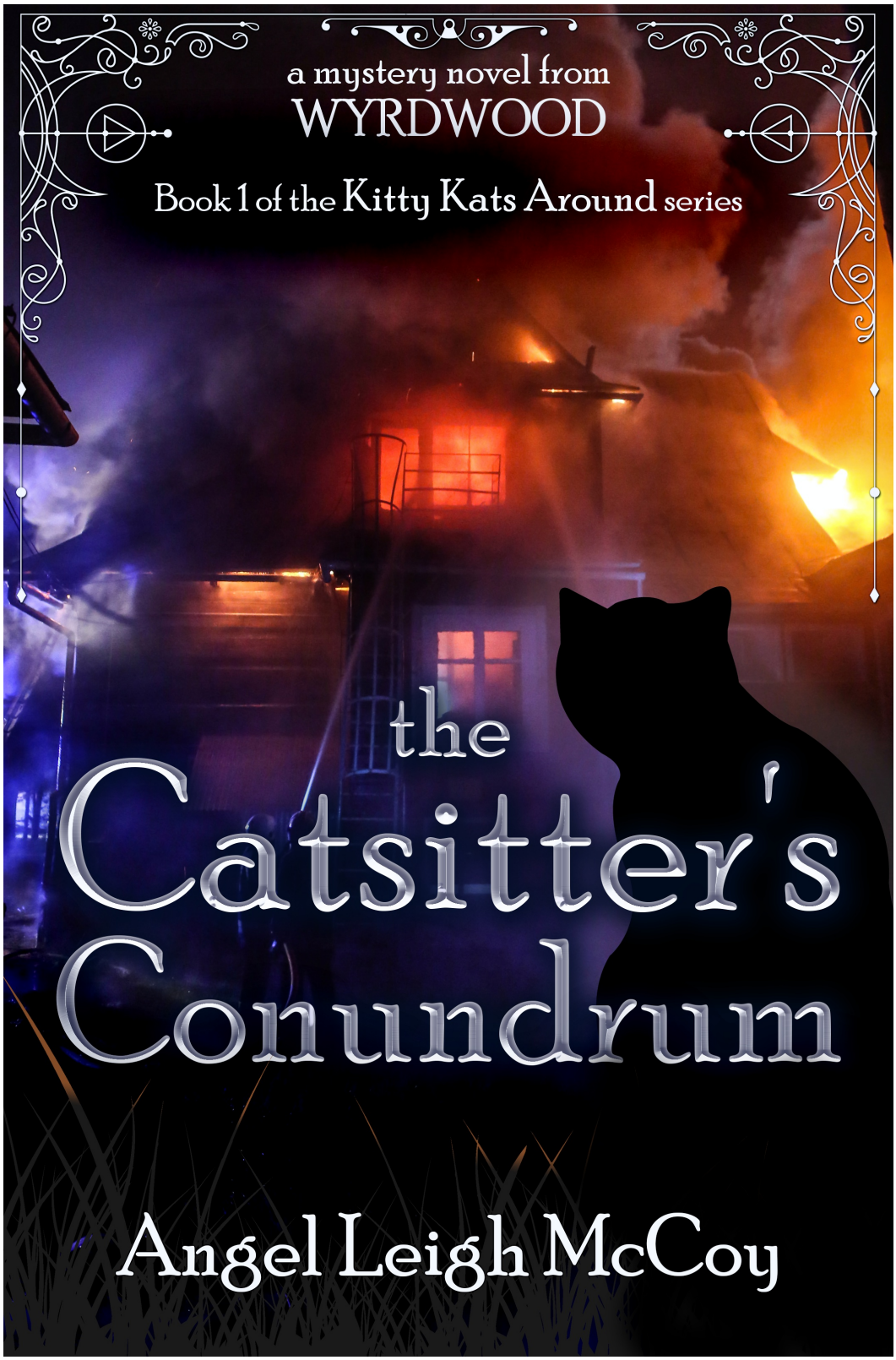
a mystery novel from
WYRDWOOD
Book 1 of the Kitty Kats Around series
the
Catsitter's
Conundrum
Angel Leigh McCoy

♦

Kitty Kats Around #1

The Catsitter's Conundrum

by Angel Leigh McCoy

♦

"The dakini traditionally appears during transitions:
moments between worlds,
between life and death,
in visions between sleep and waking,
in cemeteries and charnel grounds."

—Lama Tsultrim, *Wisdom Rising*—

CHAPTER 1

KITTY

Her world is burning down.

THE MAN'S VOICE GRATED ON MY NERVES. "You have until Friday, you know?" He was following me down the street, undaunted by my cold shoulder.

I'd made it clear that I wanted nothing to do with him and his narcissistic bow tie. He probably thought he was on the cutting edge of fashion, and I really didn't want to be the bearer of bad news.

"Did you hear me, ma'am?" he asked. "You have until Friday."

Ma'am. The most passive-aggressive insult in the English language.

I stopped under a street lamp and turned to face him, squaring off, jaw thrust forward. "Why are you here?" I glared and stuck my hands to my hips.

He halted before plowing into me but only just barely. Swaying, he took a step back to keep from toppling.

I watched him with a cold stare, waiting for his answer. I couldn't believe he had shown up at my house at dinner time, just to tell me something I already knew. Did he think I'd write him a check on the spot? Was this really how the bank did business?

"I'm doing you a favor," he said. "You need to understand that your home is on the verge of foreclosure."

"Why you? Why now?"

The question turned his face into a mask of dark shadows. No more Mr. Nice Guy—as if there'd been any true niceness to begin with.

He said, voice low, "I wanted to see your reaction."

"My reaction?" A sick feeling churned in my belly. "You wanted to see my reaction when you told me the bank was going to take my home from me—the home I've lived in for thirty-three years?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I know who you are. Who your daughter and son-in-law are, and I know what they did. I wanted to witness your family's karma catching up with you."

If I could have unhinged my jaw, I'd have swallowed him right then, and belched loudly afterward. Instead, I said, "You know one of his victims."

"Uh huh. My mother."

I couldn't find any words to reply. Of their own accord, my fingers reached out and brushed down the sleeve of his jacket, maybe trying to comfort him, maybe letting him know that I understood.

He jerked away, turned on his heel, and stalked off.

That hurt more than anything else he'd done, unreasonably so. The man—whose name I never actually caught—had been one in a long series of recriminations. I was guilty by association.

What no one seemed to understand was that I was also a victim of my son-in-law's grift.

I took a deep breath of the savory evening air. Someone had their fireplace going. This would have pleased me if it weren't for the worry suffocating all my joy. If the bank foreclosed on my home, I and my daughter would be homeless. My throat closed up, and my hands shook.

It was dark and cold, and I hadn't thought to grab a jacket. I had chugged out the front door as soon as I'd seen that bow-tie standing on my stoop. I'd pretended I was going for a walk. I didn't want him in my house, judging me.

Because I didn't want to run into him again, I just kept walking, pumping my arms as if I could punch away my troubles with each swing. I did psychic violence to my son-in-law with each step.

The moment I saw the dancing orange-red light behind the curtains at the Ortiz residence, I was mesmerized. I stopped and stared for too long, trying to figure out what it was. When the flames slithered up the curtains, I knew. House fires are terrible monsters that start small but grow quickly and consume everything in their path. Like most elements, fire goes about its business with neither judgment nor mercy—until stopped.

I'd never seen one so heartbreaking as the one that engulfed the Ortizes' beautiful old Victorian. That house had stood happily for over a hundred years until the flames took it.

I patted my pockets—no phone. I'd left it at home. Fortunately, another neighbor had called 911.

Sirens filled the neighborhood, echoing off houses, and the fire took over for the sun as it set, lighting the neighborhood.

One moment—that's all it takes for your life to suddenly become unrecognizable.

My husband and I had moved into the neighborhood when we were first married. We'd spent thirty-three years there, raised our daughter there, and then my Bob had died there. As I watched fire devour that house, I felt it like a wound to my world. It may as well have been my own home burning. In many ways, my home *was* burning to the ground.

Tears welled and flowed down my face. They blurred my vision, twisting the sight of the flames into a bad acid trip. It was all just too much!

Until it wasn't. I come from stoic Oregonian stock, so I mustered, wiped my eyes with my sleeve, and joined two of my neighbors to watch the spectacle. They glanced up as I approached, nodded, and then went back to spectating. The atmosphere was somber.

"I hope everyone got out," I said.

Harut replied, "No." He was contrarian by nature and often confused "yes" and "no."

"No?"

"No smell of burning fat. No one in there." Harut's full name was Harutyan Mushyan. His aralez ancestry—winged dogs—showed in the prominence of his nose. If anyone could smell burning fat, it would be him. He was proudly Armenian, lived three doors down from me, owned a high-end shoe store downtown, and had four children. His wife Bettina stood silently in the circle of his arm. I'd never heard her speak.

"That's a relief." I made a face.

Harut shook his head.

I pulled out my cellphone and took a picture of the blaze. "I'm supposed to catsit tonight for the Garretts. I hope the fire doesn't spread." The Garrett house occupied the lot next door to the Ortizes.

Harut said, "The fire department has it under control."

The Chapman-Silva couple arrived to stand with us.

"What happened?" asked Rose Silva.

I shrugged, "Not sure."

Margo Chapman asked, "Anyone in there?"

"I don't think they were home. Their car's gone." I smiled at the women. In their seventies, they had been in the neighborhood longer than Bob and I had. They were good neighbors, kept their lawn mowed, and only occasionally hosted raucous *Wine & Bridge* parties on their backyard deck. While Margo was a hundred percent human, Rose had magickal blood. I wasn't sure what kin she came from, but the green sparkles in her eyes gave her away despite the cataracts that had begun to thicken there.

Rose commented, stretching her neck to peer around, as if that would help her see better. "I don't see the Ortizes."

"Maybe they weren't home, dear," said Margo, raising her voice to be heard.

Another neighbor joined us.

"Hey, Mike," Margo greeted the man.

"Hey." Mike Calhoun waved half-heartedly. To humans he looked like a large and looming lumberjack. To anyone with magickal blood, he was an orcneas, a bulky race with tusks that protruded from his mouth. Mike had had his tusks sheered off, each end decorated with a shiny black stone that reflected the firelight. The rounded tips made the tusks resemble—a bit shockingly—small arching penises. Whether that had been his intention or not, no one had ever had the nerve to ask him.

Mike had purchased his home in the late eighties and had raised six kids there. His wife—a normal human—was confined to a wheelchair—a fact completely unrelated to her having birthed six kids.

Mike said, "The old lady sent me out to find out what was happening."

"Fire," Margo replied.

The rest of us nodded in agreement. We stood side-by-side, watching the drama unfold.

The fire fighters dragged out their hoses and sprayed giant streams of water at the burning house.

Rose hugged herself. "I hope it wasn't arson. That's the last thing we need."

"Their boy is eight now," said Harut. "That's the age."

"What?" I asked. "The age where you burn the house down?"

"Playing with matches." Harut shrugged. "I'm just saying."

Mike didn't take his eyes off the fire. "I bet it's insurance fraud."

Margo put an arm around Rose's shoulders. "They recently sold their boat, you know? Maybe they need money."

Rose stuck out a long-nailed finger and pointed at a car parked down the street. "Isn't that Sherrie Abbasi, the girl who babysits for them?"

I followed Rose's finger to the young couple. They were leaning as one entangled unit against a dirty sedan.

Mike said, "By the steamed-up windows on that car, I'd say she and that boyfriend of hers were getting it on."

"Suspicious," said Margo, nose tipped high in the air.

A new fire-department vehicle pulled up to the curb. A man in a sharp uniform got out. He scanned the looky-loos until his attention came to rest on me. He smiled and nodded.

I gave him a small smile and an even smaller wave.

Margo, Rose, Harut, Bettina, and Mike looked back and forth between us.

After a beat, Rose asked, "You know the fire chief?"

"Used to," I replied. "Long time ago." In my mind, I added, *Not long enough*. The wounds of high school never quite healed nor did the loves. Forty years may have passed, but the man still made my stomach flip every time I saw him. I, of course, had become skilled at ignoring it. I was married.

And then I remembered—I wasn't *technically* married anymore. Death had done us part.

I dropped my chin as a wave of sadness washed over me. I took a deep breath then immediately regretted it. Smoke from the fire filled my nose. I broke into a series of coughs serious enough that Margo put her hand on my back.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's the smoke."

"We should maybe go inside," suggested Mike without moving.

No one else moved either.

The fire chief headed for the fire trucks. His name was Elias Kariuki, but everyone called him either Eli or Karaoke (a bastardization of his last name and—unforgivably—one of his favorite pastimes). He preferred Eli. He'd always been cruelly handsome, but in his uniform, with his shaved head and muscular body, he was torture. Why did men age so much better than women?

I had once managed to tolerate the pencil-thin mustache he'd insisted on growing in high school—and still stubbornly wore. He was a Normal, but his physical and mental prowess made up for the lack of magickal blood. When I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that Eli Kariuki was the one who got away.

"Hush," I told myself.

Margo asked, "Excuse me?"

"Nothing." I waved it off and watched Eli stride across the lawn, backlit by the raging fire. He was in charge, it showed, and it put those butterflies back in my belly. For a moment, I was in high school again at the Homecoming beach bonfire, watching Eli laugh and rassle with his buddies. He'd been big even then, a football player; and I'd been a band nerd, flute.

We'd done plenty of rassling ourselves, in the back of his parents' Dodge. My mind suddenly filled with an image of us, our clothing askew, bodies on fire, and the windows so fogged up that we couldn't see out.

"Stop it!" I told myself. That was a long time ago.

That time, Margo side-eyed me but didn't say anything.

A loud bang startled us all into jumping. One of the upstairs windows had exploded. The house was beyond saving, but at least the firefighters were keeping the fire from spreading to other homes.

"Well," I said. "I'm going to go make breakfast. My daughter has moved back in."

Margo nodded sagely. "I heard what happened. So sorry."

"I warned her about that man." I shrugged as if to say it was out of my hands, wrapped my arms even tighter around myself, and headed for home. *That man* was my son-in-law, and *he* had killed my husband.

♦♦♦

Thanks for giving this excerpt a read! If you have any feedback for me, I would welcome it wholeheartedly—both praise and critique.

You can reach me via Facebook messenger (angelmccoy) or via email at angel.leigh.mccoy@gmail.com.

I sincerely want to know what you thought, how I can improve the story, and what you liked or didn't like. This helps me enormously, especially at this stage when I'm still polishing the book.

Keep watching the newsletter for more excerpts.

Wishing you the happiest of holidays!
Angel…

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