



BY STONE
BY BLADE
BY FIRE

A BARBARA HOLLOWAY MYSTERY

KATE WILHELM

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CHAPTER 1

Frank knew very well the office rule chiselled in stone: *No books are to be removed from the law library.* He had cut those words himself, decades before, when he first began stocking the shelves, but the two books he had just deposited on his desk were going home with him, his weekend reading, in his own good comfortable chair, with his own good reading lamp. He had a busy weekend lined up. Reading to do, and potatoes to plant before St. Patrick's Day. He glanced around in annoyance when there was a tap on his door, and, too quickly for him to say go away, the door opened.

"Frank—" Patsy started, and was stopped by a man pushing past her, leaning heavily on the door frame.

He was ash gray, breathing rapidly, and looked ready to sink into the floor. Frank hurried across his office and supported the man with his arm about his waist. "Come on, let's get you to the sofa. "Patsy, 911, *now*."

She nodded and scurried away as Frank led the stranger into his office and toward the sofa, but the man twisted around and lurched toward the desk and clients' chairs.

"Attorney agreement," he said in a strangled voice as he sank into one of the chairs. He was clutching a briefcase close to his body and kept it on his lap. A violent tremor shook him and he ducked his head, as if to suppress a moan. It was a futile effort. "Agreement..." he repeated in a whisper, not looking up.

Moving quickly Frank went to his desk and found a client-attorney agreement in the drawer. He put it down before the man and put a pen by it, but the new client, groping in his briefcase, appeared not to notice. He withdrew a manila envelope and with a visibly painful effort put it on the desk.

"Don't let them have it," he rasped in barely audible words. He tried to pick up the pen, his hand shaking so violently he couldn't grasp it.

"That can wait," Frank said. "You need medical attention."

“Now,” the man said and attempted again to pick up the pen.

Leaning across the desk, Frank put the pen in his hand.

The man had just started to write when his body spasmed and he pitched forward, hit the desk with his shoulder and crashed to the floor, knocking over the chair as he fell. Frank ran around his desk to see the man crumpled, the chair partly on him, and papers from the briefcase scattered. He pulled the chair away, leaned over and felt for a pulse in the man’s throat.

“Dear God!” Patsy cried, entering the office. “They’re on the way. Is he dead?”

“I don’t think so,” Frank said, straightening, regarding the fallen man with a frown. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know. Should we do something?”

Frank looked at her then. She was pale, staring wide-eyed at the man on the floor, and looked to be in shock. Patsy had been with him from the first day he had been able to afford a secretary, and until now he had never seen anything faze her. Annoy her, yes. Make her furious, absolutely. But put her in a state of shock, never. He touched her arm. “Go sit down. He doesn’t need anything we can give him or do for him. The medics should be here any second now.” When Patsy continued to stare at the man without moving, Frank took her by the arm, turned her around and pointed to the sofa across the office. “Go. Sit.”

Walking stiffly, she crossed the office and sat on the edge of an easy chair.

Frank shook his head, then studied the man on the floor. He didn’t think he was dead, but as close to death as a fellow could be and not yet crossed over. About five feet ten, sandy thin hair, no visible scars, medium weight, worn, faded jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, running shoes. Forty, forty-five years old? Hard to tell, he decided. That gray color, the shaking and moaning, made age a guess.

“Mr. Holloway, they said—” Elsie, the receptionist, gasped and moved out of the way as medics rushed in with a stretcher.

“What happened?” one of them said as he knelt by the man on the floor.

“He just collapsed and fell,” Frank said. He went around his

desk to sit as the medics went to work. It didn't take them long to get their patient hooked up to an IV, on the stretcher, and out the door. Only when they were gone did Frank rise and cross the room to where Patsy was still sitting like a statue.

"I'll get us some coffee," Frank said, touching her arm.

"You?" She looked up at him, then jumped to her feet. "No! I'll do it. I'll make coffee." She never let him make coffee, and he took in a breath of relief that his own Patsy was rejoining the land of the living.

"In a minute," he said. "First tell me what just happened here."

"Elsie called me and said a man wanted to see Mr. Bixby or you. She said maybe he was sick or drunk or something and I went out to see for myself. He was leaning on the front desk. I said I'd tell you, but he followed me, leaning against the wall most of the way. I asked him to wait a minute, but he kept coming." She was talking too fast, running words together.

"No name? Did he give his name to Elsie?"

"She said he didn't."

"He asked for Sam or me? In that order?"

"I don't know. That's what Elsie told me. Mr. Bixby is in Los Angeles, so she called me. I should go make coffee, shouldn't I?"

"No," Frank said. He went to the bookcase and opened the bar concealed behind it. "We both could use something a bit more potent than coffee."

He brought out brandy and two glasses. Patsy accepted the brandy without hesitation and drank it down as if it were medicine, as it probably was for her, Frank thought as he sipped his own. Spots of color flared on her cheeks and she looked just like she always had, a tubular woman with eternally black hair, determined to keep him from waiting on himself or anyone else. "If you're up to it, you could help me gather up that stuff," he said after a moment, eyeing the scattered papers.

"I'll do it," Patsy said quickly and put her glass on the coffee table.

"We'll both do it."

Lists of names, he realized a minute later as he picked up a folder and papers, examined some and stuffed them into the man's

briefcase. Probably they had been in some kind of order originally, but that order was lost now. Just lists of names. Donors to a cause? Membership names? Voters? Not that, he thought, studying a sheet in his hand. *Medford*. Under this label, Mabel and Don Crusick, followed by numeral three. A family? He shook his head and added that last sheet to the ones in the briefcase.

“I guess if they revive that fellow, he’ll come back for them,” he said. “And if they don’t, someone else will come by.”

Patsy rose and automatically straightened her skirt, looking around as if searching for something else she should be doing.

“Go on home,” Frank said, walking to the coffee table to retrieve his brandy and deposit the briefcase. “I’m going to sit at my desk and finish my drink. Then I’ll be off. On your way out tell Elsie I’ll have a word with her before she leaves.” Going to the door with her, he said, “You heard him say he wanted an attorney-client agreement?”

“I thought that’s what he was saying,” she said. “I wasn’t sure. Should I open a file for him?”

“Afraid not. He didn’t get that far.” Frank opened the door. “Go on home now.”

A minute later, sitting at his desk, he brooded about the man who had collapsed, the agreement with an ink line running off the bottom, and about the envelope the man had thrust onto the desk. He felt certain that Patsy had not heard the fellow tell him not to “let them have it.” Who? Not let *them* have it? Police? Someone else? Who?

Finally he drew the envelope closer and opened it, pulled out several papers, and blew out a sigh of exasperation. Lists of names, apparently like the others in the briefcase. Southern Oregon towns and cities followed by names. After glancing at several more papers, he replaced them all and closed the clasp envelope.

Frowning, he regarded the unsigned client agreement. That ragged line that had run off the paper made up his mind for him. He was a client, damn it. And he had charged Frank with not letting *them* have it, whoever they were. He picked up the envelope, crossed to his safe concealed in a paneled wall, opened the safe and placed the envelope inside.

Done, he put the brandy away, shoved his two books inside his briefcase, glanced about, and left his office to have a word with Elsie.

Monday morning he was at a library table with a pile of books, his notebook, a legal pad, and several pens. He was not at all surprised when Patsy came to his side and said in a low voice that that man wanted to see him.

“Lieutenant Hogarth?”

She nodded. To her the lieutenant would always be *that man*.

“Well, let him cool his heels for a minute or two while I wash my hands,” Frank said, rising. “Oh, Patsy, please bring us some coffee if you’re not busy. Coffee first, then the lieutenant.”

The coffee service was in place on the table by the sofa and easy chairs when Patsy showed Hogarth in. Frank motioned for Patsy to come in.

“Morning, Milt,” Frank said, crossing to the comfortable seating arrangement. “So it was a homicide. Why don’t you grill Patsy while I make like a host.”

Milton Hogarth was a heavysset man with scant fading red hair and a pink scalp, sharp blue eyes, and a scowl that seemed permanent. He nodded and seated himself in the chair he always chose. “So what happened here on Friday?” he asked brusquely, turning his scowl onto Patsy.

Frank poured coffee, moved the cream and sugar across the table toward Hogarth, and listened to Patsy recount almost word for word what she had told him on Friday.

“What did he say to you?” Hogarth snapped.

“Nothing.” She didn’t quite snap back, but came close.

“Tell him what you heard the fellow say to me,” Frank said.

“Something about an agreement, a client agreement. I couldn’t hear it all. I was on my way to call 911.”

“You just let a guy you didn’t know walk in here without giving a name or—”

“Now, Milt,” Frank said. “You asked her what happened and she told you. Good coffee, Patsy. Thank you.” He nodded toward the door and she turned and walked out.

“My turn,” Frank said after the door had closed. He told it succinctly, leaving out only the part about the envelope in his safe and the one thing the dying man had said to him. *Don't let them have it.* Police? Maybe, he thought. Maybe not.

Hogarth added cream and sugar to his coffee as Frank talked.

“Unknown fellow wanted either Sam or me, in that order,” Frank said when he finished. “Suggests he wanted a senior partner, doesn't it? Who was he? What killed him?”

Hogarth hesitated, added more sugar to his already sweetened coffee, then said, “He was a nobody. A gofer. Robert Daggart. He did odd jobs for a Portland church. Came down from Portland with membership lists and was heading to California. The church bookkeeper said he stopped in just long enough to pick up another list to take down to Medford on his way and left. An hour, hour and a half later he shows up here beaten to a pulp. Died at four in the morning yesterday. Never regained consciousness.” He drank coffee in big gulps.

“Not a visible mark on him,” Frank said after a moment.

“They worked his body over. Internal bleeding. Both kidneys pretty much smashed, broken ribs, esophagus—” He stopped and drank more coffee. “You get the picture. The doctor said it was a miracle that he made it to your office. Not your usual blunt instrument,” he added. “Loaded fists. A professional job.” He helped himself to more coffee. “Jesus, Frank, it's ugly. The world just gets uglier.”

Frank could only agree that this was ugly. A man with a roll of quarters in his fist, maybe both fists, beating a man to death. He didn't bother to ask about fingerprints, not with a professional job done by professionals.

He gave Hogarth a copy of the agreement with the line that ran off the paper, and the briefcase with church membership lists. There wasn't much more to be said and Hogarth summed it up tersely. The attackers must have left him for dead, but he had managed to drag himself to his car and drive it to the parking space reserved for Sam Bixby, then get to the office. The car had been towed and recovered by the police. The church would claim the body since Daggart had not listed any family in his personnel information.

Finally, the coffee carafe empty, Hogarth heaved himself to his feet.

“I’m getting too old for this crap,” he said on his way to the door. He paused there and muttered, “What the fuck was important enough for him to go through hell to get up here?”

Frank shook his head, deeply troubled. “I wish to God I knew.”

CHAPTER 2

Barbara stood gazing out her office window, seeing little or nothing on the street below. She glanced at her watch and cursed under her breath. Six minutes after four. The last time she looked, it had been five minutes past, and before that three minutes past four. It was a beautiful warm day, September at its best, a perfect day for a long walk, but she already put in overtime walking, until her thighs had become fire-hot and throbbing. No more walking, but neither could she stay in her office and watch the minutes drag by.

Todd and a couple of pals would be at the house working on advanced calculus and eating everything in sight; they would be talking and joking, one minute four-year-olds, the next adolescent boys who had not quite gotten used to being on the cusp of manhood.

“Dad’s it is,” she said under her breath. He could still be at his office and that would be fine. She and Darren were due there for dinner later anyway, and she’d show up early. She was not fit company for a snake and he might try to cheer her up, which she couldn’t stand. Shelley had tried, Maria had tried, and all they had gained from their efforts was her silence and withdrawal. Either that or a scream, she admitted to herself. Silence was better.

She crossed her office to the door to the reception room where Maria, working on her computer, looked up with a too-cheerful smile when Barbara entered. Before Barbara could tell her to knock off and go home, the outer door opened and a woman walked in.

She was wearing a raw silk pantsuit, the exact shade of blue of her eyes. Nicely tanned, with a few freckles, thick short curly hair that probably had been blond but had darkened to a ripe wheat color, forty-something, she was handsome rather than pretty. There was nothing ostentatious about her, nothing that signaled big money, but neither was she one of the impoverished clients who believed it was okay to walk in without an appointment.

What she shared with those clients was fear. A palpable sense

of fear made her lips tremble and her voice tremulous when she spoke.

“Ms. Holloway? I’m so glad I caught you. May I have a few minutes of your time?”

Barbara couldn’t stop her involuntary glance at her watch. A few minutes, she decided, and pushed her door open. “Of course. Come in.”

As the woman went to one of the clients’ chairs, Barbara walked around her desk to sit down and regard her visitor. The nice tan didn’t altogether disguise her pallor, or the shadows under her eyes that were shiny with unshed tears. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m Ashley Loven, and my son is charged with murder. He didn’t do it, Ms. Holloway. He didn’t have a gun, and he had no reason to kill Joseph Peel, but they say he did. Two people said they witnessed it. But he didn’t do it!”

Barbara had a vague memory of reading about it. Usually an avid follower of criminal cases reported in the local newspaper, she had paid scant attention to this one. Her impression was that it was an open-and-shut case, complete with eyewitnesses.

“You want me to defend your son?” she asked when Ashley Loven ducked her head and became silent.

“Yes. Will you talk to him, get his side of the story, help him?”

“Ms. Loven, according to the newspaper account your son is an adult. Why hasn’t he asked for me to represent him? Why you?”

“He thinks it’s hopeless!” she cried. “He’s given up already. They told him that with a former police officer testifying that he saw it happen, there was no chance of anything but a guilty verdict if it goes to trial. They said it would be better for him if he confessed up front, save everyone the trouble and expense of a court trial. I don’t know what all they told him! He’s only twenty-three and they terrified him. He needs professional help. Your help.”

Barbara couldn’t suppress a ripple of anger that stiffened her. They had him in jail and were still hounding him with questions and threats. How long had they been holding him on suspicion of murder? They could keep hammering him with questions, stoke his fear with suggestions until he had an attorney.

“Ms. Loven,” she said, “please understand what I’m about to tell

you. Your son is an adult. Unless he's incompetent, he is the one who must decide on counsel. Has he asked for anyone to represent him?"

Ashley Loven shook her head. "I don't think so. He was hit in the head, knocked out, and had stitches, and I think he's still suffering from his injury. A concussion, they said. He was released from the hospital today, and they took him straight to jail. He isn't thinking clearly, but I know he needs an attorney."

"He needs someone. But it has to be his choice." She paused, thinking, then said, "Will you see him again today, this evening?" At a nod from Ashley Loven, she continued. "Tell him to say nothing until he has talked to an attorney. That's his right, to remain silent. I'll go around in the morning and have a talk with him and we'll go on from there. I can't guarantee that I'll take his case but I can give him advice in any event."

"You can't see him today, this afternoon?" She leaned forward, clutching the arms of her chair.

"I'm sorry, but it has to be in the morning. Meanwhile, he's to remain silent. Tell him it's important that he remain silent until he talks with an attorney. Where can I reach you after I see your son?"

Ashley bit her lip and tensed even more, as if ready to spring up in protest. After a moment she slumped in her chair. "I'm at the Hilton, room 312. I'll wait for your call. I can pay you, Ms. Holloway. Travis doesn't have a cent, but I can pay your fee."

"Tomorrow," Barbara said, rising. "Travis Loven? Is that his name?"

"No. He's Travis Morgan. I divorced his father years ago and remarried."

After seeing Ashley out Barbara returned to her desk and cursed under her breath again. If it turned out to be a plea bargain case, Shelley could handle it, she decided. If it turned out that a trial was in order, Shelley couldn't do it alone—and considering the months of preparation, delays, intense concentration—none of that was on her schedule.

It depended on what happened at the board meeting that evening. Darren, her lover, had handed in his resignation at the clinic, but now, weeks later, it still had not been accepted.

At the meeting the decision would be forthcoming, and the board members believed they had little choice but to accept his resignation. The alternative was to have their tax-exempt status questioned, probably lose it. Go from a non-profit charitable clinic to a for-profit corporation or something.

Acknowledged as one of the best physical therapy clinics in the country, many of its patients were unable to pay for extensive therapy. Without donations, the clinic would have to severely limit the number of non-paying patients. Darren was unwilling to let that happen, even if it meant leaving, and that meant a move. For both of them.

“Don’t borrow trouble!” Barbara told herself sharply. “Maybe they’ll kick the can down the road again.” And maybe tomorrow the sun won’t rise, she added, standing, ready to go to Frank’s house.

She walked through the house to the kitchen where Frank was washing something in a colander. He turned to grin at her, wiped his hands, and picked up a tomato.

“Ah, Bobby, look at this!” Frank said. A broad smile activated every muscle in his face. The tomato was so dark red it looked black and was the size of a softball. “Isn’t that a beauty!”

“It’s a beauty,” she agreed.

“Help yourself to wine. I’ll get a quick shower and some decent clothes. Won’t take more than a couple of minutes. Cheese in the fridge.” He drew close enough to give her a peck on the cheek, and continued toward the hall to his bathroom, but paused.

“I can’t figure out Sam,” he said. “He’s turning into an ambulance chaser or something. Swept a promising client right out from under my nose today. Maybe he’s getting senile, or sees that I have more fun than he does. Or something.” He shook his head.

“Okay, Dad. Let’s have it. What’s the rest of the story?”

“Well, Annie McIvey came by to ask about that major who threatened the clinic. It happened that Sam was in my office, and he began asking her questions. I was right there, but he was doing the asking, not me. She told him about those two incompetents the major wanted to put in the VA system as physical therapists, and she told him that Darren had flunked them both,

and so on. Anyway, next thing I know he's talking about his pal Senator Treadmore and his subcommittee looking into the use of contractors in the VA, and for some reason Sam was getting redder and redder, ranting about mercenaries, until he finally said maybe he could help Annie, since I was so busy with the new book and all that. He whisked her right off to his own office. Ambulance chaser. I don't know. Maybe at a certain age we should all retire."

Shaking his head, he turned to go on to his bathroom.

"Dad, is Pete still in Afghanistan?" Peter Bixby was an army lieutenant, and she knew very well that he was. Sam talked about him at every opportunity.

Frank glanced back over his shoulder. "I believe he might still be over there. See you in a few minutes. Oh, I believe Sam told Annie to tear up that resignation." He vanished into his room at the end of the hall.

Barbara sank into the nearest chair. Of course Sam would have been in Frank's office when Annie arrived. Of course they would have talked about the major who had threatened to pull strings at the IRS if Darren refused to give accreditation to two contractor guys, who, Darren said, weren't qualified to empty bedpans without supervision. Of course Frank knew that Pete was in Afghanistan, in harm's way, that the day could come when he might need physical therapy. And of course Frank knew about Sam's many friends and acquaintances in the government.

Frank had manipulated Sam every inch of the way and Sam would never suspect that he had done exactly what Frank had planned. She could almost pity the major who had made his outrageous demand to the clinic while Darren was on vacation. Sam would be relentless in his pursuit of that guy. How many other incompetents had the major succeeded in placing, satisfying some big contractor, making money on each deal?

Smiling, she lifted her glass in a silent salute to her father. Then she began to think about the recycle box in the hall. It would have this week's newspapers. Ten minutes later when Frank rejoined her in the kitchen, she was at the table reading about the murder of Joseph Peel and his killer, Travis Morgan, who had been subdued at the scene of the crime.

CHAPTER 3

Barbara was seated at the table in the conference room waiting for a guard to bring in Travis Morgan. The room was tiny and windowless; the table, bolted to the floor, was ugly grey metal with years of grime ingrained in molding that edged the top. Two chairs opposite each other, also metal, were very uncomfortable. The room was not designed to lift the spirits of an already dispirited prisoner.

She watched in silence as the door opened and Travis Morgan walked the few feet from the door to slouch into a chair without a word or a glance toward her. The guard nodded in her direction and left, closing the door hard behind him. Travis sprawled in his chair, his legs out to the side and, keeping his head turned slightly, his face averted, studied the tabletop as if it contained a secret map. He looked much like Ashley. The little she could see of his hair appeared thick, darkening blond, and from the brief glimpse she had seen of his face, his eyes were just as blue. He still had a bandage on his head. He appeared to be well built, muscular, and she assumed the rigid line of his jaw was not permanent but rather a visible effort to keep control.

“You know who I am?” she asked. “Why I’m here?”

“Sure. Holloway. My mother hired you.” He didn’t glance her way as he spaced the words in the manner of a bored middle school student.

“Let’s get a few ground rules established. First, I don’t answer to Holloway. It’s either Ms. Holloway or Barbara. Your decision. Second, your mother did not hire me. Neither did she retain me. Again, that’s your decision. And third, if you want me to defend you, you’ll have to face me. I don’t speak to the side of anyone’s head longer than it takes to say ‘so long.’”

In an exaggerated act of compliance, he straightened and folded his hands on the table, then looked at her. It was a mocking gaze.

She met his gaze steadily. “Let me tell you what I know about

you,” she said. “You’re tough. You’ve had to be to get by on your own since you ran away at sixteen. You have all the street smarts a guy needs to get by, and then some. You think you understand the system you’re up against, and you don’t know squat. You walked into a house and according to two eyewitnesses you shot and killed a man in cold blood. You cooperate with me, or with someone like me, or you’ll spend the rest of your sorry life in prison. And if it’s with me, you’ll cooperate or I’ll walk out. You need me a hell of a lot more than I need you. If it’s me, I’m going to be in your face a lot. I’ll know you as if you were my blood brother before this is over, and you’ll answer every question I ask, fully, in detail, and truthfully.”

She continued to gaze into his blue eyes until he turned away. “I didn’t shoot Peel.”

“Do you want me to defend you?”

“Yeah. My mother said you were good. Not that it matters.” He added with a touch of the earlier sarcasm, “My ass is grass.”

“What happened Friday night?”

“I rang the doorbell and a guy opened the door and said they were expecting me. He took me down a hall to a door, reached around me and shoved it open. He gave me a push and I took a step into the room. Peel was starting to stand up. Then I got hit in the head and woke up in the hospital.”

“Who hit you? The man who opened the door?”

“It couldn’t have been,” he said after a moment. “He was behind me, pushing. Someone else. I never saw him.”

“Okay, that’s the outline. Let’s fill in some details. You rang the bell and a man opened the door. What did you say to him? What did he say?”

“I told you. I said my name and he said they were expecting me.”

“That’s all you said? Just your name?”

“Jesus! I said my name and I had an appointment. And he said they were expecting me.”

“Walking down the hall, did he say anything?”

“No. And neither did I.”

“So you reached the door. Then exactly what happened? You

said he reached around you to open it. Why?”

Travis glanced toward the door as if measuring his chances, then turned his gaze to her. He looked as if he wanted to reach across the ugly table and throttle her, but he said, “He was walking behind me. He reached around me for the doorknob. He opened the door and gave it a shove. Then he gave me a push.”

“Where was Joseph Peel? Did you know him? Were you surprised to see him instead of your father?”

“Yeah, I knew him and, sure. I was surprised. I didn’t know the guy was taking me to him. Peel was behind a desk... He looked surprised... Yeah,” he added as if he had just thought of this. “He was surprised. He sort of jumped to his feet. Like, *what the fuck?* Then *blooie*. Out.”

“Good,” Barbara said. “Why did you go to see your father that night? Had you kept in touch after running away?”

He tightened again, and the ridge of his jaw became hard and sharp. “No. I hadn’t seen or heard from him for seven years. I had to tell him something.”

“So tell me what were you planning to tell him.”

For a moment she thought he wouldn’t answer. He became even more tense, and both hands clenched on the tabletop. He looked directly at her, then past her at the wall.

“My mother and I had a court order to exhume the body of my sister, and if she had a mark on her, a scar or bruise, anything to indicate abuse, we’d see him prosecuted for kidnapping and abusing her.” He drew in a long breath, then said in a rush, “I wanted to tell him myself, face to face, watch his expression, watch him sweat and squirm.”

She leaned back in her chair, and thought, Dear God, he wanted to kill his father. His act of arrogance, sarcasm, indifference, impatience had vanished in a flash, leaving hatred, a passionate hatred clearly visible, the undeniable hatred of a young man for his father.

She watched without speaking as his hands unclenched, and he regarded them curiously as they trembled. With an abrupt jerk he moved both hands from the table to his lap.

When he lifted his head again, she saw what his mother had

seen—the face of a very frightened young man.

“Tell me about your sister, Travis,” Barbara said.

“She was being held somewhere and they hurt her. She wanted me to come get her...”

As the words trailed off, he looked at Barbara and shook his head. “Never mind. It’s too crazy. You won’t believe me.”

“What I’ve learned is that when people make up stories, they make them sound as rational as they can. Sometimes the craziest sounding ones are the truth. Try me.”

He gave her a long searching look before speaking again. “I was hanging out with a g— with someone, using her computer. I was on a blog and signed myself Stinkbug, with a link to my email address. A week later June emailed me. She asked me to tell her what I gave her once when she caught me doing something I shouldn’t do. It was a bag of marbles, agates. I asked her what I’d been doing. Then, after another week or a little longer this time she answered: smoking. She signed herself Junebug. It was her, my sister.”

He told it haltingly, watching Barbara for a reaction. June had not owned the computer and had to sneak a minute or two when she could in order to use it. She was being held somewhere, but didn’t know where. She had a tiny apartment in a big compound of some sort, a small garden area she could use, with a high fence around it. They had cut her. She had a guard who pretended to be a nurse, and another girl came in four times a week, a companion or something.

When he stopped, Barbara asked, “Did you go to the police? Tell anyone? Try to get help?”

“Yeah. I tried. They didn’t believe me, said it was just a kid pulling a scam of some sort, having me on.” He looked toward the door again, this time with a look of near desperation. “My mother has the emails, all of them. Printouts.”

“I’ll need the computer you used,” Barbara said after a moment. “People can trace the sender, the recipient, everything. Didn’t the police or anyone else try that?”

“No. The girl I was with ditched me. I used her laptop. I couldn’t find her, and June stopped emailing. I began to use a library computer, checking every day to see if there was a new message, but

there wasn't. I decided to come home and see if my mother would or could do anything. I found out that June had died."

He was very pale and a tic was jerking in his jaw. All that jaw clenching, Barbara thought, plus a head injury. He'd had enough, she decided. She opened the folder she had brought and withdrew two client agreements, slid them across the table to him. "Okay, Travis. We'll call it a day. If you want to retain me, you'll need to sign an agreement." She told him what to expect in the coming days, and that no one could question him again unless she was present. She explained that he could ask for a plea bargain at any time, and what it meant: possibly a reduced sentence.

He shook his head. "I didn't shoot him."

"So that's what we'll go with," she said and put a pen by the agreement.

Although he gazed at the paper, it was obvious that he was not reading it. Mumbling, he said, "I don't have any money."

"Your mother said she would pay for your defense."

When he picked up the pen and signed his name, his blue eyes were as shiny with unshed tears as Ashley's had been.

When Barbara got to her offices, she stopped just inside the door and said, "For heaven's sake." It was less in surprise than in resignation. A tall lovely blue vase on the floor between two chairs held blue and violet irises and several sprays of pink pampas grass. A glass vase on Maria's desk had an assortment of flowers. "Shelley?" she said, walking again.

"She said she had to do something," Maria said with a broad smile. "You know, to celebrate."

They had all been jubilant that morning when Barbara said no move was in sight, that Annie McIvey and Sam Bixby were prepared to fight the whole government if necessary. And, of course, Shelley would have to do something.

Going past Maria's desk, Barbara said, "I hope she's left room enough for me to walk." Maria laughed.

Pausing at her door Barbara said, "See if you can get Bailey, will you? Ms. Loven will come in this afternoon; and if Bailey calls back while she's here, just tell him I want him at about four thirty.

And ask Shelley to hang around if she checks in after her stint at Martin's."

Maria nodded happily. "We're back in business!"

That summed it up, Barbara thought, opening her door.

They were back in business. But her office suggested that it was a florist's business. A basket of flowers under a window, a large vase of flowers on the coffee table, a shimmering cut-glass vase with rosebuds on her desk. Once Shelley had said that when she was young she jumped up and down when excited, but as an adult such behavior was unseemly. She found other ways to express her excitement, and Shelley never did things by half measures. The office smelled like gardenias and roses.

Barbara was smiling when she went to her desk and put in a call to Ashley Loven.

"At a good time for you," she said, and Ashley said, "Now." Fifteen minutes later she was in the office.

"You'll defend him?" she asked anxiously as she entered the office.

"Yes. Let's sit by the table and talk." Barbara gestured toward the sofa and easy chairs.

If Ashley even noticed the flowers, she gave no sign. She sat stiffly in one of the comfortable chairs, and Barbara on the sofa. "Do you believe him?" Ashley asked. "You do, don't you?"

"I think he believes his story," Barbara said. "I don't know enough to believe or not believe. I need to know why he hates his father. Is that a good starting place?"

Ashley looked deflated by her words. It appeared that she had not slept much during the past few days, and it showed in the shadows under her eyes. She drew back in her chair and shook her head.

"We should start a few years earlier," she said. "Back when I was still married to Arlie. I was nineteen and he was twenty-nine when we married. Travis was born ten months after our wedding. It... it wasn't an easy pregnancy. Morning sickness that lasted six months, and hemorrhaging afterward that put me back in the hospital."

Although her gaze had become fixed on the flower arrangement, Barbara doubted it was what she was seeing as she

continued in a dull voice.

“June was born five years later. Ms. Holloway, over a period of ten years I became pregnant seven times and had two live births. Miscarriage after miscarriage, and they became progressively worse. The last one occurred in a shopping mall, and my sister came from Denver to be a blood donor. I was so ill that she insisted on taking me home with her to recuperate. In Denver I saw her gynecologist. Another pregnancy could kill me, she said, and I believed her. I had a tubal ligation. My sister paid for it. That was in the tenth year of my marriage to Arlie. I didn’t tell him what I had done and I thought, hoped, he never would find out. Nearly a year later he did.”

She looked at Barbara then. “I couldn’t leave him, or so I thought, because there were two young children. Over the years, he had changed and I had been too ill too much of the time to realize how much he had changed. I began to hear what he was saying, and he sounded like a madman. He’s a preacher. His message had become one of condemnation of the sexual act for anything other than procreation. He was obsessed with it.”

She paused a moment, shook her head, then continued. “He received a late bill from an anesthetist. Mistakenly it was sent to our house, not to my sister. He immediately moved out of our bedroom and didn’t touch me, speak to me, or even look at me. I was glad, Ms. Holloway,” she said with a touch of defiance. It didn’t last long. “Then he denounced me in church. He told the story of Jesus and the fig tree and said the woman who rendered herself sterile was cursed also. She was an abomination in the eyes of God. He kept his eyes on me through it all. I got up and walked out.”

“Good for you.”

“Not so good, the way it turned out,” she said dully.

“Take a break,” Barbara said, standing. “Do you drink coffee? Tea? A Coke?”

“Coffee.”

“Coming up.” Barbara went to the door. When she opened it, the smell of brewing coffee overwhelmed the fragrance of flowers. She nodded her thanks to Maria, who held up two fingers. “It’s already on,” she said, returning to the table.

“I’ll get an apartment here,” Ashley said in a low voice. “I’ll visit him every day, take him whatever they’ll allow.” Her unseeing gaze was fixed on the flowers again. “I lost June. Travis was lost to me for so many years. I can’t lose him again, not like this.”

Maria tapped lightly on the door, entered with the coffee tray, and put it on the table. Barbara thanked her and poured. She and Ashley sipped coffee silently for several minutes.

When Ashley continued her story, her voice was a monotone, as if she had repeated this history to herself so many times it had lost all meaning. She had seen a lawyer but so had Arlie; suit and countersuit for a divorce followed. There was a court hearing about custody, and he won. He charged her with multiple abortions, wanton behavior, denial of his conjugal rights, claimed she was unfit to be around children.

“He used Travis,” she said in that curiously toneless voice. “Arlie’s lawyer asked him a few questions, like who took him to after-school events. I never did because we had one car and Arlie kept the keys. I never drove. I had read to them a lot until Arlie banned any book that he didn’t approve of, nothing with fantasy, magic, the things kids love. Not even Dr. Seuss. Then the kids didn’t want me to read anymore. The attorney asked Travis if I read to his little sister. He had to say no. It was like that. Anyway, when it was over, Arlie had custody, and I had visitation rights only if he was present. Those visits were ugly. No one had anything to say, and he glared at me and kept a tape recorder on. June would get disturbed and cry, and Travis began biting his fingernails. I stopped going.”

“You didn’t see your children after that?”

“I was ordered to stay at least two thousand feet away from them unless he was there. The judge said it would be a criminal offense if I disobeyed his orders. Jail time. Arlie would have made them follow through. I used to go to the school and park half a block away just so I could see them.”

Barbara drew in a long breath to quell her anger. “Then what happened?”

“The usual, I suppose. Depression, poverty, job hunting. If it hadn’t been for my sister, I would have ended up on the street. I just didn’t care. My doctor put me in touch with a singles support

group, newly bereaved, newly divorced, single parents. I met Maurice Loven there. He had lost his wife and daughter in an accident. We had coffee, talked, and we helped each other, oddly enough. Sixteen months later I married him. He urged me to go back to school, finish my degree, go on to graduate school.” Her eyes were downcast and she began to trace the pattern of inlay on the coffee table. “Maurice was killed in an arson fire at his cabin on the coast three months after we married.”

Abruptly she rose, looked about the office, then walked to one of the windows and faced out. “He taught me so much, Ms. Holloway. It’s possible to love someone without constantly judging them, without constant orders to do this, do that, stop doing something else.” She ducked her head and stopped speaking.

After a short silence she returned to her chair, poured herself more coffee from the carafe, and continued without touching the newly poured coffee. She had kept watching her children from a distance. Then Travis stopped showing up after school and a detective had come to her apartment to search for him.

“He would have been sixteen in a week when he left,” she said. “He had been gone for ten days when the police came. That’s when I learned he had run away.”

She became silent again, longer this time, and Barbara waited without speaking.

“Then two years ago June stopped coming out of school. She was attending a private girls’ school. I waited three days and went to my attorney for advice. I was so afraid she had run away, too. A girl like that on the streets... We had a detective look into it, and his report said that Arlie had pulled her out of the school. A drug-crazed gang kid had tried to kill Arlie, and he had been afraid that June might become a target. He placed her where she would be safe. The detective hadn’t been able to find out where she was, and Arlie wasn’t required to divulge that information, not even to me, her mother.”

She had sent both children cards, notes, gifts from time to time, Christmas presents and birthday presents, but nothing had ever been acknowledged. Travis had told her they never received anything from her.

This time when she became silent, Barbara didn't wait for her to resume with past history. "How did June die? When?"

"In June. Her death certificate listed the cause as pneumonia." Her voice broke and she bowed her head, held her face with both hands, convulsed with sobs that were almost inaudible, and more terrible because of their silent intensity.

Barbara rose and took the coffee carafe to the door and motioned to Maria, who came swiftly to take it from her. "*Five minutes*," Maria mouthed. Barbara nodded and returned to the sofa to wait out Ashley's weeping.

After Ashley was composed again, her eyes red rimmed, her face puffy now, she told the rest of her story. She had been out of town for five days on a business trip for her company and learned on her return that June had died and had been buried. At the end of July Travis had shown up.

"At first he was so belligerent," she said. "I made him listen to me, hear my side of the story, and he told me the lies Arlie had fed to them over the years. We went together to the cemetery and we wept together there. We took the emails to my attorney, and he said pretty much what the police had said, that without one or the other computer, the emails had little legal standing."

Like Travis, she believed they were from June. No one had known about their secret names for each other except her. No one else could have known about the agates, smoking, any of it. Barbara asked if she had intervened when she overheard the children bargaining.

Ashley shook her head. "Children need their secrets. Arlie had renamed us all, good biblical names, and he insisted that we use them. June had to be called Ruth. Travis was Isaac, I was Sarah. He called himself Benjamin. The children rebelled, but never in his presence. I don't think any of us ever laughed in his presence."

Stymied, but determined to find out what had happened to June, Ashley had petitioned the court for the exhumation. Her attorney pleaded her case, that she had not been notified of her daughter's death in time to say goodbye. She had a necklace passed on from her own mother that she wanted to bury with June. No one had made any attempt to locate her although her company could

have furnished the information if they had been asked.

“We were going to do it,” she said. “That’s why we came down to Eugene. I had to know if June had been mistreated. If he had abused her in any way.”

“Was Travis abused before he ran away?”

“He said he hadn’t been, but something happened that made him run away. He said it was a lot of little things. It was more than that, but he won’t tell me what it was.” She paused, then said forcefully, “He did not have a gun. When he arrived he had a backpack full of dirty clothes and books, nothing else. A few dollars. He didn’t know anyone in Portland, and he hardly ever left my apartment. We bought him a bicycle or he used buses or the light-rail when he did go out. He never had a chance to buy a gun, steal one, or get one any other way. He never fired a gun in his life. He just wanted to tell Arlie that we were going to exhume June’s body. He seemed to think that he had to tell him in person.”

It was after four when Barbara stood and stretched. “You’ve been through enough for one day, more than enough. I’d like to photocopy those emails and the death certificate.”

“You’ll want a copy of the exhumation order,” Ashley said. “I intend to go through with it myself.”

“Of course,” Barbara agreed. “I’ll handle the details.”

End of sample.

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Kate Wilhelm

Kate Wilhelm's first short story, "The Pint-Sized Genie" was published in *Fantastic Stories* in 1956. Her first novel, *More Bitter Than Death*, a mystery, was published in 1963. Over the span of her career, her writing has crossed over the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy and magical realism, psychological suspense, mimetic, comic, family sagas, a multimedia stage production, and radio plays. She has recently returned to writing mysteries with her Barbara Holloway and the Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Leidl Mysteries novels. Her works have been adapted for television, theater, and movies in the United States, England, and Germany. Wilhelm's novels and stories have been translated to more than a dozen languages. She has contributed to *Redbook*, *Quark*, *Orbit*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Locus*, *Amazing*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Ellery Queen's Mysteries*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Omni* and many others.

Kate and her husband, Damon Knight (1922-2002), also provided invaluable assistance to numerous other writers over the years. Their teaching careers covered a span of several decades, and hundreds of students, many of whom are famous names in the field today. Kate and Damon helped to establish the Clarion Writer's Workshop and the Milford Writer's Conference. They have lectured together at universities in North and South America and

Asia. They have been the guests of honor and panelists at numerous conventions around the world. Kate continues to host monthly workshops, as well as teach at other events. She is an avid supporter of local libraries.

Kate Wilhelm lives in Eugene, Oregon.