



KATE WILHELM

In
Between

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IN BETWEEN
Kate Wilhelm

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AT FIRST SAM THOUGHT the voices were part of a dream and, since he had been working at lucid dreaming, he was pleased with his partial success. He closed his eyes tighter, not willing to wake up and lose the little gain he had made.

“You can’t just leave them wandering about,” one of two voices said. This was the reasonable one who sounded like a patient teacher.

“I know that,” the other one said, this one petulant, peevish, put upon, the way his mother used to get when she caught him doing something disgusting, like drinking milk from the carton. “I imprinted them with the rules. They can’t leave the estate.”

“They belong in quarantine. Out of sequence, into quarantine.”

“And I get a thousand questions. Who messed up, how, when? My unit’s been in trouble like this before, and I don’t want to go there again. Not my fault that they keep sending me newbies who don’t know squat. I’ll find the culprit and take measures, and meanwhile these two can put in time here, not in quarantine. They haven’t done anything to deserve that. It’s not their fault that they’re out of sequence, and it’s certainly not my fault, but I’ll be bla—”

Sam heard a sharp cry and the voices stopped. He bolted upright and stared into the face of a woman whose mouth was open, eyes wide staring into space. He was on a chaise lounge by Ben’s swimming pool, she on a matching chaise, and before he could say a word, she jumped to her feet and cried out again, “Stop!”

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Lori, he remembered. Her name was Lori, Ben's meek little secretary. He reached over to touch her arm, to shake her, to still a possible new scream.

"You were going too fast," she said in a tremulous voice. "I told you to slow down and you kept driving faster and faster."

"There weren't any brakes," he said. His voice was little more than a whisper. He jerked his hand from her arm and stood, looked at his hand, her arm, then down at his body, her body. No blood, no torn clothes. He was wearing jeans, a white sweater; she was in a shapeless blue pant suit, not a black hair on her head out of place. And that was impossible.

"Arthur!" she called. "Arthur, who brought us here? What happened?"

Arthur Beaseley, Ben's security man, a former heavy-weight boxer with a seriously crooked nose, had walked out of the house onto the pool terrace. He went on to the bathhouse, entered, returned after a second or two and clicked off the lights there and on the terrace. Light from the house illuminated the terrace as he continued to the table nearest Sam and picked up two glasses.

"Arthur!" Lori screamed. "What happened? Where is Ben?"

Arthur's slow, measured pace did not change, nor did he glance at Lori or Sam. He entered the house, closed the sliding glass door, and walked out of sight.

"He pretended he couldn't see me or hear me," Lori said in a faint voice. She twisted around to look at Sam. "He was pretending, wasn't he? It was an act?"

Sam picked up an ashtray from the table, banged it down hard. He had substance, damn it! He had touched Lori, had felt her arm, solid in his hand. "Did you hear voices before you sat up? Did you hear them?"

She nodded. "I was dreaming."

"The Voice said she imprinted us with the rules. One of the rules is that we can't interact with any living creature! Do you remember something like that?"

"Oh, my God!" Lori cried. "I remember it now."

"Arthur didn't see us, didn't hear you. Lori, we went over the cliff. I couldn't stop the car, lost control. We went over."

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He started to walk toward the sliding door and Lori hurried to catch up with him. "Remember the party?" he said. "Forty, fifty people here. Where are they? When was that? How long have we been... whatever the hell we are?" He glanced at her. "You came in and said something to Ben, your car was blocked or something. Ben yelled to me to come over and he tossed me his keys. Remember? He told me to drive you home."

"He never let anyone touch that Jag, but he let you. Why?"

"He said he'd report the Jag stolen if I wasn't back by noon. He made that clear. He wants the new script. He'd let me play with his pretty shiny toy for a while, but at the stroke of noon, reel me in with the play in hand."

He tried to open the sliding door, but it was locked. After a momentary pause, he walked through the door. He heard Lori gasp, and then she was inside, too. "Full access to the estate," he said in a low voice. "Another rule. I knew we could do that. Come on. I want to find Ben, see what the bastard is up to."

Lori pulled him to a stop. "Sam, either Ben wanted to kill us both, which doesn't make any sense, or someone tried to kill Ben and got us instead. That's why we're out of sequence. Ben's supposed to be dead, not us." She sounded indignant. Although she did not add, *It's not fair!* it was implied.

"Exactly," he said. "And I want to find out what he's doing about it."

The room they had entered was what Ben called his party room. A long bar dominated one wall; scattered seating arrangements of easy chairs, tables, sofas and more tables could accommodate up to a hundred people, possibly more. The colors were bright red, royal blue, emerald green, with a lot of gilt here and there, a lot of crystals dangling from chandeliers. It was hideously expensive, Sam knew, having been told several times by Ben, but to Sam's eyes it was tawdry, carnival-like and cheap. He hurried on through, past a sweeping staircase, into a broad corridor. Down this way was Ben's office, Lori's office, a screening room, a study, other rooms.

Abruptly he stopped his forward march and caught Lori's arm to stop her. Ahead, Darla Spencer stood with her ear close to the study door, which was open a crack. An intent, listening expression

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on her face did not change as Sam and Lori began to draw closer. Darla was beautiful, with long, ash-blond hair that shone like platinum, limpid aquamarine eyes, peerless cheekbones, flawless teeth and a supermodel's perfect body, formed after leaving that profession and gaining ten pounds. That was what Darla had done when she was discovered by Ben Carnahan and turned into a cinema superstar.

Sam hesitated when he was within touching distance of Darla, but Lori continued to walk and entered the study. Sam followed. Ben was striding around the room the way he always did, forcing his audience to keep swiveling about to keep him in sight, to pay rapt attention to every word. Ben was a massive man, six-foot-four-inches tall, close to three hundred pounds, with a great upper body, rather like a buffalo, it was often said of him. With sandy hair, thinning and down over his ears, a tendency toward a double chin, widely-spaced and deeply-set dark eyes, he owned any room he occupied. He had a deep, resonant voice that could rise decibels to an ear-hurting volume.

"Who's the fat guy?" Sam asked, nodding toward a man who seemed to be cowering in a chair.

"Sy Wannamaker, his lawyer," Lori said. "Scared to death of Ben. The other one is Harrison Coolson, his producer and partner. Shh. Listen."

"I don't care what the goddam protocol is," Ben was bellowing at Sy Wannamaker. "Get one of your guys over there and get that script. Sam said it's half finished. I want that half and we'll go on from there with it."

"Ben, be reasonable. I told you the police sealed his apartment, padlocked until they get the tox report. And his sister won't even talk to us. She has her own lawyer handling everything."

His sister had come? Sam was pleased and surprised that Susan had left Iowa to tend to his affairs. It was the first time, to his knowledge, that she had traveled farther than a hundred miles from Des Moines. Of course, since the family thought he was making a fortune, with his play picked up and made into a successful movie, they would spring for an attorney. He felt a bit of discomfort thinking that he might have said something to lead to that belief.

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“I don’t give a shit about the woman,” Ben yelled. “Anything Sam wrote belongs to me! She wants a court fight, she’ll get it. But after I get that play. Let her sue me then.”

“There isn’t any play,” Sam muttered to Lori. “I told him that to get him off my back.”

“It could just be notes on his computer,” Sy Wannamaker said. “Maybe he didn’t have enough to print out yet.”

“Then get me the goddamn computer! Tomorrow, not next week or next month. It’s been over a week, and they’ve had time to do whatever tests they need, toxicology or anything else. I’ve waited long enough.”

Harrison Coolson stood then and started to walk toward the door. Sixty-something, well built, with gray hair and a matching mustache, always impeccably dressed, he exuded good breeding and decorum. His voice was well modulated, low key as he said, “Get the play, do what you want with it, but count me out. I won’t do that to Darla. She’s at the top of her form and you want to sideline her. For God’s sake, the new girl will keep, ripen. How old is she, eighteen, nineteen? Doesn’t matter. Darla deserves better than that.”

“Rebecca’s exactly the age Darla was when I created her ten years ago,” Ben said, his voice dropping to a low rumble, more ominous than his bellow had been. “Darla was yesterday’s pretty new face. Rebecca is tomorrow’s. Sam’s writing her a big part, bigger than Darla’s ever was, and that’s how it’s going to be. Now sit down and shut up.”

“There isn’t a new play,” Sam muttered again. “He told me to write Darla out, the big sister who gets cancer and dies, and pretty Rebecca saves the family ranch, or some other damn crap. He said to think about Elizabeth Taylor, a beautiful girl riding a big black horse, something like that, only different, maybe a race car driver. There isn’t a word on paper or in a computer file.” He turned to look at Lori. “I know why I hang around. He has me under contract, but why do they? Why is Coolson sitting down on command?”

“Blackmail,” Lori said in a low voice. “He keeps people by manipulative contracts, like yours and Darla’s, or by blackmail.”

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“I know,” she said. “Come on to his office, let me show you something.”

She walked in front of Ben, who didn't break his stride or pause in his loud orders to Sy Wannamaker and Coolson. Sam trailed after Lori through another door, into Ben's office. It was big with several upholstered chairs, a sofa in cream-colored leather, and a massive desk with an ebony surface as reflective as glass. There were three black-faced file cabinets and a six-by-eight-foot framed picture of the pyramids on one wall. Lori went to the desk, opened a drawer, and pressed a button. The large picture swung upward, to form an awning over the front of a safe.

“It's computer coded to a silent alarm,” Lori said, joining Sam near the safe, where she pointed to a wall-mounted key pad. “You have to turn that off first, then use a key to open it. He changes the code every week.”

“What's in there?” Sam asked.

“Good question. Not contracts. They're in the file cabinets. Yours is in there. I read it.”

“So did I,” he said. “Six months too late I really read it and then took it to a lawyer and had him read it.” What he had learned was that he had signed over to Ben Carnahan everything he wrote while under contract, and that he had to submit and have accepted three complete, original scripts before the contract expired. Nowhere did the contract say that Ben was under any obligation at any time to accept a submitted play. Sam couldn't write for anyone else, couldn't even write his memoir and call it his own. He could have been tied to Ben for ten years, twenty years, forever. He had come to realize that Ben owned his grocery lists.

“Darla's contract is like yours, like a lot of others,” Lori said. “She has to star in one more of his movies before she can cut loose, and he's having her written out of the one you're supposed to be writing. She can't go anywhere, do anything else except wait to star in another movie. She won't touch a supporting role. She'd be a fool if she did, and she knows that.”

“Jesus!” Sam said. “Standard operating procedure for him?”

“Pretty much. He has Sy Wannamaker write a contract, advises the newcomer to consult with a famous agent, Sylvia Coleman,

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and *she* advises the starry-eyed innocent to grab it, best thing since sliced bread, consider yourself kissed by the god of entertainment, etcetera, etcetera. Done deed.”

Sam nodded. Ben had sent him to Sylvia. “Cy Wannamaker, Sylvia, Coolson, his tools, his stooges. Under contract or blackmail?”

“Not under contract,” Lori said with a shrug. “But obedient as show dogs. They and a handful of others. I think they’re all in the safe.”

“They were at the party,” Sam said after a moment. “Any one of them could have had a chance to mess with his brakes on Friday evening. He drove the Jag that morning and it was okay then.”

“Forty-four people were at the party. Most, maybe all of them, with reason enough to want him dead.”

Sam eyed her narrowly. “What about you? Why do you stay? What’s he got on you?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m just the hired help, replaceable, invisible except when needed. He could replace me in a minute, and probably did.”

“You didn’t answer the question. Why do you stay?”

She was looking past him, at the door to the corridor. “Someone’s coming in.” As she spoke the door swung open. Ben walked in.

Sam hurried back to the desk, to press the button to replace the picture over the safe. His finger passed through the button with no effect. Rule number one, he thought, trying again to press the button: they couldn’t interact with any living creature. It seemed that around people he and Lori became less than shadows.

“Forget it,” Lori said. “Let’s see how he reacts.”

Ben was carrying a drink. He took five or six steps into the room before he caught sight of the picture hanging over his safe. He came to a halt, dropped the glass, and looked about wildly as if expecting to see a burglar, or more likely a killer. He took a deep breath, another, and began to move again, walking like a man uncertain of his footing, as if blinded by a dense fog. When he reached his desk, he sank into his oversized chair with a groan, his gaze fastened on the exposed safe. He pressed the button and

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watched the picture shift downward until it was in place, the safe hidden. He was pale and his hand was shaking when he closed the desk drawer and wiped his forehead.

“He’s spooked,” Lori said.

“Ya think?” Sam said. “He’s probably trying to convince himself that he left it up and he knows he didn’t. Maybe he’s afraid his would-be killer is back. And you still haven’t answered my question: why are you here?”

She gave him a long searching look, then said, “Revenge. He killed my father.”

End of sample.

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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

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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.