

A Barbara Holloway Mystery

# NO DEFENSE

Kate Wilhelm

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NO DEFENSE: A Barbara Holloway Mystery  
Kate Wilhelm

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NO  
DEFENSE

A BARBARA HOLLOWAY MYSTERY

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# PART ONE

## 1

## Lara

The rising sun is veiled with desert haze, rose-red streaks extending north and south against a royal blue that only gradually turns mauve. A high cirrus cloud glows brilliantly pink for a short time, vanishes; the haze dances a morning ritual, rising and falling, then it vanishes also, and finally there is only the sun, not visible as a thing in itself, but rather as if the sky, haze, clouds are being rent apart to reveal an intolerable brilliance. Sunlight flares on snow-topped mountains, the Wallowas, Blue Mountains, Steens, and closer, on the Strawberry Mountains; it is cast back by the obsidian on Glass Butte, windows placed by giants untaught in human architecture. It shines on dawn-still needles of juniper trees, on motionless sage and bitter grasses, and casts preternaturally elongated shadows as black as openings into the abyss.

On the southern flank of Lookout Mountain, sunlight, like an Aztec signal on a shard of a mirror, is blindingly bright, but no human is on Lookout Mountain to be blinded that early in the morning. It falls on a hand that is shades darker than the ground

on which it has come to rest, is reflected for an instant in three fingernails; the little finger and the thumb are in shadow. The rest of the man's body lies hidden beneath the wreckage of a van. Only the hand and part of the lower arm are exposed.

Two coyotes lift their heads simultaneously as if joined to each other, sniffing the air, sniffing the scent of gasoline, of motor oil, of raw metal. The scent of man, of blood, of death. The scent comes from above them, on the side of the steep, rocky mountain with scant undergrowth. They hesitate, but the smell of gasoline is too strong. They turn and trot away together.

The sunbeams light up the redwood deck of the Jessup house, the grill, chairs, and tables that gleam as if covered with ice. Sunlight races across the deck to enter the living room through wide windows where the drapes were left open the night before. A lamp pales and casts no light of its own, overwhelmed by sunlight. Light falls on the red-blond hair of a woman; her hair is curly and short. Although her face is sunburned, with a scattering of freckles, it has the delicacy and the sculpted beauty of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Fine hairs on her arm gleam like gold. She stirs and turns away from the glare. In sleep she looks younger than her years; she is thirty-three. Stirring, she uncovers her feet, and she moves again, still sleeping, to adjust a gold and green throw that is too short to be used as a blanket. Now the sunlight falls on her eyelids, and she moves restlessly, as if unwilling to leave a dream.

Then abruptly she is awake, so suddenly that she can't move for a moment, as if her mind and body are obeying different signals.

For Lara Jessup, awakening is the beginning of a nightmare.

She jumped up and rubbed her eyes; then, barefooted, she hurried to the study door and looked inside. She looked into the guest room next to the study; Vinny's bed was neat and untouched. She ran now, down the stairs to the lower level of the house, to look inside the garage, just to be certain, but she knew. Vinny had not come home last night.

She raced through the house, looked inside every room, looked in her son, Nathan's, room, where he was sound asleep; then she ran to the kitchen phone and hit the automatic dialer for Manny Trewater.

She knew she was incoherent, but she couldn't control her voice or her words, and dimly, as if he were underwater speaking to her, she heard Manny telling her to put on coffee, he would be there as soon as possible.

"I should have stopped him," she said to Manny Truewater fifteen minutes later. "I could have stopped him, or gone with him. Something!"

"Lara! Sit down. What happened? Where was he heading?"

Manny was from the Warm Springs tribe, short and thick, thick in the chest, with a broad face, black hair cut short, his skin the color of old mahogany. In his fifties, ten or twelve years younger than Vinny, he was Vinny's best friend.

She sat down hard on one of the kitchen chairs, and he placed coffee in front of her. Her hands were shaking too hard to lift the cup, although she had been so steady minutes earlier that she had felt almost somnolent.

"We had fish out on the deck. With the Cornings. And Vinny remembered that he had told Judge McReady that he would give him some documents. He said he would take them over, and he left."

"When did he leave?"

"Nearly ten. They left, the Cornings, and he got the papers together, and then he left. I wanted him to mail them or wait until this morning, or something. I should have driven over with him."

"Okay. You go get dressed, and I'll call the sheriff and get him to send a car out. Vinny might be sleeping on the mountain, maybe ran out of gas and didn't want to walk home in the dark. Take it easy, Lara. Just get dressed now."

"You know how he's been these past months.... I didn't want him to go. I was afraid.... He said it was a perfect golden day. Yesterday."

"Lara! Go get some clothes on. I'll talk to the sheriff."

She stood up, as obedient as a child, stilled by the harshness that had entered his voice. For a moment his gaze met hers, and she saw the same fear that had seized her. "It's my fault," she said in a low voice. "I could have stopped him."



She turned and left the kitchen. She didn't remember putting on her robe, but she was wearing one, huddled inside it, freezing, her feet like ice on the bare hardwood floor.

At first they said it had been an accident: Vinny's van had rolled over the side of the mountain; he had lost control on that bad curve just before the driveway to the Lynch house.

"Lara, they'll have to investigate," Manny told her. "You understand that, don't you? They'll want to ask you some questions. You don't have to talk to them now, today, if you're not up to it."

"I have to go to the hospital," she said vaguely. "I'm on today."

"Lara, pull yourself together. Listen to me. I'll call Norm and tell him what happened. You don't have to go anywhere. The sheriff will want to know what happened last night, who was here, what Vinny said he had to do. That's all you have to tell him, just what you told me. That's all he'll be interested in. Can you do that now, or would you rather wait a day or two?"

"I have to call Alene and Roger..." They were Vinny's adult children, both of them older than she was.

The nightmare persisted, a waking nightmare; first she was here, then there, with no recollection of moving. Sitting on the couch with Manny, then in her bedroom lying down, in the kitchen trying to drink some of the broth that Manny's wife had placed before her, gazing at Norm Oglespeak, her boss at the hospital, where she was a nurse. She had seen many people in shock and could deal with them gently and effectively; she did not recognize shock in herself.

Then the sheriff suggested suicide. Alene and Roger were both there, red-eyed and grieving; Nathan, her twelve-year-old son, was red-eyed and silent. Manny was with them. The sheriff said maybe Nathan could go out on the deck so they could talk, and without a word Nathan left. He had said almost nothing since Manny told him about Vinny's death.

"Mrs. Jessup," the sheriff started after Nathan had gone out, "was Vinny disturbed about anything? Upset?"

She shook her head. A lie. She found it too difficult to say any of the things racing through her head without letup. *What a beautiful*



*sight you are! Rising like a water nymph, shaking off diamonds. This is one of those rare and wonderful perfect golden days. You should have a special place in your head to store such days so that you can open the door and walk back into them later. You've given me so many perfect golden days. I am very grateful.*

“Was he worried about his checkup? Norm tells me he was overdue to check in at the hospital.”

*You know what I fell in love with? Your hands. You get to know the hands that tend you in a hospital. Hard and efficient, or careless and even indifferent, some so soft and fluttery they seem to take twice as long to do what needs doing as they should, but your hands were soft and gentle and swift. Your hands knew this old body didn't want much handling, and they got the job done as fast as possible without hurting. Your hands never hurt me.*

“When you've had cancer,” she said in a very low voice, “you're always concerned about the next checkup. It's impossible not to be concerned.”

“But no more than usual?”

She shook her head.

“What's this all about?” Roger demanded then.

He was sitting on one side of Lara on the couch; Alene was on her other side, as if Lara needed protection. They had not started out on friendly terms; their hostility to her, to their father's unseemly marriage to a woman younger than his own children, had been open and vocal. Then Vinny had taken them out somewhere, and when they all arrived home that night, Alene had held Lara and wept. Lara never had learned what he said to them.

“Well, Roger,” the sheriff said, “it's this note that turned up.

Here's a photocopy; we'll have to keep the original for a while.”

He handed a sheet of paper to Roger, who read it and turned very pale. “It's a lie!”

Alene reached across Lara and took the paper from him, then she and Lara read the typewritten words together.

*I'm sorry about this. But it's best this way. Forgive me, Lara.*

*Manny knows what to do with the practice.* It was unsigned.

Lara looked up to find the sheriff regarding her with an unblinking gaze; he looked cold and hard. She had met him,

Sylvester Gouin, going on sixty, going to fat, but he had been genial and smiling before. The town children called him Silly Gooey.

"It's a lie," she said. "It's a fake." Her voice was a hoarse whisper. Manny yanked the note from Alene's hand and read it, then tossed it down on the coffee table. "Where'd you get that?"

"In his shirt pocket. They found it when they peeled off his clothes. Mrs. Jessup, is there a typewriter in the house?"

"No. A computer and printer. In his study."

He stood up and motioned to a deputy leaning against the door frame. "Maybe we can have a look."

Afterward they padlocked the study. "You folks have a bit of trouble?" the sheriff asked at the door of the guest room. Inside, a few folders and loose papers were on a bedside table.

"No," Lara said. "Vinny had the flu back in the winter, and he had a persistent cough. He wanted a room where he wouldn't disturb me."

They padlocked the guest-room door also. She wished Vinny had taken him out for a talk, that he had taken them all out for a talk, the whole town, all the old men who looked at her like that, all of them speculating on the May through December marriage, wondering what a "girl like her" was doing with an old man like him. She had heard a whisper, had been meant to hear it: "A girl like her, she's out for money. What else?" *Honey, they're so jealous, they see you and jerk off before they even get home to their wives. And know what? I don't blame them.*

Then, nightmarelike, the sheriff was gone and she was sitting with Alene, Roger, and Manny. Roger was furious.

"That note's a fake, and even that dimwit should see through it!"

"Maybe he does, maybe not," Manny said. "McReady says Vinny never showed up that night. McReady, his wife, and her folks waited up for him until nearly eleven, then they went on to bed. No papers turned up in the wreckage on the mountain. So the question is, What happened to them? And another question is, What was in them? They're going to do an autopsy. All we can do is sit tight and wait it out. After the funeral, some of us will go over all of Vinny's files. The sheriff will get a court order to allow a court-appointed attorney to oversee the whole thing, and try to spot those missing

papers, just in case Vinny changed his mind and went back to the office or put them in his files here.”

Manny was executor of the estate, and now he said that Vinny had given him instructions about what to do if the hospital decided to keep him awhile. “You know, when he went in years ago, it was four months before he got back home. He knew that could happen again. So I have instructions.” Vinny had known that many of his clients would refuse to have a Native American attorney, although he and Manny had worked together many times in the past. Manny would get in touch with those people whose legal business had anything to do with Indian affairs, he said that day, and Robert Sheffield would get in touch with the rest of the clients and offer his services. “It’s all going to take time,” he said soberly. “And the insurance isn’t going to come through until the case is settled one way or the other. Lara, how are you fixed for money? Your joint accounts and your safe-deposit box will both be frozen pending the outcome of the investigation.”

She moistened her lips. “When I started working, he said I should have my own account.”

*Lara, that’s your money. I went broke years back, but we’re not broke now. Keep it for Nathan’s education. You don’t suppose Curtis is likely to help out with that, do you? His eyes had been knowing. Curtis begrudged every penny he had to pay in support for his son. Let’s talk just a bit about money. I could say “if anything happens to me,” but I won’t. No euphemisms. When I die, you’ll get the insurance. That’s what I got it for, to take care of my wife if the day came that I couldn’t do it myself. It’s yours, or will be. Just wanted you to know that. But his wife had died first, and then he had fallen in love with gentle, capable hands. I nearly let it lapse, but I kept thinking of the nurse with the magic hands, and I kept up my premiums. If you’d said no, I would have chucked it and spent the money on booze or video poker, or down in Vegas.*

She was blinking back tears again.

The next time the sheriff came back, he had several other men with him; he was grimmer than ever, and he had a court order to search the house.

“We got the autopsy report,” Sheriff Gouin said curtly.

“Vinny died of a gunshot wound in the head.”

Lara and Alene huddled on the couch while the sheriff and his detectives searched; Roger stayed with the officers. When they were done, he told Lara about it. “They were looking for weapons, guns and ammunition, and drugs,” he said. “The autopsy turned up narcotics—codeine—in his system. And they took the tape from the answering machine.”

Lara groaned. Late the night before, Curtis had called and left an ugly message. “Pick up the phone, damn you! I know you’re there. Now that old moneybags fart is gone, get your ass back here where you belong.”

They released Vinny’s body, and the funeral was scheduled. Roger’s wife and Alene’s husband arrived with their children. Alene wept when Lara said Vinny should be buried next to his first wife. They had been married a long time; their children and their grandchildren should come first. Then even that was done with, and a stillness settled over Lara and her house.

Sometimes during the night she imagined she could hear the creak of a wheelchair, an old-fashioned chair, not a modern motorized one. She could imagine Marilyn, Vinny’s first wife, wheeling herself through the silent house, looking for something, always looking for something.

*Marilyn never was really alive after Lewis vanished. A nervous breakdown, prescription drugs that turned her into a zombie, then the strokes started. It was never her house. I doubt she ever really saw it or knew where she was. It’s your choice, Lara. If you want to move to a different house, we will.*

It had never bothered her. She knew that Marilyn couldn’t have gone up and down the different levels, that the house held no ghosts, no memories of a creaking wheelchair, but now and then she strained to identify what she imagined she heard.

In a few days school would be over for the year, and Nathan would go to Portland to stay with his father for a month, and for the first time in her life, she would be alone. Alone in a town where the residents whispered about her and stared openly at her, where

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rumors about Vinny's death circulated and became more and more vicious. Alone in a house where she would hear the wheelchair creaking and groaning.

She yearned for the door to open into one of the perfect golden days, but behind every door there was only more of the nightmare.

\*

That concludes the sample pages of No Defense.



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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

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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.