



SMART HOUSE

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery

Kate Wilhelm

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InfinityBox Press
7060 North Borthwick Avenue
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CHAPTER 1

THREE THINGS HAPPENED THAT week in April to make Beth Elringer decide to attend her husband Gary's birthday party. The first was losing her job, which came about because of a broken press at the company where she worked as editor. Beth and Margaret Long, her employer, sat opposite each other in a booth at Taco Time. Beth pushed a tamale around on her plate while Margaret talked.

"I just can't take it any longer," Margaret said. She looked exhausted. "We were up all night, and then the damn press went blooey and we have as much chance of meeting our deadline as we have of finding pearls in oysters."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You know how to fix the damn press? A pulley broke. Three weeks, Mike said, to get a new one installed, if we had the money to do it in the first place."

"What will you do?"

"I wish to God I knew. But, honey, you'd better be thinking of another job. I just don't know if this is the last straw. I have a feeling it could be."

Beth liked her job as editor; she had a book of poetry in the works that she especially liked, by an author who might never get it published if the Long Press went out of business.

The second event came two days later when her brother Larry asked for a loan. She gasped when he told her how much he needed. He had been out on strike; he and his wife had gone into debt and they would lose the house and everything else if he couldn't pay off some bills.

The third thing was finding her cat dead a few nights later. She

wept over that. She knew she could get another job, and she had taken out a bank loan to help her brother, but there wasn't a damn thing she could do for the cat. If she had not been so preoccupied with jobs and loans, she would have noticed that it was sick, poisoned maybe; she would have taken it to a vet instead of finding it stiff and cold on her kitchen floor.

That night she examined the agreement she had signed with the Bellringer Company when Gary had given her a share of stock. There were only nine shareholders, and the company was said to be worth millions of dollars. Even one share was worth a fortune, she knew. And she owned one share. The agreement stated that if ever she wanted to dispose of her single share, she must first offer it to Gary without telling anyone else it was for sale. She read the paper twice, then nodded. Gary's party, she decided. That was the time to tell him. He would be in a good mood, happy with a weekend party going on around him, pleased that she was attending. He had predicted that she would be back, had infuriated her with his self-assurance about her penitent return. She read through the agreement one more time. If she and Gary could not agree on a price for her share, she could then present it at the next shareholders' meeting and accept the highest offer that met or exceeded Gary's offer. That would be the day after his weekend party. If still no satisfactory price could be agreed to, an independent accountant would assess the market value of the share, and she would be paid that amount by the company, the payment to be assessed among the shareholders according to percentages of ownership; they would then divide the share. But she knew it would never come to that. Gary would snatch it up. And if he didn't, then his brother Bruce would.

Two weeks later she boarded the small commuter plane in San Francisco on her way to Smart House. The invitation had said simply somewhere on the Oregon coast, and the airplane ticket had been for the town of North Bend. "Don't worry about it," Gary had said on the phone, "we'll meet you." Now Beth stared bitterly out her window at the great expanse of ocean, all gray and frothy near the shore, with deep shadows and gleaming highlights beyond that,

and then flat gray to the horizon. She could make out fishing boats, small boats closer in, a large oceangoing cargo ship, all dipping and swaying and passing from sight above and below her tiny window on the world. She could feel her stomach rise and fall in time with them. She clutched the arm of her seat and closed her eyes, but that was even worse. When the plane went down, she wanted to know it. She could not understand why it mattered, but she did not want to plummet into the sea with her eyes closed. The plane was buffeted from side to side, and it rose and fell with an unpredictable motion that did not allow for compensation. Just when she braced for a downward plunge, the plane rose alarmingly, then dropped again.

Damn Gary, she thought over and over. Damn him. Gary had scrawled on the invitation, “You’ll love the plane ride. I can’t wait to show you Smart House!”

Thirty, she thought morosely. Who would have gambled on Gary’s surviving this long? The plane lurched and dropped at the same time. She hung onto the seat and muttered, “Damn him! Goddamn him!” Staying married to Gary Elringer for ten years, she thought, gave her privileges; who had a better right to damn him to hell?

On the ground, waiting for the plane from San Francisco, was Madelaine Elringer, Gary’s mother. Maddie was sixty-two, and after fighting plumpness for most of her life, had finally given up the battle, only to find that when she stabilized again she had a new figure, not altogether unpleasing, she thought secretly. She was busty, with a waistline still defined, and shapely legs, nice wrists and ankles. Not bad at all, she had decided, and had colored her hair strawberry blond—pink champagne, the shop called it. She used makeup with a deft hand and bought very nice clothes, all in keeping with her role in life as mother of a millionaire genius. She sat in her B.M.W. smoking cigarette after cigarette waiting for the arrival of her daughter-in-law. A front had come in, bringing erratic winds that were frigid, not at all Maylike; the small terminal was dreary, and she was too worried to be pleasant to the few others who were awaiting the plane. The weekend was a ghastly mistake, she had known that from the start. Bringing together nine of the shareholders, even Beth, and heaven alone knew what was on her mind these days, and Bruce being a real shit about the whole thing.

She dreaded the shareholders' meeting on Monday more than she had dreaded anything in years, or maybe ever. She lighted another cigarette from the butt of the last one and flicked that one out the window, then felt a start of guilt and looked around hastily to see if anyone had noticed.

At last the plane was down and three passengers appeared on the tarmac; she left the refuge of her car to enter the terminal. To Maddie's eye, Beth looked exactly the same as she had when she and Gary had first met. Boyish, with short dark hair that was instantly windblown, she was too lanky and long-legged to be really pretty, and made no effort to pretend anything else. She was wearing black jeans and a gray sweat shirt, for heaven's sake, Maddie realized. She had not approved of her daughter-in-law, but neither had she caused Beth and Gary trouble, so why did the girl seem to go out of her way always to look just a little wrong? Not quite proper...

"Beth, I'm so glad to see you! I'm so glad you changed your mind!" They both stopped advancing simultaneously, suddenly awkward with each other.

"Hello, Maddie. You look great! How are you?"

To the considerable surprise of both women, Maddie burst into tears.

Now Beth closed the gap between them and embraced Maddie; she rubbed her back gently, making soothing nonsense sounds. Maddie fought to regain control, aware of eyes watching her in amazement. People often cried at meeting after a long absence, or at parting with a loved one, she told herself. Let them stare. She took a shuddering breath.

Beth had only her carry-on bag and an oversized canvas purse. They left the small terminal. Beth whistled at the sight of the new automobile and Maddie said almost apologetically that Gary had bought it for her for his birthday. She groped for her keys and sighed when Beth pointed to them in the ignition. "He thinks all children should give their parents presents when it's their birthday, the children's birthday, I mean. To say thank you, I suppose. Bruce was furious about it." She blinked back tears. "Oh dear, I didn't realize I was this upset with it all.

“Maybe we’d better have a little drink before we go back,” Beth said grimly, “Bruce always was a pain in the ass, even if he is your son. What’s going on, Maddie? Why a three-day get-together? What’s Gary up to?”

Maddie started to drive jerkily, then jerked even harder when she hit the brake. “A bar, a tavern or something,” she said. “We have to talk about it all. Then you can drive. The car hates me.”

Maddie drove them to a tavern that also served seafood. The odor of frying fish, rancid oil, and onions was stifling. Beth ordered coffee and listened to Maddie ramble as she gulped bourbon on the rocks. Everyone else was already there, she said. Bruce, her other son, six years older than Gary, the boy genius. Rich, Harry, Laura... She did not know what Gary was planning; no one did, but Bruce was trying to organize a palace coup, she said ominously. He would approach Beth, she warned. And he might even have the votes.

Beth listened and tried to rearrange the nearly incoherent information. There were too many bits and pieces, with too much left out. The Bellringer Company, Incorporated, had nine shareholders, but it was Gary’s company undisputedly, and he ran it as he saw fit. During the last few years he had been totally preoccupied with creating Smart House, a computerized, automated house that until this weekend no one had seen except those who had worked there.

“I hate it!” Maddie cried. “It knows where you are every minute! It spies on everyone all the time, listens to everything you say, turns the lights on and off, and heats the bath water and the temperature in the greenhouse. It does everything, and I hate it!”

Beth nodded in sympathy. Bruce had called her months ago, had wanted to meet for lunch, and she had turned him down. She wished now that she had gone. A coup? It did not seem bloody likely, she decided, and tuned Maddie in long enough to know she was still going on about the house. The house must be the rabbit hole where all the money was vanishing, she realized. After Smart House had got underway, the company had stopped showing profits. AU the others, except Maddie and now Beth, were also employed by the company, and she had assumed their salaries had been adjusted upward when profits dried up. Now she doubted that

such was the case, and it explained Bruce's fury. Enough votes to override Gary? Beth's one share gave her a single vote in whatever came up at the meeting on Monday, hardly worth anyone's while to capture.

She was jolted from her own thoughts suddenly when Maddie put her hand on Beth's and said, "Please promise you won't tell him you want a divorce until after the weekend."

"Who told you I want a divorce?"

Maddie looked about vaguely, as if searching for the informant. "You do, don't you?"

"Has he been spying on me? Have you? Bruce?"

Maddie drained her glass and set it down hard. "Darling, it's not a secret that you aren't living together in any way. And it's not a secret that Gary's a little eccentric. I just want you to wait until after his party, that's all. Don't spoil his birthday party, please."

"Eccentric! Maddie, he's crazy! Your darling boy is a nut!"

Beth drove along a curving road lined with small buildings, shacks, frame houses weathered gray, auto shops, bait stores.... Neither spoke now except for the directions Maddie provided from time to time. The ocean was not visible, but its presence was there; the gusty wind off the sea was fresh and cold, bringing news of the East, news of the deeps, of passing ships and whales, shrimps and crabs. The sun made a brightened area in a thick cloud cover, then the woods closed in on the road, and even that timid bright patch was blocked. She turned off this road at Maddie's instructions, onto a much narrower blacktop road with no markings, a private drive without shoulders, just woods that came to the edge of the black surface, that met overhead and turned the early evening into night. Still no sea. The road climbed steeply, became more crooked.

She slowed down more when she saw a sign, Stop Ahead. Around a curve there was a mammoth gate that looked like bronze. She came to a stop. No one was in sight; a high chain-link fence vanished among the trees on each side of the gate. A lighted sign asked her to open her window, and as soon as she did, a crisp male voice said, "Please identify yourself and your passenger."

She looked sharply at Maddie, whose face had become pinched.

“Beth Elringer, Madelaine Elringer,” she said, raising her voice slightly.

“Thank you.” The gate swung open silently; the lighted sign went off.

“See what I mean?” Maddie whispered.

“I see that Gary’s being cute,” Beth snapped. “Is this what’s bugging Bruce? That Gary’s sinking company profits into toys?”

“He’s spent millions and millions,” Maddie said. “I don’t think anyone even knows exactly how much. That’s what’s bothering Bruce, I suppose, that there’s no real accounting. A talking gate! Talking doors! An indoor waterfall!” Her voice rose to a near wail.

Someone knew where the money was going, Beth thought, ignoring her mother-in-law again. Milton Sweetwater was the company attorney; he must know. Or Jake Kluge, a whiz kid in business affairs.

Or, for heaven’s sake, Harry Westerman, the accountant. Someone, maybe all of them, knew. If Bruce didn’t, it had to be because Gary did not want to tell him. The road started down, still narrow and as winding as before, but now the greenery looked planned, not the wild growth of the other side of the fence. Landscaping on a macrocosmic scale, she mused, that was her boy, her husband, Gary. Masses of rhododendron in bloom formed immense blotches of scarlet, rose, gold, fringed with lacy ferns that were so deeply green they looked black in the darkening shadows. She made another turn, and finally there was the ocean, a couple of hundred feet down, on three sides of this point that jutted out from the mainland like the prow of a ship. She had to drive another quarter mile before she got a glimpse of Smart House. She gasped and stopped the car in order to gaze at it.

Although the building was tall, apparently it had only two stories, with a gleaming dome on top and walls of glass and redwood and metal broken by a continuous balcony at the second-story level. The building appeared to be curved all the way around the front, with a straight cliff-like back wall made of stone. The dome did not cover the entire roof area; there were plants up there, a terrace? She drove on. The house was eclipsed by trees and shrubs; she drove past a tennis court, formal gardens that looked

imposing, and finally a broad concrete approach to the house. Apparently every room in it had a vista of ocean. Behind the house a cliff rose almost straight up,

At first the house had appeared almost grotesque, then it had looked like a curious hotel, a resort perhaps, and now close up it loomed monstrously, like a madman's vision. A red-tiled verandah curved out of sight as she and Maddie left the car and approached the front entrance.

"Good afternoon," a pleasant female voice greeted them when they walked across the verandah. "Please identify yourselves."

Beth looked for cameras, but they were hidden too well. Maddie stopped before the high entrance door, intricately carved and polished, and said in a meek voice, "Good afternoon. I'm Madelaine Elringer, and this is Beth Elringer. We're expected."

"Yes. Please come in. If you'll leave your bags, we'll have someone collect them." The door swung open.

Maddie glanced at Beth, as if to say, see?

The foyer was thirty feet by thirty feet, with a curving staircase to the left, and a wall full of museum-quality art on the right. The floor was a continuation of the red tile. There were several black pedestals with statuary. Beth kept thinking that at any moment a uniformed guide would appear and start a spiel.

"I can't actually show you around," Maddie said in her new, subdued voice, with a nervous glance over her shoulder. "I'm supposed to show you your room, that's all. Or you'd never find it." Her voice became shriller, and she caught her breath sharply and clutched Beth's arm. "Up these stairs."

Beth held back a bitter comment. Maddie was acting as if Gary had become Attila the Hun. They went up the stairs. "Do you know what he's planning for the weekend?" she asked.

Maddie shook her head. "No one seems to know yet. He'll tell us after dinner. Drinks in the garden at six, dinner at seven."

They reached the top of the stairs and Beth gasped. Across the corridor was another glass wall, and this one looked onto a jungle. She moved closer and saw that the interior of the house contained a mammoth atrium enclosed in a circular glass wall that was as high as the house. Beyond the glass there were trees, and a swimming

pool at the end. The space appeared to be a grotto, with entrances at the second level, stairs that looked like natural rock formations leading down, other entrances at the ground floor; there was a cliff-like wall of various rocks behind the pool, with a path, and a waterfall that appeared, vanished, then plummeted down to the swimming pool.

“For God’s sake,” Beth muttered finally.

“It’s... just grotesque,” Maddie said, and tugged her arm. She seemed in a hurry now. “Your room’s all the way around on the other side.”

There were closed doors on one side of the corridor, the glass wall on the other, and as they moved Beth had always-changing glimpses of the scene below. There were rattan tables and chairs, a bar, and half a dozen people standing, sitting, drinking, talking. That must be the garden, she decided. How like Gary to order no tours, to force them to explore the house without a clue. Okay, she thought grimly, she would go along with that; she would not show any more surprise than she had already shown, just accept whatever the damn house had to offer and find a chance to talk alone with her husband. They stopped before one of the closed doors.

“This is your room,” Maddie said. “I can tell you this much: No one but you and the staff can open the door. Watch.” She put one hand on a panel with the number two on it, and tried to turn the doorknob with the other hand. The door remained closed. “You try. Don’t worry, it already knows who you are and what room you’ve been assigned. And where you are, and what you’re doing...” She bit her lip and moved aside, her hands twisting together as if with a life of their own now.

Beth put her hand on the panel and turned the knob; the door opened.

“I’ll leave you alone to freshen up. We’ll all be in the garden. Come down when you get ready.” She fled back through the hallway, apparently toward her own room. Beth watched her only a moment, called out her thanks, and entered the room.

She realized that she was moving as quietly as possible, almost holding her breath, and she knew that no one would want to talk in this house, not really. Was it listening, recording everything? She

closed the door hard, but it was virtually soundless anyway, and now she saw that her suitcase had been brought up already, just as the house had said it would be.

She spent several minutes exploring her room and bath. The colors were dusty rose and a pale yellow. Twin beds, a good desk with a computer that was on with no visible way to turn it off, some magazines, books obviously from a used-book store—well read, some pages even dog-eared. She picked up a beautiful rose quartz statuette of a mermaid, carefully replaced it on the table; there were two lamps with bases of the same rose quartz, and a massive, matching ashtray. In spite of herself, she was feeling overwhelmed. Angrily she marched into the bathroom, to see an assortment of soaps and shampoos, a blow dryer, many nozzles in the tub/shower, and a panel of push buttons for water temperature, perfume, and bubble bath mixes, all expensive, selected by someone who had known what to buy. And she had to count pennies every day, she thought with fury.

Her room faced south; the outside wall was glass, with a sliding door to the balcony, ceiling-to-floor drapes. She stood gazing at the ocean for a long time. The sun had come out and was low in the western sky at the edge of the vista her room provided. She was startled by the sound of four soft, melodious, clear bell tones, the audible logo of the Bellringer Company. She turned to see the notes displayed on the computer monitor.

“It’s six o’clock, Beth,” the pleasant female voice said. “Would you like to bathe before dinner? If you will tell me the temperature you prefer, I’ll be happy to draw your bath.”

“Can I turn off the audio signal of the computer?” Beth asked in a strained voice.

“Yes, Beth. I’ll signal if there is a message for you.” A message appeared on the monitor: *The audio signal is now off. Please indicate if you wish any service.*

Without moving, Beth said, “Close the drapes.” Soundlessly the heavy drapes drew together, shutting out the ocean view. Beth nodded. Her lips were tight as she began to unpack her suitcase, shook out a long skirt and sweater, and yanked off her jeans. No wonder Maddie looked like that. Actually, Maddie had been

showing considerable restraint. Beth showered and dressed and left her room to find her way to the garden.

Laura Westerman waved when Beth drew near the small group clustered by the bar in the garden. Laura was in her thirties and very beautiful. She wore a pale green silk dress that showed her perfect figure at its perfect best. She had chestnut hair, tumbled model fashion, and wore makeup so adroitly applied that few people suspected it was even there.

At Laura's elbow was Jake Kluge, over six feet tall, gangly, with limp, straight brown hair. He was the most powerful man in the company, next to Gary, of course. She wondered if Gary had consulted him about Smart House, if he had approved. It used to be that he was the only person Gary even pretended to listen to. This passed through her mind swiftly as she tried to understand what it was that was so different about Jake. Then it came to her. He used to wear oversized glasses that magnified his pale blue eyes eerily, but now he seemed to have gone to contacts and looked younger than when she had last seen him. She knew he was five or six years older than Gary. He came to meet her with his hands outstretched.

"How are you?" He gripped her hands firmly and examined her face, then kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm fine," she said, wishing he were not quite so earnest all the time, wishing he would not show concern for her, for Gary, for everyone he came across. She pulled loose and looked beyond him at Milton Sweetwater, the handsome lawyer who groomed himself to look like a lawyer, or like Gregory Peck playing the role of a lawyer. She had always felt a great reserve concerning him, never certain what he thought of her, if he actually disapproved. He was too well mannered to let anything except civility show. But then, she thought, he would never mention it if Gary had a limp either. Suddenly she felt as if she were Gary's limp that Milton Sweetwater was too polite to notice. She nodded to him and went to the bar, then hesitated. Automated, damn it, she thought in disgust.

"Let me," Milton said, joining her. "I take it that you feel as uncomfortable as I do talking to a machine."

"You take it just right," she admitted. "Is there wine? If I drink anything harder than that, I might pass out. It's been a long time

since breakfast.” She glanced around as he opened a refrigerator and brought out a bottle of white wine. “Where’s... everyone else?”

“Inspecting the marvels of the new age of electronics, I think. In the basement.”

He handed her the wine. “It’s all something else, isn’t it?”

She nodded. The wine was excellent. “Forty-eight degrees, I bet,” she said, holding the glass up. “Bet?”

He laughed. “It’s good to see you. How long has it been? Four, five years? You look exactly the same. Wonderful.”

“You too,” she said, and she felt as if something had clicked off, or perhaps on. When she first met him, ten years ago, he had awed her with his impeccable manners, his expensive clothes, an obviously superior education—his elegance, she summed it up now. She had been timid, almost tongue-tied, in his presence because she could not see past the highly civilized facade he presented; she never once had glimpsed the person behind the smile. For the first time she felt at ease with him. Not that she would be able to talk to him, even now, but it no longer mattered. Back in San Francisco he had an elegant wife and two superior teenage children going to superior schools and making superior grades. She wondered what people like that talked about. Laura sauntered to the bar.

“Are there ice cubes, Milton, darling?” Her voice was the caress that Beth remembered. Laura turned to her and smiled. “I heard what he said, and it’s true, dear. You do look very nice. I always did like that skirt.”

Beth gripped her glass harder and nodded, then looked past Laura at the garden and did not speak. At first glance she had assumed that they had brought in loads of dirt and dumped it to make a hill, but she saw now that all the greenery was in planters arranged in a semicircle on wide stairs that rose to the second floor, where there was a balcony. The illusion of being at the bottom of a hill was magical, and although she had been able to see into the garden, she could not see out. The illusion was that it went on and on. There were banana plants and palm trees and climbing philodendrons with leaves three feet long. There were orchids hanging from trees, growing in baskets, growing on trunks of trees. There were blooming orange trees and lemon trees scented

the air, but overriding all the other fragrances was the smell of the swimming pool, a tinge of chlorine; the air was heavy and humid, jungle like, and always there was the sound of the waterfall splashing into the pool.

Then at the far end of the atrium Gary and Bruce Elringer appeared. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, she thought distantly. The brothers were arguing, their voices loud and carrying, neither listening to the other, neither intelligible because of the other. They both had dark curly hair and blue eyes; Bruce was an inch or so taller than Gary. Both were chubby with legs a little too short for their torsos.

“What a lovely sight,” Laura Westerman drawled.

“Shut up,” Harry Westerman said.

Beth looked around in surprise; she had not seen Harry enter, but suddenly he was at Laura’s side. More startling to Beth was the expression that crossed Laura’s face; she became rigid, and even looked afraid for a moment before her customary mask reappeared. Beth looked from her to her husband. Harry Westerman was hard all over, wiry gray hair, wiry hard body, hard black eyes. He was not a large man—both Jake Kluge and Milton were taller and broader—but Harry gave the impression of great strength. He looked like a pole vaulter in the instant before a leap; he had that kind of tension about him, a furious energy that was being consciously suppressed. It was said of him that he never saw a mountain he didn’t covet and eventually climb. If he saw Beth, he did not acknowledge her in any way, but kept his gaze on the approaching brothers, watching them with a remote, unreadable look.

Beth turned to watch them also; their voices were still raised in argument. She could make out some of the words, but before they made sense—going over budget, going broke, going for broke, whatever—Gary spotted her and abruptly cut off what he had been saying. He hurried to her and seized her arms, shook her.

“It’s about time you came back,” he said. “You know I want your input. My wife belongs at home.”