

SWEET, SWEET POISON

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery

Kate Wilhelm

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InfinityBox Press
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For Geoffrey Simmons, with gratitude.
There are debts that cannot be repaid, but only acknowledged.

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CHAPTER 1

AL ZUKAL DROVE INTO the driveway of the new house with caution. You never knew out here in the country, he thought; things happen, dead animals, trees down, sinkholes... .

“They ain’t got here yet,” Sylvie muttered. And, in fact, no one else was in sight.

There was the gravel drive close pressed by evergreen trees at the county road and dense undergrowth that neither recognized, with grass that already needed cutting and probably would need it on a weekly basis. The driveway curved a few times, and at those places neither the county road nor the house was visible; it was like being in a wilderness, they both thought uneasily. The yard had not been maintained for many years. Untrimmed roses sprawled with dead lower branches; lilacs grew as high as trees and made a thicket with too many spindly new sprouts. Spent blossoms hung in brown clusters. Sumac had crept in and threatened to claim the entire acreage but was contested by many young trees—maples, pines, a few oaks—all too crowded and weak-looking. There were fourteen acres altogether, reverting back to a natural state where nature would do the thinning.

But no moving van was in sight. Al pulled in behind the house, where he stopped and turned off the motor. There was a two-car garage, unusable until tons of junk were cleaned out. He looked at Sylvie.

She had been a red-haired girl when they married, thirty years ago, and she would die red-haired at the end, no matter how long-delayed it was. He was used to her red hair and liked it. He liked her pear-shape, too, and would have admitted readily that they made a good couple, each pear-shaped, with her rounder end down, and his up. It made for better sleeping that way, he liked to think.

“What if they don’t make it today?” she demanded, not yet moving to open her door and get out.

“They’ll make it. They want to get paid, they get here. Simple arithmetic. Come on, gives us time to make sure where we want the bed.”

Actually the only thing they were moving of any consequence from their Bronx apartment was the bed. “That was my mother’s bed!” Sylvie had said early on, as if that settled that. And it had. Just about everything else in the van that had not yet arrived was new. The new station wagon had boxes of bedding, two feather beds, also inherited from her mother, God bless her soul, and a mishmash of dishes, no four alike. But Sylvie knew when and how they had acquired each and every one of them, and when the missing pieces had vanished, or had been broken. “I want them all,” she had said through tight lips, and there they were in the wagon waiting to be lugged inside. There were also boxes of new clothes; at least she hadn’t insisted on keeping every rag they ever owned.

He said, “Well, why don’t you get on out and let’s get at it?”

Actually he said, “why doncha,” and when she responded she said, “Well, aincha the impatient one!” But they didn’t hear it like that and presently they were both standing before their new home. It was a two-story building, the lower half finished with river stone, the upper section white clapboard. It had an attic that would sleep many grandchildren, and a basement that would probably hold more junk than they could accumulate in the years remaining to them—they were both in their fifties. The house was large, five bedrooms, a den and breakfast room besides the kitchen, a big dining room, and even bigger living room. The biggest apartment they had ever lived in had had three bedrooms, and one of them was really a dining room or a parlor or something. But with four girls growing up in the house they had needed bed space more than eating space or sitting space. Now they looked at their new home with silent awe.

Looming over the many trees behind the house the mill rose, and that was theirs also. The mill had been built in 1848 and operated until World War I, or thereabouts, and used as a school at one time, and a bootlegger’s production site at another, but for the past twenty years it had not been used for anything.

Sylvie cleared her throat and said, “Listen.” It came out as a

whisper.

“I don’t hear nothing.”

“That’s what I mean.”

Before, when they had come out to their house, they had been with the real estate man, and then with their daughter Flora and her husband Bobby and their two kids, and there had been noise. But now there was a breeze shaking the trees a little, and off beyond the mill the rustle of water, and a faint sound of the falls, not much, not enough.

“I don’t know, Al,” Sylvie said softly.

“Jaysus Crackers! Now you don’t know! Come on, grab that first box and let’s get at it. Wait and see. When Flora and Bobby are here, and the kids yelling, the radio and stereo blasting, it’ll be just like home.”

They began to carry the boxes inside and stack them on counters in the kitchen, and soon the movers came, and the sight of the four-poster with the pineapple knobs comforted Sylvie. She began to relax. She fussed at Al for getting in the way, and he cursed the movers for bumping the bed against the stair rails, and everything was normal again.

The movers also brought in a new sofa, new chairs and tables, dining table, kitchen table... a new stove, a Jenn Aire that had a grill and six burners, and a refrigerator with two doors. Al had stared at it in the store. “Jaysus Crackers! You know what I grew up with? A little box this big, with a chunk of ice delivered every Monday, and by God it had to last until the next Monday.”

After the movers had finished, Al nudged Sylvie with his elbow. “Well, watcha think?”

She nodded. “We need more furniture than I thought we would. It’s a big house, Al.”

“You don’t have to fill it, you know.”

She was surveying the living room with narrowed eyes and did not answer. The spanking-new and factory-clean furniture looked barren somehow, and that was because there was no clutter, no piles of newspapers and magazines, no sneakers in corners, no beer cans on the tables, no pretzel bags, nothing to make it look like home. It even smelled strange, Al realized, not liking the untouched, un-

lived-in look and smell. Sylvie would fill it, he knew, and after the kids got here, they would help, and for now, well, there was work to do.

A while later she was stashing things in cabinets in the kitchen when he decided to do the shopping they had agreed on ahead of time. “You coming?”

She shook her head. “Too dirty. I thought they just had this many cabinets in them fancy magazines with houses that no one really ever lives in.”

She'd fill the cabinets, too, he thought gloomily and left her there. Spender's Ferry was less than three miles away, one hour and twenty minutes out of New York City, with a commuter train station and everything. Goddamn suburbanites, he thought in surprise. That's what they had suddenly become. Al's father had come over from Czechoslovakia to strike gold and had set himself up in a butcher shop, which Al inherited in due time. Then the Bronx caught on fire. That was how he thought of it. The shop vanished, and Al got a job butchering for a supermarket. At least, he often thought when things got tough, they always had meat on their table. Stolen meat, meat carried home in pockets, in his lunch box, meat sometimes slipped to Sylvie when she came in to shop. When things got really bad Sylvie worked too, cleaning offices in the middle of the night. Somehow they had made out okay. Not great, but okay. Then, almost a year ago, Al Zukal had spent five dollars on the lottery and had won big. Just like his father always said, he thought: work hard all your life and you'll make it. Guaranteed income of two hundred twenty-five thou a year, he thought, as he had very, very often over the intervening months. Goddamn suburbanites!

Jill Ferris was leading the way across a swinging bridge below the mill at that moment. “Dad's always maintained the bridge, just because he likes it,” she said over her shoulder to a tall man behind her. Jill was thirty, a bit underweight, with long pale hair, no longer really blond, although she had been very blond as a child. Now it was the color of darkening golden oak; it gleamed with red highlights when she moved into sunlight. The man following her

was Sebastian Pitkin, a few years older than Jill; he had a solemn expression, lank hair darker than hers, and large blue eyes that bulged a little. The bridge swayed and he clutched the handrail involuntarily; she seemed not to notice.

Jill stopped near the end of the bridge and pointed. "Pretty, isn't it?" Below them was Spender's Lake, seven acres in all, with a short strip of beach at the upper-right end. That was on the side of her father's land, several hundred acres, mostly woods, with an orchard that was invisible from here. On the other side of the lake was the university experimental farm. The narrow bridge, twenty feet across, swung a few inches above the dam; the waterfall had a drop of eight feet. The stream that wound away through a gorge was only two feet wide below the dam, although farther on it widened again to become Spender's Creek. The setting was incredibly beautiful, untouched-looking. The trees were massive in the forest, the lake shockingly blue, grasses edged the water in places, and even the picturesque swinging bridge was like an illustration in a book from the turn of the century.

"See, that's state forest land," Jill said, pointing again. "Dad's land borders it on this end and the creek and mill property make up the boundary here. The experimental farm is on the other side of the mill property. No one will ever be able to encroach in any way. Perfect, isn't it?"

Sebastian was nodding thoughtfully, eyeing the mill that towered over them. The waterwheel looked intact, although some of the buckets probably would need replacing. Hard to tell, though; there was too much moss on the lower portion.... No water flowed through the diversion trough, but of course it wouldn't, not with the mill shut down. "You say the mill's in good shape?"

"Absolutely. They built it out of cypress, cedar, and oak, and they built it to last forever. The upper floors would be great for dormitories and the entire lower part could be classrooms, mess hall, kitchens, meeting rooms. Wait until you see." She started to walk again; the bridge began to swing again. He caught the handrail and followed cautiously.

There were mammoth double doors that had admitted horse-drawn wagons loaded with grain at one time, but no longer opened.

Weeds grew thick at the base of the doors, all around the mill. White Queen Anne's lace, blue forget-me-nots, pink and yellow sweet peas trailing everywhere. Almost too pretty, too planned. Jill led the way around to a normal-sized door that opened at her touch. The interior was dim; makeshift partitions had been added at one time or another, obviously temporary additions that never had been torn down again.

"See," Jill said, in the center of one of the small rooms, "a private meditation room, or a sleeping cell, or even a meeting place for a group of four or five." The room was about eight by ten, stifling, bake-oven hot. The single window appeared to be painted shut.

They left the room and were in the central, open space where the mechanism for the grinding of the corn and wheat was all there, gears and wheels and chains and pulleys, but the stone grinding wheels had been removed. This section was pleasantly cool. They went up very sturdy stairs and looked around, came down a different staircase, and roamed the back part of the lower floor.

They were emerging from around one of the partitions when Jill gasped at the sight of a figure in the open doorway.

"Who are you? This is private property," Jill said, louder than she intended, startled.

"I could say the same," the woman snapped back at her. "It's private property, all right, my private property, me and my husband's. What are you doing in here?"

Jill could only stare at this awful woman, with her awful, thick Bronx accent and voice that sounded like a demented duck quacking. She was dressed in awful dirty, baggy pants, with a dirty shirt, and she had awful red-dyed frizzy hair poking out from under a grass-green kerchief.

"I'm sorry," Sebastian said. "We certainly didn't mean to invade your privacy. I thought the property was for sale. Mrs. Ferris was showing it to me. Please forgive us." He smiled gently. "This is Mrs. Ferris, and I'm Sebastian."

For a moment, with his light blue eyes fixed, his gaze on her so directly, she felt confusion. A kind man, she thought, understanding, but then the girl made a noise and Sylvie looked at her, the moment broken, gone, leaving a bewildering set of

contradictions in its place. Sylvie crossed her arms over her chest and nodded. “Right. Well, the mill and the house ain’t for sale, not no more. Me and Al bought it all last week and we’re moving in right now.”

“Come along,” Sebastian said to Jill then. “It’s a mistake, after all. No harm done.”

Sylvie watched them narrowly as they left the mill and stepped onto the bridge. She waited until they had vanished among the trees on the other side before she went back to the house, muttering to herself. A politician, or a preacher, she thought. She shook her head. Preacher. Not just because no politician would ever own up to a name like Sebastian, but the way he looked at her. Making up to her, she thought with surprise. The kind who got on Sunday television and looked at you like that, like he’d be all over you in a flash if he could, like if he could just lay on a hand, you’d say yes no matter what he asked. Making up to her, at her age, she muttered angrily. Sylvie didn’t trust religion that relied on sorrowful blue eyes and the laying on of hands, and the intimate little smiles that suggested he knew your secrets. Religion should be cooler than that, she thought, more dignified. And that skinny girl. Putty in the hands of a man like that. Her lips tightened at the thought of the girl. Who are you? Like she owned the world. Well, she showed them, Mr. Sebastian-let-me-save-your-soul, and Mrs. I-own-the-world Ferris.

She was still grumbling under her breath when David Levy turned up at the kitchen door of the house. He was a stick of a boy, way over six feet, with a great big pumpkin grin, and wanting a haircut, like always. Ever since she knew him, he had needed a haircut. Must get it done sometime, she thought, but it never showed. Great mop of black hair. Rosa, their youngest daughter, had told David they were looking for a place in the country, and David had told them about this, and now here he was to lend a hand. A good boy. And Rosa didn’t know good when she saw it, off in California on a scholarship, studying to be some kind of ocean scientist, and some other girl would see David Levy and not be so blind... .

“What can I do?” David asked. “I wanted to come earlier but

we've been pretty busy at the farm. Anyway, here I am." He had a backpack slung over his shoulder. He put it on the table and she began directing him exactly the same way she directed Al and the girls and their husbands and children.

Pretty soon Al came back with the station wagon loaded with groceries, and they got to work carrying them inside. "I told my boss about you," David said, putting a box down on the table. "I hope it's okay if she comes by to meet you."

"Grand Central," Sylvie muttered. "Fine, David, fine. Al, put that on the table until I have a chance to see what all you've got. Did you buy some hot dogs like I told you?"

"Sure, sure. And buns, what you didn't tell me. And catsup. And beer. And I'm for a beer right now. David?"

He shook his head. Al opened two cans and handed one to Sylvie. David rummaged in his backpack and brought out a thermos. "Lemonade," he said, and drank.

He put the thermos down and went to the door then. "Here she comes," he said. In just a moment a woman appeared and he opened the door for her.

"Dr. Wharton, these are my friends, Mr. and Mrs. Zukal."

She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and sneakers. She had the kind of sturdy little body that would let her wear clothes like that for many more years. Her hair was short and straight, dark with streaks of gray at the temples. When she smiled, a dimple appeared in her cheek and her eyes smiled along with her mouth.

Sylvie nodded. "You want a beer?" she asked. And then, "You're a doctor?"

"Just a professor. And call me Lois," she said. "I'd love a beer." She was looking around at the furniture, at the boxes, and cartons with undisguised interest. "This has been a hell of a day."

Al Zukal popped another can and handed it over to her and she drank thirstily. "For us, too," he said. "Moving's a bitch."

"I was really surprised when David said you had bought the place," Lois said. "Not you, but anyone. This property has been on the market for years."

"Two looks," Al said. "All it took. Two trips and me and Sylvie, we seen it was exactly what we're after. Believe you me, we looked at

a lot of dumps, real dumps, and a lot of mansions, too.”

Sylvie began to talk about some of the other places they had inspected, and Al was still talking, now about the realtors who would sell a doghouse and call it a palace. Lois finished her beer and caught the look of affection and amusement on David’s face. She grinned again and although both Al and Sylvie were talking, she did, too.

“Anyway, welcome, and thanks for the beer. I have to go and scrub. I’m all over muck. Why don’t you join us for a cookout? David, you know the way up the trail, don’t you? You can be guide. Seven or thereabouts.”

Sylvie and Al exchanged glances; hers said sure, why not, and he nodded.

“Good. No one should have to cook on moving day, and restaurants are just too much trouble if you’ve been working hard. Don’t dress up or anything. It’s a real cookout, first of the season, and with the weather cooling off the way it does as soon as the sun goes down, it’s not likely to be a late-night affair.” She reached out to put down her empty can, and somehow her arm brushed David’s thermos and it teetered, then fell with the unmistakable sound of breaking glass.

“Goddamn it,” Lois said with a sigh. “David, I’m sorry. As I said, it’s been that kind of day. I’ll replace it, of course.” She bent over to pick it up, but he was there first.

“It’s all right,” he said hurriedly. “Really. Don’t worry about it.”

But she would get him a new one, Sylvie thought. Lois left then, and Sylvie turned to the bags and boxes on the table. “Now, let’s see what you got and try to figure out where it should go.”

Al was looking thoughtfully out the door. “David, she said up the trail, walk to her place. Where? There ain’t no place out there that I know about.”

David squirmed uncomfortably. “I didn’t know she’d invite us all over,” he said, not looking happy. “I mean, she’s my boss, a professor, Dr. Wharton, and all, but she’s also Mrs. Wollander. She lives in the big house at the other side of the lake.”

As Lois walked away she continued to hear Sylvie’s raucous voice,

and Al's equally raucous voice in some kind of weird harmony. She was still grinning.

"What's so funny?"

She looked up, startled, but not really surprised to see her husband Warren approaching with both hands outstretched.

"Hi! Didn't see you there. Sun in my eyes maybe."

He drew her close and kissed her. Warren Wollander was six feet tall and large through the shoulders and chest, strong-looking at sixty-two. "I didn't intend you should see me," he said, softly.

"That's just about where I was standing the first time I saw you. Remember? I like watching you when you don't know I'm there."

"Who could forget?" she said, and put her arm about his waist. His arm was across her shoulders as they started up the trail.

He had taken the walk that day even though there was still snow in every shadowed cranny, thick on the north slopes, piled up behind stone walls. And across the lake he had seen a person who, he thought, was spiking the experimental trees. A short, shapeless figure in a down jacket, heavy pants, boots, with a red stocking cap that had a long tail that swung back and forth as she applied a drill to a tree, braced for purchase, and started to drill.

"I thought you were a yeti," she said gravely, and they both laughed. Actually, she had been drilling out core samples to measure for growth. He tightened his arm around her shoulders. "I was smiling at our new neighbors," she said. "Mr. and Mrs. Zukal. I invited them to the cookout. And David, too. It's time you met David, I think."

The pressure of his hand on her shoulder tightened, just for a moment, and perhaps not in response to what she had said, she thought. She did not look up at him, but watched the trail. It was well-groomed, with dense mayapple colonies on both sides.

"Well, well, the place finally got sold? That will surprise Jill, I suspect."

"I guess so," she agreed, and suddenly felt tired, and unhappy about the invitation that she had issued without thought. "Do you mind that I asked them over?"

This time she knew his hand tightened, but it was a reassuring pressure, and reassurance was in his voice when he replied. "Lois,

this is your house, not Jill's. Remember? You're the lady of the house. You want company, invite them. Tell me about our new neighbors."

She began to talk and presently he was chuckling, and then laughed louder. "God, it will certainly surprise Jill."

She laughed, too, but she was bothered about his daughter Jill. What if Jill came on in one of her bitchy moods? She could do that. And this man, this guru, whatever he was, what if he was impossible? She knew that Jill's husband Stanley would be all right, and Warren would treat the Zukals exactly the same way he treated everyone. With a politeness that would be excessive if he didn't like them, and with warmth and humor if he did. She sighed and wished she could take back the spontaneous invitation. And even with the thought, she found herself denying it.

No, by God, she thought firmly; this was her house, she was the lady of the house, and Jill had to be reminded now and then. Jill had arrived for a visit three weeks ago and Lois was beginning to think of her as the Woman Who Came to Dinner. Yesterday Jill had announced plans for a cookout, even though the late April weather could be as fickle as any poet ever suggested. She had invited a stranger, Sebastian, and had taken it for granted that it would be fine with everyone else. Well, it was, only the party had suddenly increased by three.

Sometimes she wondered if Warren was fully aware of the cautious maneuvers she and Jill used with each other, and usually she knew the answer was that he was fully aware. She suspected that he knew exactly why she had invited their new neighbors, and she suddenly felt ashamed of herself, and immensely grateful for his support. His position was not enviable either, she knew. He was deeply in love with her, no doubt about that, and he loved his daughter without reservation, even though she could be... difficult was the kindest word Lois could think of. She gave his waist a little squeeze when they had to separate to walk single file. She appreciated these short periods together more than he could realize; she knew he was the wisest man she had ever met, and if he thought it would all work out, that made her think so too. Most of the time anyway.