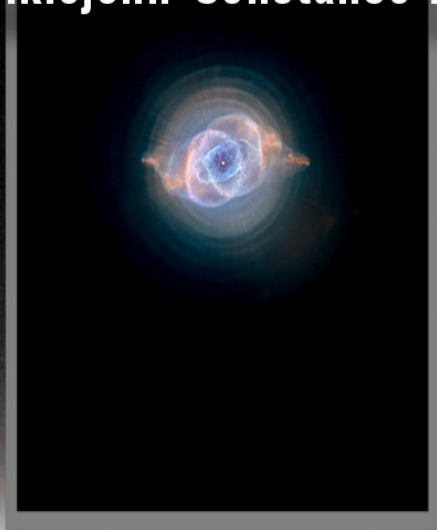




# THE DARK DOOR

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery



# Kate Wilhelm

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# CHAPTER 1

JUNE 1979. CARSON Danvers knew he was being overly cautious, getting insurance quotes for all four places he was considering, but he had time, and it was better to be cautious before the fact than have cause for regrets afterward. Although River House was fourth on his list, he and Elinor had already decided this was the one they really wanted. Half an hour out of Washington, D.C., through lush countryside with gentle hills and woods, a tiny village a few miles past the inn, it was perfect. He would keep the name, he had already decided. River House, a fine gourmet restaurant for the discriminating. He glanced at Elinor's profile, caught the suggestion of a smile on her lips, and felt his own grin broaden.

In the back seat his son Gary chatted easily with John Loesser. Gary was seventeen, ready for Yale in the fall; it was time to make the change if they were ever to do it. He suppressed the urge to laugh and sing; John Loesser would never understand.

Carson pulled off the Virginia state road onto a winding blacktop driveway and slowed down to navigate the curves, several of them before the old inn came into sight. The grounds were neglected, of course—rhododendrons thirty feet high, blackberry brambles, sumac—and the building had the windows boarded up. But even so its air of regal affluence was unmistakable. Three stories high, with a wide antebellum porch and beautifully carved pillars that reached to the third level, it bespoke the graciousness of the century past.

"We'd keep the upper levels for our own living quarters," he said over his shoulder to John Loesser. "A main dining room downstairs, several smaller rooms for private dinners, a lounge, that sort of thing. I'll have to do a lot of remodeling, of course, but cheaper than trying to build at today's prices."

"If it's structurally sound," John Loesser said in his precise way.

He did not have stars in his eyes, and that was all to the good, Carson thought. One of them should stay practical, add up the pennies, add in insurance costs. That was John Loesser's department, assessing the insurability of the place. He stopped his Buick at the front entrance.

As soon as they left the air-conditioned car, the heat of late June in Virginia assailed them. Carson pulled off his coat, and after a moment John Loesser did also. Elinor was sensibly dressed in a cotton shift and sandals, her legs bare, and Gary had on shorts and a tank top.

Only the businessmen, Carson thought with some amusement, went through the motions of suits and ties. And after he bought River House, made it the restaurant he had long dreamed of owning, he promised himself never to wear a necktie again in his life, or a coat in the summer.

"I have flashlights," he said, opening the trunk of the Buick. "I loosened some of the boards on the windows last week, but the basement's like a cave." He handed John Loesser a large flashlight, took another for himself, and saw that the other man was staring at two rifles also in the trunk. "Gary's going to get in some practice while we're going over the building." He closed the trunk and tossed the keys to his son.

Elinor watched the three men remove some of the window boards, then go on to the next bunch and take them down. How alike they were, she thought, surprised, all three over six feet, all blond. Of course, Gary was still somewhat frail looking, having shot upward over twelve inches in the past year; it might take him three or four years to fill in the frame he was constructing for himself. Seventeen, she found herself marveling. A sharp image superimposed itself before her eyes, eclipsing for a second the three men: an image of herself walking with Carson, with Gary in the middle swinging from their hands, laughing. Yesterday. Ten years, twelve years ago. She shook her head and turned to the front door of the inn, put the key in the padlock, and opened it. When she entered, she left the door wide open to admit air and more light.

On one side was a wide sculpted staircase sweeping up in a graceful curve. They would have a women's lounge up there; permit

the customers to fantasize briefly of being the lady of the house, making a grand entrance to a crowded, suddenly hushed ballroom, glittering with the wealth of the Virginia aristocracy. Elinor smiled to herself. That was her fantasy. The area to the right had held the registration desk; nothing was there now. A closed door led to a narrow hallway and small offices. To the left of the entrance stretched a very large room with a centered fireplace built with meticulously matched river stones. She could visualize the palm trees, the velvet covered lounges and chairs, low, ornately carved tables, brass lamps. . . . Only faded, rose-colored flocked wallpaper remained. She moved through the large open space toward the back of the building. Suddenly she stopped, blinded by a stabbing headache; she groped for the doorway to steady herself.

An overwhelming feeling of disorientation, of dizziness, swept her, made her catch her breath and hold onto the door frame; her eyes closed hard. The moment passed and she could feel a vein throbbing in her temple, a knife blade of pain behind her right eye. Not now, she moaned to herself, not a migraine now. She opened her eyes cautiously; when the pain did not increase, she began to move again, through a corridor to the rear of the inn. She unlocked another door and threw it wide open, went out to another porch to lean against a railing. She took one very deep breath after another, forcing relaxation on her neck muscles, which had become like iron. Gradually the headache eased, and by the time Carson and John Loesser moved into sight, it was a steady throb, no longer all demanding.

Carson saw her leaning on the rail and felt a familiar twinge of pleasure. Standing like that, in profile, as trim and as slender as she had been twenty years ago, she looked posed. She looked lovely.

“Are you married?” he asked John Loesser.

“My wife died five years ago,” Loesser said without expression.

“Oh, sorry.” Loesser was already moving on. Carson caught up again. “Here’s the back entrance. We’ll have a terrace down there, and tables on the porch overlooking the river. The property extends to the bank of the river. I want it to be like a garden, invite strolling, relaxing.”

They went through the open back door, on to the kitchen,

which would need a complete remodeling, walls to come out, a dumb waiter to go in. Carson was indicating his plans when John Loesser suddenly grunted and seemed about to fall. He reached out and caught a cabinet, steadied himself, stood swaying with his eyes shut. By the time Carson got to him, he was pushing himself away from the cabinet. A film of perspiration covered his face; he looked waxy and pale. Carson's first thought was *heart attack*, and with that thought came the fear men his age, misfortunes, always suffered. Loesser was that age, too, he knew. He took Loesser's arm.

"Let's go outside, get some air. Are you okay?"

"I'm all right," John Loesser said, pulling free. His voice was faint; he sounded puzzled, not afraid. "A dizzy spell. Could there be some gas in here? Bad air?"

Carson looked at him doubtfully. "How? I've been all over this building three times already. Elinor, Gary, we've been in every room, and that was with the boards on the windows, before we were allowed to open it up at all."

Loesser drew in a deep breath, his color back to normal, a look of irritation the only expression Carson could read. "Whatever it was, it's gone now. I have a bit of a headache, maybe that's to blame. You understand any figure I come up with is a ball park figure, contingent on many other reports. A termite inspection, for example."

Carson nodded and they wandered slowly throughout the other rooms on the main floor. Something was different, he thought suddenly. It was true that he and Elinor and Gary had prowled through the building three times, but now something was changed. He felt almost as if something or someone lurked just out of sight, that if he could swivel his head fast enough, without warning, he might catch a glimpse of an intruder. He had had a violent headache ever since their arrival. Pain throbbed behind his eyes. It was the damn heat, he decided; maybe a storm was building, the air pressure was low. Or high; it felt as if the air was compacted, pressing against his head. He and Loesser went up the wide, curving staircase to the second floor, where he began to outline the plans for a women's lounge.

Suddenly he heard Elinor scream, a piercing shriek of terror, cut

off by a gunshot. He turned and raced through the upstairs hallway to the rear stairs. John Loesser ran toward the stairs they had just ascended. Before Carson reached the first floor there was another gunshot that sounded even louder than the first. He tore out to the porch, pounded to the far end of it, and saw Elinor crumpled on the floor.

One of her sandals was gone, he thought distantly. How could that have happened? He touched her face. One eye was open, as blue as the dress twisted about her thighs. The other side of her face was gone. He touched her cheek, whispering her name. He started to gather her up, to lift her, carry her inside, straighten out her dress... . From a long way away he heard a man's anguished wail. Angered by the noise, he jerked up, snapped around, and saw his son Gary leveling the rifle at him. He was still moving when the gun fired, and fired again. He was flung backward by the momentum, stopped briefly by the porch rail. Then he toppled over it to fall to the thick underbrush below.

He came awake slowly and did not know where he was, why he was sleeping in the shrubbery. He tried to rise and fell back to the ground. Someone sobbed; he listened to hear if the other person would say something. An insect chorus crescendoed. He tried to roll to one side and prop himself up, but found that one of his arms had turned to lead. There was no pain. Something was wrong with his vision; he wiped his eyes with the hand that worked. Sticky. Suddenly he really looked at his hand and saw blood; memory returned, and pain swamped him. He heard the distant sob again and knew this time that he was making the noise. Elinor! Gary! He began to work at pulling himself up, rising first to his knees. Then, fighting dizziness and nausea, he got to his feet. He staggered, fell, and rested before starting again.

Falling, crawling, staggering, pulling himself along with his good hand grasping the brambles and scrub trees, he hauled himself to the building, then up the stairs to the porch, where he collapsed again. After many minutes he started to inch his way to Elinor. The entire end of the porch was awash in blood. Elinor was not there.



A wave of pain took his breath away; he pitched forward and lay still. When he could open his eyes again, he saw her footprints, one shod, one bare. She must have gone for help, he thought clearly, and in his mind the vision of her destroyed face and head swelled, dwindled, and swelled again like a pulse. He forced himself to his feet.

For the next hour he followed the bloody footprints, sometimes on his knees, sometimes staggering on his feet. At the bottom of the curved stairs there was a bigger pool of blood, more prints. He picked up a wallet. Loesser must have dropped it, he thought distantly, the way Elinor lost her sandal. He put the wallet in his pocket and pulled himself up the stairs, resting more and more often now; sometimes he slept a little, woke to hear his own groans. Slowly, he moved on upwards.

They were all around him, he realized during one of his rests. The intruders he had sensed before were still here, everywhere, watching him, surrounding him, pressing against his head, waiting. He came to the rifle and rested by it, moved on. Then the prints stopped. He lay with his cheek on the floor and knew one of the bloody trails was his own. Straight ahead was a closet with an open door; the bloody path ended there. He sighed tiredly and lifted his head, tried to see past a blackness that filled the doorway from top to bottom. Inky blackness, nothing else.

He rested. They were here, everywhere, he thought again, from a great distance. Waiting. Suddenly he jerked awake. Waiting for him to bleed to death. Waiting for him to die! Slowly he began to retrace his trail. He rolled most of the way down the stairs. He found himself at the Buick and fell onto the front seat and rested a long time. It was getting dark. Key, he thought. He had tossed his keys to Gary. Without any thought or plan, he found Elinor's keys in her purse on the passenger seat. He got the car started, and aimed at the state road. When he reached it, he slumped forward and slept. He heard a soothing voice, felt hands on him, tried to return to the drifting state that was not sleep, but pleasanter because it was dreamless oblivion. The voice persisted.

“Can you hear me? Come on, Mr. Loesser, wake up. You're safe

now. You'll be all right. Wake up, Mr. Loesser."

He was being pulled back in spite of himself.

"A little more, Mr. Loesser, then you can sleep again." The voice changed slightly. "He can hear you and answer if he wants to."

A different voice spoke. "Who shot you, Mr. Loesser?"

He opened his eyes, realized that only one seemed to work, and reached up to feel a bandage that covered most of his face. He remembered being awake earlier, remembered wanting, being denied, a sip of water, being allowed to sleep again.

"Who shot you, Mr. Loesser?" The speaker was out of focus, thin faced, sad looking.

"Gary," Carson said and heard it as a croak.

"Did you say Gary? You mean Gary Danvers?"

"Gary," he said again and closed his eye. "My wife—"

"Yes. Your wife? What about your wife?"

"Dead," he said in his strange croaking voice.

The other voice came back, the soothing one. "Go back to sleep now, Mr. Loesser. Your wife died a long time ago. Remember? That was a long time ago."

"What's that all about?" the sad man asked.

"He's confused. Shock, trauma, loss of blood. His wife died in an airplane accident more than five years ago. Let him rest now. You won't get much out of him until the Demerol wears off, anyway."

"Okay. Okay. I'll drop in tomorrow."

Carson Danvers drifted and thought that if he were John Loesser, he would have grieved for his dead wife a long time ago. He slept.