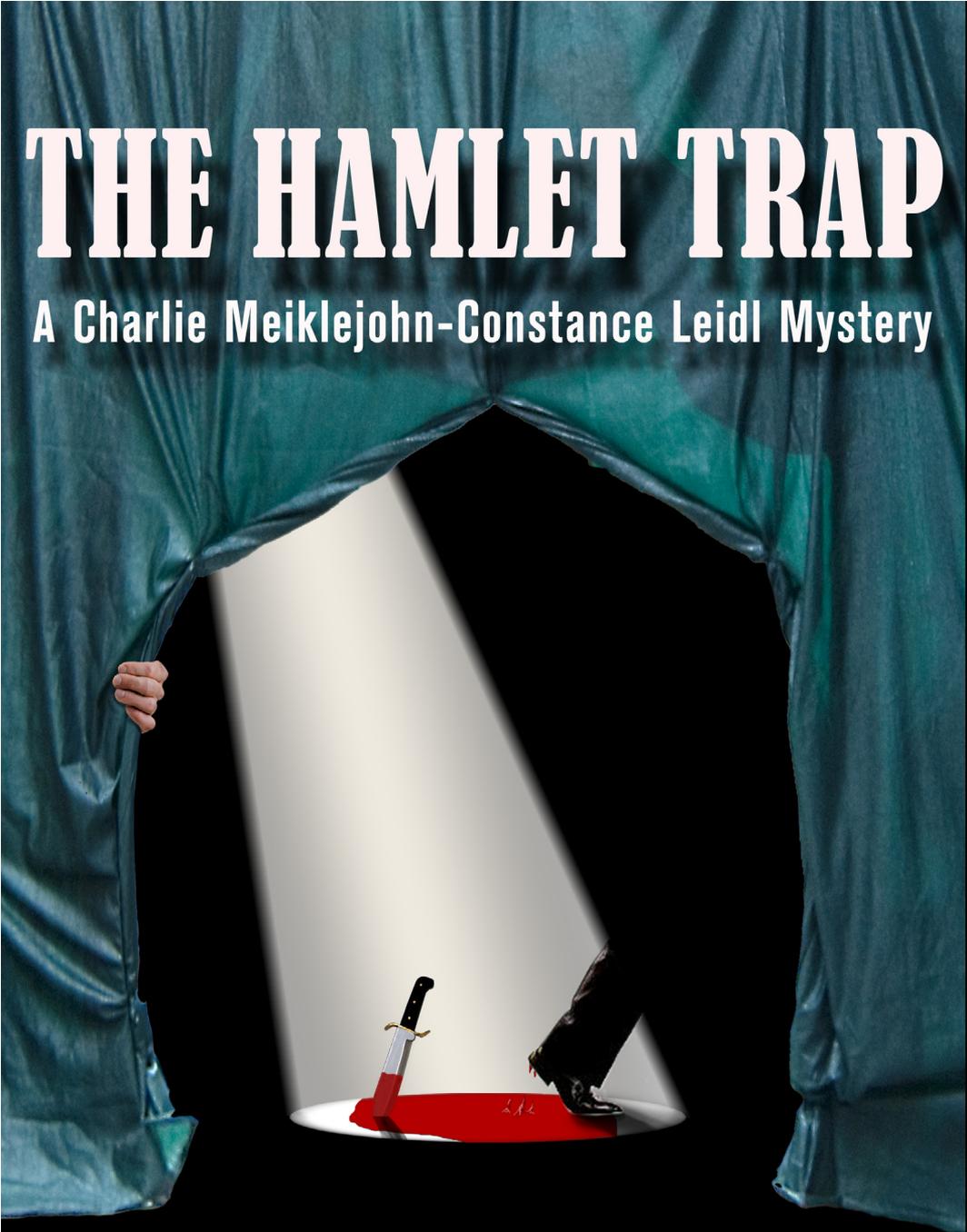


# THE HAMLET TRAP

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery



# Kate Wilhelm

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# ONE

ROMAN CAVANAUGH CLOSED his eyes and turned his head away when he saw Ginnie sailing down Pioneer Street on her ten-speed. The next time he looked, she had crossed Main safely and was slowing down for Lithia Way. He took the breath he had not dared attempt and walked around the theater to the stage door. He was smiling slightly, but his fear had been real and heart-stopping. Ginnie was his only living relative and he sometimes thought that if anyone loved another person more than he loved Ginnie, he would die of it.

He seldom saw the theater anymore, unless he was showing it off. It was perfect—from the brass hinges and copper spittoons to the cherubs on the ceiling, from the acres of scarlet velvet drapes everywhere to the twenty-foot-diameter cut- and stained-glass chandelier in the lobby. Perfect. He had resisted the temptation to rename it after himself and stuck to the original: Harley's Theater.

"Morning, Ro," William called out from the stage where he was examining one of the traps. William Tessler, in his sixties, Ro's age, had been the technician so long that people said when the builders started excavating they had uncovered him and he'd refused to go away. Ro waved to him and headed toward his office. William had looked at him with candor when Ro said his niece was going to work with Harriet, the set designer. Is she good? William had asked. Ro had assured him that Ginnie was very good and he had nodded. So why're you telling me this? his nod had implied. Ro had asked him how he felt about working under a twenty-four-year-old girl.

"If she's good, what else is there to bother with?"

William was not a designer, but he could put together anything Ginnie said she wanted, from the Eiffel Tower to a swarmy dungeon

to a surreal black-and-white dreamscape. It was as if they had been built to work together. Now, with Harriet retired, Ginnie was the only set designer they had, and this team simply got better every year. This was Ginnie's fifth season.

In his office Ro heard Ginnie enter and yell to William and Spotty, the watchman, who would be leaving along about now. You always knew when Ginnie had arrived. Ro's smile was broader as he started coffee before approaching his messy desk.

Ginnie stuck her head in, as he knew she would, and greeted him. "Hear from Wonder Boy yet?"

"He called from Bend last night. He'll get in this afternoon. Underestimated how long the drive would take. No one from back East believes the distances out here."

"Got a cup of coffee?"

"Come on in," he said in mock resignation. "And, Ginnie, stop calling him Wonder Boy. You'll forget and say it in front of him. And please don't swear like a sailor, at least until he gets to know you."

"Sure," she said, taking the coffee cup from him. "Thanks. In fact, I quit cussing. Haven't you noticed?"

"When?"

"Couple of weeks ago. You know, I started it when I realized I'd never grow t—" She looked at the ceiling and said primly, "One day it occurred to me that I probably would never become a voluptuous woman and no one would believe I was grown up, so I decided to use language to make the point."

"And you gave it up?"

"Right. I decided what the h—. I decided I didn't give a f—. I decided I didn't care."

Laughing, he poured himself more coffee. Ginnie was rangy, with dark curly hair that she kept too short. She wore sweatshirts, blue jeans, and crazy T-shirts and sneakers. Today her shirt had a smoking dragon on it. Ginnie had lived with him after her mother died, then she had gone away to school and at twenty-four had returned, two years into her master's program. She didn't give a shit about the degree, she had said cheerfully then. She had hung on for the experience of designing sets and now she was ready to go to

work for Harriet. She had shown him her portfolio and half a dozen models, and he had hired her.

He had been anxious and watchful in the beginning. When she hung around the theater before, as a kid, she had been coltish, childlike, obviously sexually immature, in no real danger. She was still too young, but with a difference: She was now independent. The first smooth-talking, handsome actor who came down the pike and saw a good thing in her because of who she was, who her uncle was, would twist her like wet spaghetti, he had thought, and he had been wrong. She treated them all with affection, like pets. Now he felt sympathetic amusement for the fresh young actors just out of school who came along and got a crush on her, and many of them did, whether or not she had developed a womanly figure.

“Has Wonder Boy picked out the winner yet?” She asked when she finished her coffee and was leaving his office.

“Ginnie, please. No, he hasn’t.”

“Well, sho—ot,” she said, and winked at him. “How can I start thinking about the set when I don’t know what for?”

“There’ll be time, plenty of time. Now get. I’ve got work to do.”

Ginnie wandered backstage greeting various people who were arriving: Anna Kaminsky, grumbling about the way the actors mistreated their costumes, as if she had nothing better to do than take up this seam, let out that one... And clean them. Always, clean them. She was leaving Monday for a vacation in Phoenix. Eric Hendrickson arrived, his brow more furrowed than usual. “Henry Dahl is sick,” he said in a tone of disbelief, incredulity. How dare Henry Dahl get sick now! he was actually saying. Two more shows to go! He’d pump him full of penicillin personally... Gary Boynton had to see William right now—he had found such a deal on redwood one-by-eights! Jessica Myers slouched her way toward props, her eyes distant and dreamy. Jessica had a new friend, her third this year. They were planning a long trip, starting Sunday night... .

Bobby Philpott and Brenda Gearhart arrived together and flushed when Ginnie raised an eyebrow at them. Bobby was lights; Brenda, sound.

“When I go take that workshop on laser lighting,” Bobby said

diffidently, “we thought Brenda might look in on some new sound techniques.”

“Her technique looks pretty sound to me as it is,” Ginnie said. Brenda blushed even more.

Could there be such a thing as a simultaneous manic depression? she wondered. Everyone always got manic at the end of the run, and it was always coupled with a depression amid the talk of vacations and trips and new affairs and whatever.

One show tonight, she mused, two on Saturday, and a matinee on Sunday that would finish the season with the last performance of *Harvey*. Finis. End of season. Already the theater felt different, as if a presentiment of loneliness had invaded it. Ginnie had been gone much of the summer and would not be leaving again until after the new season was well launched. She knew her Uncle Ro was grooming her to take over for him one day; he had asked her to sit in on the selection process for the next season, be in on the precasting decisions, budgets, everything. She was not certain she was ready for those responsibilities yet.

She glimpsed Kirby Schultz conferring with Eric. Kirby was the director who was leaving to make his fortune in television. She wished him well and thought it was just silly of Uncle Ro to be furious with him. Even if Uncle Ro was right and Kirby ended up hating it, he had to try, she had decided months ago, and tended to side with Kirby every time the subject came up.

“They’re sloppy,” Kirby was saying to Eric when she got within earshot. “I timed it on Wednesday and they’re running nine minutes longer than they were a month ago. Timing’s everything in a play like *Dracula*, everything. Take them through the second act, that’s where it bogs down.”

Eric nodded silently. Poor Eric, she thought, passing them, waving. He had been so certain he would get Kirby’s job.

“Not creative enough,” Uncle Ro had said when she questioned him about it. “A director’s got to be as creative as the writer or he’s nothing. Eric’s a great stage manager, a great prompter, a great one to get the most out of actors at rehearsals, after a director’s told him what he wants.”

At ten she left the theater, where she really had nothing to do

at this time. She rode her bike slowly through town toward the university, where she was to meet Peter and go with him to inspect a house that was a possibility for Wonder Boy and his companion. She grinned, remembering the expression on her uncle's face when she called his find by that name. But it was his fault, she reasoned; he had praised the new director too fulsomely not to evoke some reaction.

Harry Rosen waved at her from his car, on his way to his insurance office, she guessed. She liked Ashland. Everyone she saw who was a resident, not a tourist, smiled at her, waved, spoke, somehow greeted her. She liked that. All her life until she had come here she had lived in one big city after another, one apartment after another, always a stranger among strangers. Here people made her feel welcome and even useful. At least one time each year they asked her to come to the high school to talk to the art students; the Cascade Gallery had invited her to have a show twice now, with her models on display for a week to ten days at a time; if there was an art show, they asked her to be on the jury; she had spoken at the university several times. ... It was good to belong, to have a community. A town of fifteen thousand was just right.

"Hey, Ginnie! Over here!"

She braked, spinning out her bike on gravel in the driveway of the university-staff parking lot. Peter Ellis covered his face with both hands. He peeked through his fingers.

"Good God!" he said. "Do you always stop like that?"

"Is there another way? No one told me it, if there is."

"Chain the bike and let's go. I have to be back by one. Time to see the house and have lunch. Okay?"

She nodded and very quickly joined him at his car. Peter was six feet tall and fair; he moved as if his joints had not been firmly linked. He was an archaeologist at the university. He had been here for a year working on his Ph.D. dissertation, which he hoped to finish by spring. This quarter was his last here. Then, back to U.C.L.A., dig in and finish the paperwork, he said.

"Tell me something about the house," Ginnie said as he started the car and backed out. "How'd it happen to turn up at this time?"

"Warner and Greta Furness tried to rent it out during the

summer, but no luck. They said no actors and no students, and that didn't leave much, I guess. They want a year's lease. They're at Harvard for a year. Yesterday I heard about it and thought of you and your new director and here we go."

Peter was easy to be with, not demanding, and not theater. He seldom even came to the theater to pick her up, or to meet people there. He did not expect her to be any more comfortable with his university friends than he was with her theater friends. In a way, that tended to isolate them when they saw each other, and that, she knew, would not work if things ever started to get more serious. They would have to make some adjustments then, but for now it was fine. They hiked together and looked for good spots for him to dig, went to the coast or the high desert now and again. Sometimes he made dinner for her and sometimes she did it.

The house he took her to was on Alison, up a steep hill, about midway between the university and the theater, half a mile from each. The hill was not as steep as the one that led to her house on West Park Street. Much of Ashland was built on the mountainside, some of the streets so precipitous that she refused to drive on them at all.

"It's beautiful," she said, standing in the driveway. The house had two stories and looked expensive, with carefully sculpted grounds, immaculate paint.

"They'll make a deal. They don't want it empty all winter. Let's go on in."

It was a three-bedroom house, richly furnished, carefully maintained. She nodded. If Wonder Boy didn't like it, let him find his own house.

"Take the key," Peter said. "Show it to them and if they want it, they can get in touch with Warner. Otherwise, just give it back to me sometime. Here's the name and number." He handed her a slip of paper.

"Okay. So I'm a broker or something. Where for lunch? I'm starved."

"You're always starved."

Ginnie had never been able to ride her bicycle all the way up her

own hill. But she was getting higher each time, she thought grimly, when she had to get off and walk the rest of the distance that afternoon. Her legs throbbed. At her own house she nodded with satisfaction. It was perfect for her. The yard was messy with uncut grass, dandelions, overgrown bushes, last year's leaves turning a rich brown where they had collected in dips and along the walk, against the foundation of the house. She had dug up the backyard and had sown wildflowers, two pounds of seeds, at twenty-eight dollars a pound. The back was a kaleidoscope of color nine months of the year. She intended to have the front dug in the spring, plant it to wildflowers also.

Her uncle had looked at her with incomprehension when she told him she intended to buy a house. She had the insurance money, she had said firmly, and that was what it was going to go for, her own house.

Inside, she looked at her belongings with the same satisfaction she had felt surveying her yard. Everything in it was hers, things she had chosen herself. It was bright with color—she loved color, none of that neutral, good-taste, decorator stuff for her. The rug in her living room was red, the couch deep forest-green, one chair yellow. A Cherokee wall hanging was red and orange and yellow and blue. . . . There were plants in red and blue ceramic pots. She had caught the startled expression on the faces of visitors now and then, but most people liked it after that first surprise. The colors were carefully chosen, nothing clashed with anything else. She used colors the way they were used in tropical climates, in Indonesia, or Malaysia. It all worked.

She called her uncle and learned that Gray Wilmot and Laura Steubins were due at the theater by four. They had checked into a motel already and were cleaning up, relaxing.

Although she had intended to change her clothes, she forgot, and when she arrived at the theater to meet Wonder Boy, she was still in the jeans and T-shirt she had worn all day. She joined the throng in Ro's office.

William was there, and Eric, Kirby, Anna, Brenda, Bobby... most of the actors who had been put through an extra rehearsal for *Dracula*. Everyone wanted to meet the new director. Ro saw her

and called, "That's Ginnie. Meet Gray and Laura."

She could not see Laura for the people between them, but Gray was tall enough to spot.

"Hi!" she yelled, and he nodded. Grim, she thought. Probably dead tired from the long drive, and now a mob scene, just what he needed. She ducked to get a glimpse of Laura and grinned at her. Even tireder than he was, apparently.

"Ginnie's located a house you might want to rent," Ro was saying, his voice carrying over the other voices in the office.

"Whenever you want to see it, she'll take you."

"Maybe we should do it now," Laura said. "I'd like a nap before dinner. It's been a long day."

He didn't like that, Ginnie thought, watching Gray's expression tighten. And she doesn't like theater people. Like Peter.

"That makes good sense," Ro said heartily. "Ginnie can drop you off at your motel after you see the house. And I'll pick you up at six-thirty for dinner. Okay?"

They made their way through their welcome committee, and she led them out the back to her car. When she opened the door, they both got in the backseat without speaking. She walked around to the driver's side and got in, and realized that they thought she was a gofer, Ro's secretary, or a stagehand or something. She thought cheerfully, well, fuck you, too, Wonder Boy.