

A wooden canoe with a yellowish-brown interior and a dark blue exterior is positioned on a calm lake. The canoe is viewed from the front, showing its pointed bow and two blue interior seats. The background features a dense line of green trees on the far shore under a sky filled with heavy, grey clouds. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

Whisper Her Name

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery

Kate Wilhelm

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WHISPER HER NAME

Kate Wilhelm

First Edition

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Kate Wilhelm

1

CONSTANCE GLANCED UP FROM CUTTING lemon wedges when Charlie walked through the kitchen carrying a floor fan. He grunted something unintelligible as he continued on to the back porch. Moments later he returned and stood glaring at her.

“This time you’re not going to talk me out of it,” he said.

“All right.” She rinsed and dried her hands and added the plate of lemon wedges to the tray she had prepared. Lemonade, iced tea, glasses, spoons, napkins, sugar. She nodded and took the tray to the porch, where she put it on a glass-topped table.

Following her out, Charlie said, “I’ll call Hank on Monday.”

Her only response was an “Umm,” sound.

It wasn’t fair, he thought bitterly. It was hot as hell, he was hot as hell, and she, cool as ever, was arranging a tea party. She was wearing a sleeveless pale-blue top over ivory-colored pants and sandals, and looked like a damn model, not a wife of twenty-five-plus years, and certainly not like a psychologist. Even her hair, almost platinum, just the way it had always been, belied her years, since a few new white hairs now matched her natural hair so closely. Regarding her, his scowl smoothed out as another thought surged. She was the most beautiful and the sexiest woman he had ever seen, always had been, still was.

“It’s really quite nice out here, isn’t it?” she said, turning her gaze toward him. Her eyes were the same pale blue as the top she

wore.

He had to admit that the porch was okay, maybe even nice, with a ceiling fan and the floor fan both humming, clematis shading the western side, and jasmine perfuming the air. The flower bed was riotous with color, dead-looking cats sprawled in shade patches, and butterflies were plying their trade among the flowers.

“I’m still going to call Hank,” he muttered. Hank owned a heating and air-conditioning business. Every summer Charlie resolved to get him out to the house and install AC but, somehow, it never happened. This year it would, he told himself. Then, thinking of air-conditioning and the window unit in their bedroom, he said, “Let’s give these guys the bum’s rush, pronto-like.”

“Whatever you say,” she said with a faint smile. She glanced toward the door and added, “I think they’ve arrived.”

Constance knew that it wasn’t the heat bothering Charlie as much as boredom. No grass to cut or snow to blow, nothing to repair around the house at the present time, nothing stirring in the nearby village or the firehouse where he often hung out with the volunteer or two who wandered in, no interesting case to occupy his mind. He was simply bored and tired of August. After years as an arson investigator, more years as a New York City homicide detective, and the ever-constant pressure of living in the city, inactivity and a quiet life were proving to be more difficult for him to adapt to than either of them had ever considered.

She went with him to meet the woman who had called earlier that morning.

“Tricia Corning,” the woman said inside the foyer. She extended her hand to Constance, then to Charlie. “Thanks for seeing us on such short notice. My nephew Stuart Bainbridge, and Dr. Rasmussen.” She indicated the man and woman who had entered with her.

Tricia Corning was slightly built, with hair turning gray at the temples, a flawless complexion, and lovely brown, heavily lashed eyes. She appeared to be in her forties, but when she smiled she looked years younger. Hers was a slightly crooked smile. Stuart Bainbridge had that same lopsided smile and pretty eyes. Six feet

tall, muscular, he was deeply suntanned with brown hair, sun-bleached almost blond. Probably not yet thirty, Charlie thought, shaking hands with him. The third member of the party, Dr. Rasmussen, was a tall woman, sturdily built, not overweight, but strong-looking, with an air of authority that made Charlie think of librarians. Constance was reminded of her high school gym teacher who had always covered her nose with zinc oxide when she led her class out to the field, pretending unawareness of the girls' amusement. Dr. Rasmussen's hair was nearly black, short and straight, and neatly framed her face like a helmet. With prominent black eyebrows, little makeup, dark-blue eyes with an unwavering frank assessment of both Constance and Charlie, she was upper management, Charlie decided. She would take charge if given half a chance.

He was closing the front door when another car pulled into the driveway, and a third woman emerged and headed toward the door. Too-high heels, too much leg, too much cleavage, Charlie thought, watching her.

"I'm Pamela Bainbridge," she said, drawing near. "I'm with them." She jerked her thumb toward Tricia Corning and Stuart.

Tricia took a step back and two spots of color flared on her cheeks. "For heaven's sake! You followed us?"

"You bet I did," Pamela snapped. "No secret deals while my back is turned."

Stuart Bainbridge's hands clenched for a moment, then relaxed. "She's married to my father," he said, "and she has no business being here. I have his power of attorney. I'm acting on his behalf."

Pamela Bainbridge raked him with contemptuous gaze, then said to Charlie, "I have as much right as anyone else. He's trying to cut me out, and I won't be cut out."

She was what Charlie thought of as conventionally pretty. Thirty, thirty-five, features in the right place, makeup skillfully applied, bottle blonde, good figure draped in a sundress cut too low, with a tiny jacket over her shoulders, and instantly forgettable. Another blue-eyed blonde too young to be the wife of a man old enough to be Stuart's father.

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“Well, it’s turning into a regular convention,” he said. “Come on out to the back porch, where it’s marginally cooler than the house.”

A few minutes later, seated, with beer for Charlie, Stuart, and Pamela, iced tea for the others, Charlie said, “What brings you all out here?”

Tricia leaned forward, put her glass on the table. “What I’d like to do is give you an outline of our problem with a few details, until you decide if you’ll help us.” She waited for his nod, then continued. “About six months ago my brother Howard was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. He was given six months to a year. While in New York at that time, he went to his lawyers and had a will written. Last month he died of a self-administered overdose of a prescription drug. His lawyer contacted us about the will, which was to be read in Howard’s house with his siblings and Dr. Rasmussen present. That took place three weeks ago.”

She paused, picked up her glass, sipped tea, then said, “Each sibling can remove one object from the house and afterward will not be admitted inside again. After six weeks, or after we each choose our one item, whichever comes first, the property will be donated to Stillwater College. Dr. Rasmussen is the president of the college, the reason she was at the reading of the will.”

Charlie did not look at his watch but did move his arm in such a way that a glance at it would not be too obvious. There were cases that he absolutely had no interest in hearing about much less agreeing to work on. Lost dogs, divorces, missing spouses, in-store pilfering. And family squabbles over wills and money, he added to himself. Definitely family squabbles over wills.

“The problem,” Tricia was saying in a voice that had become much tighter, “is that when Howard was in New York seeing specialists and writing his will, he also went to his broker and ordered all his holdings to be liquidated and converted to cash to be transferred to his bank. After that was done, he went to his bank and withdrew five million dollars in cashier’s checks, each one for one hundred thousand dollars, and no one knows where that money is.”

Charlie expelled a soft whistle. “How many siblings are you

talking about?”

“I have three brothers.”

“And each one of you can take one thing from the house. I suspect there’s a bit of tension in the air along about now.”

Pamela made a rude snorting sound and Tricia looked pinched. She nodded.

“Doing all that in New York would have taken a couple of weeks, maybe longer. Any idea if he made other trips after that one?” Charlie asked.

“He went home the day after he withdrew the money and there’s no record of any other trip, no charges on his credit cards, receipts, nothing like that. His housekeeper said he didn’t leave again.”

“None of your brothers has a clue about what he was up to?”

She shook her head again. Hesitantly she said, “I was the only one he kept in touch with—or, I should say, I kept in touch with him, with all my brothers. I don’t think any of them kept in touch with one another. I know he didn’t.”

Looking at her hands tightly clasped in her lap, Tricia said, “One more thing about the will. He specifically stated that there was not to be a service, that he was to be cremated and his ashes thrown into Stillwater Lake. No family members were to be present.”

Charlie glanced at Constance, who, he was certain, had signaled him with invisible fingers on his spine. Her nod was imperceptible to anyone but him, he was also certain. He waited.

“Ms. Corning, why was there such animosity toward his siblings?” Constance asked.

Tricia looked startled by the question and hesitated before responding. “You’re right,” she said. “Years ago, when we were all young, there was an accident. Howard’s fiancée died in a boating accident and he was injured, in a coma for several days. When he recovered, he was changed. I think he suffered post-traumatic brain disorder or something. We had always been very close, at least the boys had been before that, but never after the accident. He withdrew from all of us and never had anything to do with the family after that. As I said, I kept in touch with all of them, but he never called me or got in touch with me himself.”

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“He came to see us,” Pamela said with a touch of malice in her voice. “After William and I got married, he dropped in out of the blue.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tricia said, clearly surprised. She looked at Stuart. “You met him?”

“No. I was still in school. Dad told me he came by, stayed a couple of hours and left. He didn’t say where he was going or where he had been, why the visit, nothing. Dad said it was the first time he’d seen him since they were both young. I’d never heard about the accident before today,” he added.

“Nearly thirty years ago is a long time,” Tricia murmured. “Little reason to bring it up, I guess.”

Charlie turned to Dr. Rasmussen, who had not said a word or moved either, as far as he was aware. “How well did you know Howard Bainbridge? Did he confide in you?”

“I never met him,” she said. Her voice was even, the words not actually clipped, but decisively crisp. “This donation was a total surprise. On returning to school after the reading of the will I looked him up in the records, in order to see if he had been a donor over the years. He had not. His only connection to the college came years ago when he sponsored a complete scholarship with living expenses for a girl named Andrea Briacchi.”

At the mention of the name Andrea Briacchi, Tricia gasped and straightened in her chair. Charlie turned to her. “What?”

“Good heavens,” she said. “She saved his life. That boating accident I mentioned. It was on Stillwater Lake. A little girl saw it happen, a rowboat sinking, people falling into the water. She told her mother, who called nine-one-one, then called a neighbor with a motorboat to come to the rescue. The girl was eight or nine years old. She was Andrea Briacci.”

“Is she still in the area?” Charlie asked Dr. Rasmussen.

She shook her head. “I looked her up, too. She was nineteen when she attended Stillwater College, then dropped out after three years when she was a senior. She died before my time, ten or twelve years ago. She drowned in Stillwater Lake, some kind of accident. I don’t know the details.”

Pamela cried, “Oh, my God! The curse! It was the Bainbridge curse!”

Things got interesting for a minute or two, Charlie thought, leaning back in his chair, watching. Stuart leaped to his feet, his fists clenched again. He looked ready to jump over the table and throttle Pamela. Tricia caught his arm and told him to sit down, and Constance stood up. Charlie almost wished that Stuart had tried to get to Pamela, and imagined his surprise when Constance floored him. She had enough black belts to piece together a quilt, and she taught a variety of martial arts. It was not to be, however. Tricia’s grasp of Stuart’s arm and her words were enough to make him subside, sink into his chair. Rasmussen meanwhile had tried to merge herself with the back of her chair. When Stuart sat down again, as tense as a cornered cat, Constance picked up the tray and walked to the door.

“I’ll bring some more tea. Beer anyone?”

“Might as well bring three beers,” Charlie said. Inwardly he was cursing. She had been as ready as he had been to heave them all out, take their money fight somewhere else, but she had signaled that it was not going to happen. More tea, more beer, more questions and answers. There was a curse to run to ground and, by God, she would run it to ground. He regarded Pamela sourly and wanted to throttle her himself. Either she was a hell of an actress, he thought then, or she really believed in some kind of a goddamn curse. Her outcry had been spontaneous, reflexive.

He remembered a past conversation he’d had with Constance about curses. He had been scoffing at the idea and Constance had said in a thoughtful way, “What I know is that if the one being cursed believes in it, it can be quite effective.”

She returned with the tray, and after they were all served again, she turned to Pamela. “Tell us about the curse.”

“Howie told me. When he came down to Orlando three years ago, he told me. First his, Howie’s, girlfriend drowned in that crazy accident. He tried to save her, but her hair was caught in a board under the boat or something, and he couldn’t do it. Then Ted’s live-in girlfriend, up at his farm. She went to town for something

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and vanished. Just never came back, didn't take nothing with her, just disappeared and was never heard from again. Lawrence. His girlfriend got killed by a drive-by shooter. William's first wife, hit-and-run, when he"—she nodded toward Stuart—"was a baby. Howie said I was either brave or crazy to hook up with a Bainbridge man. Howie scared me. Really scared me. I felt like I was having a nervous breakdown or something, and I had to leave William."

"That's a lie!" Stuart yelled. "You left when the money spigot got turned off!" He looked at Charlie and said in a rasping voice, "She was in a jam and Dad bailed her out, then he married her. It took nearly a year before he came to his senses and realized that she would clean the bank and he changed all his credit cards, gave her an allowance, and said that was it. She packed up and left and took everything she could carry with her."

"You're the one lying!" Pamela cried. "You don't know anything about it. I love him, but I was afraid!"

"You don't know what love means. Where were you when he was hurt? When he had surgery? Never a peep out of you, no card, no flowers, no visit. Just nothing."

With a sniff, Pamela turned to Charlie. "That girl, Andrea, she must have been sleeping with him, with Howie. He must have cared about her, and he lost her. Just like all the others. That's what I was afraid of."

"I don't think that works," Dr. Rasmussen said drily. "Andrea was nineteen when she enrolled at Stillwater College. She and her mother had moved to Newton and it took time to find them. A year and a half after returning to Stillwater, she married Earl Marshall, the writer. A year or two after that she died, as I said, ten or twelve years ago, before my time. There was hardly time for an affair with Howard Bainbridge. He didn't even move to Stillwater until four years ago. And he had stipulated that the scholarship was to be anonymous, his name never revealed to the girl."

Charlie held up his hand. "Let's leave history and return to the present," he said. "Ms. Corning, the will was read three weeks ago. What's happened since then?"

She nodded. "Mr. Jespersen, the attorney, said the firm had

an inventory of the contents of the house, and they had appraisals made of the property and the contents. At the end of six weeks the reports will be turned over to the college, the deed transferred. Our six weeks began after the appraisals, and so on, were completed, two weeks ago. An associate in the law firm, Mr. Paley, will live in the house until the transfer is made or the money is found, and there are three watchmen to keep an eye on everything. That's how it's set up now. Mr. Paley is there to record any object that we remove, for tax purposes, to satisfy the law about what is being inherited. The watchmen search packages, handbags, backpacks, whatever is taken out. We are given access from eight in the morning until eight at night, and there is a housekeeper who worked for Howard who comes in every day to tidy up and prepare a late lunch or early dinner, and she is gone by seven."

She drew in a long breath before continuing. "We—my brothers, Stuart, and I—got together and made our own plans. We hired a detective agency from New York, the Slocum Agency, to come in and search the house. The appraisals had indicated that there were no antiques, no fine art, nothing of that sort to consider. Howard was not a sophisticated man; we didn't believe he would have bought gems or rare stamps and hidden them away. And there was the matter of time. He simply hadn't taken enough time to find and make a purchase like that without leaving a trace. We told the detectives there were missing papers, some checks that might be in separate envelopes, or all in one fairly large one. That's what they were looking for. At least two of us remained with them throughout their search. They found nothing. We had an architect in to compare the structure with the original plans to see if there was a hidden safe or niche of some kind. There isn't. We talked to the landscapers Howard had hired, asked if plantings had been disturbed, ground dug up, anything unusual had gone on. And we had his car detailed by a professional group. All that was during week one, last week. This past week we were doing little more than wandering about, or re-searching what's already been searched."

"And running up bills," Pamela said.

When no one responded to her, Charlie asked, "Who's ponying

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up for the expenses as you go?”

“Jespersion said the law firm would cover any expenses as they incur,” Tricia said in a strained voice. “It’s been quite expensive to date, of course. There’s about three hundred twenty thousand dollars in Howard’s account. I’m to receive two hundred thousand, and our expenses will be taken from the remainder before it’s distributed to all of us equally. The law firm’s expenses will be paid the same way. Our living expenses are not to be considered when the accounting is done. For that we’re on our own. Mr. Meiklejohn, none of us has any money to spare. I’m married to a country doctor who’s still paying off his student loans. We have two teenage daughters; one wants to be a surgeon, the other a biologist. We’re trying to save for their education. Ted has a heavily mortgaged farm in upstate New York, little money to spare. Lawrence calls himself a consultant, again no money. William’s business collapsed when the economy plummeted, and then he had a serious work injury...”

She paused, looked first at Constance, then at Charlie. “If you’ll agree to take this on, your fees would be paid through the law firm now, charged to the estate later. And if you find the checks, we will split the money four ways, and we will pay you a bonus of fifty thousand dollars on top of your regular fees.”

Constance sipped her tea, put the glass down, and asked, “Ms. Corning, you’ve had experts do everything possible to find the checks, to no avail. Why do you think we could do more than what has been done?”

“My husband asked our attorney if we could contest the will,” Tricia said after a moment. “He said no, Jespersion’s firm is too thorough, too careful to have left a loophole. And he also recommended that we consult with you two. Maybe we need to look at this from a different angle, with different expertise. He said your combined talents might prove effective. A renowned psychologist and a superbly trained detective, both of whom often appear to think outside the box. You might come up with an approach that no one else thought of, see something that we’ve all overlooked. Reveal the purloined letter, something like that. Dr. Leidl, we know those checks are there! We, my brothers, Stuart,

and I talked it over early this morning and we agree, the checks are somewhere to be found. We agreed that we'd cooperate in any and all ways with whatever you and your husband do, how you do it, when. Our full cooperation. And we agreed to split the money equally among us if you find it."

"I didn't agree to diddly," Pamela said. "I told you before, and I'm telling you here and now, that if I find that money it's ours, mine and William's. And don't you forget it!" She turned her furious gaze toward Dr. Rasmussen and said to the group, "If that money's still there when she gets the house, how long do you think it'll take her to pull it down board by board with her bare hands?"

Constance watched her until she subsided. Then, as if Pamela had not spoken, she said to Tricia, "You realize that what you're asking of us will involve personal questions, perhaps deeply personal questions. In order to try to understand your brother, those who knew him are the only source we'll have to work with."

Tricia nodded. "We know that. We'll all talk to you, but privately." Her glance toward Pamela was no more than a flash of her eyes in that direction.

"Of course, privately." Constance looked at Charlie as if to say, your show, I'm done.

"All right," he said. "You're on. Now, for what I'll want. Full addresses, phone numbers of everyone involved...."

Tricia leaned down and reached into her oversized bag. "Let me show you what all I've brought along. No doubt you'll want more, but it's a start." She brought out a large thick envelope and he moved his chair closer to hers and cleared a space on the table.

Moving stiffly, Pamela rose. Her jaw was clenched, and she looked as if she was biting her tongue to maintain control. It was not an altogether successful attempt. Her anger was manifest in her posture, her strident voice. "Now, you'll give them copies of everything, won't you? I can't even have a copy of that damn will, but they get it all. Well, I'm leaving. I've seen enough, more than enough. You two, remember this. I'll be watching you like a hawk."

Constance went to the door with her and neither spoke a word. Pamela backed out of the driveway and drove away as if she had

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glimpsed a monster in pursuit.

The consultation lasted another hour, and Charlie suspected he was the only one not surprised when Constance asked for a list of the women who had died, full names, addresses, police reports, whatever was available.

Finally, when they all stood up, Dr. Rasmussen said, "Of course, I'll cooperate in any way that I can. For now, I can recommend a bed-and-breakfast in Stillwater if you'd prefer that to a hotel or motel." She reached into her handbag and brought out a card, jotted something on it, and handed it to Charlie. "My address and number and the name of the B and B. Please give me a call when you're settled in town. And just one more thing for you to consider. The housekeeper, the one who will be there every afternoon, is Alice Knudsen, and she is a notorious gossip. She has always lived in Stillwater and knows everyone there. I would advise everyone to be careful of what they say within her hearing range."

"Does she repeat only what she actually hears?" Constance asked.

A faint smile came and went on Dr. Rasmussen's face as if she fully understood the implication. "Alice has a vivid imagination," she said.

As they rose and collected their possessions, Charlie asked, "What's the weather like down there in Stillwater?"

Their three guests exchanged puzzled looks and Stuart said, "Great. Ten degrees or more cooler than up here. Why?"

"Just curious," Charlie said.

After seeing them all out, Constance and Charlie returned to the porch and started to gather glasses. The sun was very low in the sky and not a leaf stirred. As long as he had been seated with the breeze from the floor fan on him, Charlie had thought little of the continuing heat; but standing, watching Tricia retrieve her purse from the table, just moving about, actually doing something, he had started to sweat again.

"Why did you decide to take them on?" Constance asked, adding the plate of lemon wedges to the tray.

"Cooler there than here."

She smiled. “Really, why?”

“Fifty grand.”

She laughed. “But since you don’t think we’ll find the checks, that bonus is an illusion.”

“You think we might find them?” he asked.

“What I think is that a frosted pitcher of margaritas, guacamole and chips, and a nice quiet booth where we can look over some of those reports in comfort would be a good plan. Eventually to be followed by real food.”

He had merely glanced at the reports when Tricia unloaded her big envelope and identified the many papers. “That’s a real plan,” he said.

She picked up the tray, went to the door and paused there. “You haven’t answered the question. Why did you?”

He scowled. “You told me to,” he said in an aggrieved tone. And she had the grace not to deny it, he thought, as her smile deepened and she entered the house.

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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 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.

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