

With Thimbles, With Forks, And Hope

A Charlie Meiklejohn-Constance Leidl Mystery



Kate Wilhelm

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InfinityBox Press
7060 North Borthwick Avenue
Portland, OR 97217

www.infinityboxpress.com
www.facebook.com/InfinityBoxPress
www.facebook.com/kate.wilhelm.52

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THE FARMHOUSE GLOWED IN the late afternoon dusk, like an old-fashioned Christmas card scene. Low evergreens crowded the front porch; the sidewalk from the drive curved gracefully. It was all scrubbed-looking, the white clapboard freshened by rain that had started to fall. Charlie felt a twinge of guilt at the cleanliness and the comfort of it after spending most of the day in New York. He parked in the garage and entered a small side porch that led into the back of the house. The porch was a catchall for the bottles to be returned to the store, newspapers destined for a recycle center, some wooden seed flats that had gotten only that far on their way to the barn, an overflowing woodbox. When the clutter got so bad that he could no longer make his way through it, he cleaned it up, but not until then, and he never had finished cleaning everything—the seed flats had been there since June.

Inside the house, the fragrance of soup was tantalizing; there were the odors of wood fires, of onions, of cats—three of them—cedar paneling, and other things he had not been able to identify, leftover things from when the house was built, or from the first seventy years of its occupancy.

“Hello,” he called out, but he knew Constance was out. The house felt empty when she was outside. Two of the three cats stalked over to sniff his shoes and legs, checking credentials before they accepted him. The third one, Brutus, glared at him from on top of the upright freezer. It was Charlie’s fault, obviously, that the rain had started again. Brutus turned his back and faced the wall.

Charlie went through a narrow hallway, through the utility room, all the time dancing to avoid squashing a cat. He heard the soft plop Brutus made when he left the freezer, and he knew the evil old tiger cat was following along, his tail rigid, daring either of the other two to get in his way. They would keep an eye on him and scamper if he got near. Brutus was a New York cat; he had not,

would never approve of country life. In the kitchen, there was a copper-colored electric range with a stove-top grill, a dishwasher, a disposal that had never been used since they had moved in—meat scraps went to cats, and everything else went on the compost; there were rows of hanging pots and pans, all gleaming copper-bottomed, seldom used. What was used every day for nine or even ten months of the year was a forty-year-old wood cookstove. On it now, there was the iron kettle with soup simmering so low that a bubble broke the surface once every five minutes or so.

The orange cat rubbed against him and complained about things generally. He rubbed its ears for a moment, then said softly, “She’s going to be mad as hell, Candy.” Brutus swiped at the gray cat, Ashcan, in passing and settled himself on the rocking chair nearest the stove. His eyes gleamed yellow as he narrowed them in the way that made him look Mephistophehan. Candy went on detailing her awful day, Ashcan licked the place Brutus had nabbed him, and Charlie tried to think of a way to break the news to his wife that he had practically taken on a job for them both. “She will be mad as hell,” he said again under his breath, and he put down the briefcase filled with reports that he planned to read that night and have her read.

On the slope overlooking the house and yard, Constance was on her knees planting daffodils under the half dozen apple trees that made their orchard. Next year, they should start bearing. “Goddamned rain,” she muttered, “had to do it now, couldn’t wait another fifteen minutes, had to be right now.” Rain trickled down her neck, icy fingers that made her skin flinch, trying to turn itself inside out. She plunged the bulb planter into the yielding earth, twisted it viciously, lifted out the plug, and laid it down. With one hand, she scooped up wood ashes and bone meal and sand and tossed the mixture into the hole; with the other, she groped in her pail for another bulb and dropped it in, no longer taking the trouble to put it right side up. She returned the column of dirt topped with newly cut grass and jabbed at the ground a scant six inches away to repeat the process. It was impossible now for her to summon the vision of apple trees in bloom on a golden carpet.

She had heard the car and knew that Charlie was home. She had

known when Charlie left that morning that when he got home he would hem and haw around for a while and finally blurt out that he had taken the job, that it would be a milk run, nothing to do, nothing dangerous, et cetera, et cetera. Her stomach would churn and her blood would chill, making her fingers cold, and she would nod silently and try to find words that would tell him she hated it but that she was willing for him to do it because she knew he couldn't just quit the business cold turkey. She knew that now and then he would go see Phil Stearns and come home to tell her that he had agreed to do just this one job, this one last time. "But it isn't fair," she muttered. For twenty-five years, Charlie had worked on the New York City police force, and he had come out scarred but intact, and it wasn't fair to risk everything again.

The worst scars were the ones that could not be seen. Invisible scar tissue had formed, protecting him where he had been hurt too often. In the beginning, he had been possessed by zeal, a sense of mission, holy justice; over the years, that had become cynicism and simple dedication to sharpening his skills of detection. Then he had become different again, had developed a cold fury because nothing changed, or if there were changes, they were for the worse. His rage at the criminal began to extend to the victim. Constance had known then it was time for him to get out. Surprisingly, he had agreed, and three years ago, at forty-seven, he had retired.

She looked with dismay at the pail, at least twenty more bulbs. The rain was coming down harder; there was a touch of ice in it. Her fingers were red and swollen-looking and her nose had started to run and she couldn't wipe it without smearing mud across her face. "It isn't fair!" she cried, looking at the house.

By the time she finished the job and put away her equipment, the rain was a downpour and the day was finished, with the gray sky lowering toward the ground. Charlie met her at the back door and drew her inside, pushed her gently into a chair, and brushed a kiss across her nose as he leaned over and pulled off her muddy boots. He helped her out of the sodden jacket and then took both her hands and pulled her across the kitchen, through the hallway, to the bathroom, which was steamy and sweet-smelling from bubble bath.

She sighed and did not tell him she would have preferred a shower in order to wash her hair also. Since her fingers were stiff with cold, he ended up undressing her and then held her elbow firmly until she was in the tub, only her flushed face and wet hair above water.

Charlie was perplexed about the hair; she was not the image he had anticipated, with mud on her cheek and her hair dripping and clinging to her cheeks and her forehead.

“Be right back,” he said, and left, taking her wet clothes with him.

As soon as he had vanished, she stood up and pulled a towel from the rack and tied up her hair. It was silly for Charlie to baby her; she was taller than he was, and almost as broad. Her face was wide, Slavic, her eyes pale blue, her hair almost white, it was so blond. The gray that was already showing here and there blended in, and no one but Charlie knew she was turning. She knew she neither looked nor acted like the kind of woman a man would baby. She sank back into the suds and thought again it was silly for him to go through this to ease his conscience, but she was glad he did. Sometimes he babied her and sometimes she babied him; it worked out.

He came back carrying a tray with two frosted martini glasses, the shaker, a plate of garlic salami, the kind you could get only in a good New York deli, and strips of cheese. He sat down cross-legged on the floor so that his eyes and hers were level, poured the drinks, handed her a towel and then her drink, and began to tell her about the job. While he talked, he ate the salami and held out pieces for her to bite.

Constance watched him and listened and she thought: He was night to her day, all dark and brooding and secret. His hair was a mop of tight black curls, his eyebrows so heavy, they made his face look out of proportion. There was a gleam of gold in his mouth when he laughed, one gold cap. His teeth were crooked, an orthodontist’s nightmare, but they were the whitest teeth Constance had ever seen.

“Lou Bramley,” Charlie said, eating cheese, “will be fifty-one November first. That’s Saturday. He’s got a wife that he cares for,

two good kids, treasurer of Tyler and Sacks, Incorporated, no debts, everything going for him. And Phil's sure as sin that he's going to suicide before the end of the day Saturday. And leave him, Phil, holding a five-hundred-thousand-dollar insurance policy."

"So why doesn't he just not issue the policy?"

"Because it's too big to piss away without more than an itch to go by. And nothing's come up. He's had his best working on it for the last three weeks and they haven't come up with anything—no motive, no problem, no woman, nothing."

"Why does Bramley say he wants that kind of insurance?"

"His story was that at a party a screwball astrologer told him the next six months are the most dangerous of his life, that unless he takes extreme care, the odds are good that he will be killed in an accident." Charlie poured the last of the martinis and laughed. "Phil even hired an astrologer to do a horoscope for Bramley. Nothing to it. He's riding a high wave, nothing but good things ahead. Can you imagine Phil going to an astrologer?"

Constance laughed. They had known Phil Stearns since Charlie's college days. Phil believed in nothing but actuarial tables. "Charlie," she said then, "it's an impasse. In time, a good psychologist or psychiatrist could give Phil his answers, but if his people couldn't find anything in three weeks, what does he think you can do in three days? He has to gamble or cut loose."

Charlie nodded. "I more or less told him the same thing. Midnight Friday, the policy goes through automatically if he doesn't reject it. By midnight Saturday, we both think Mr. Lou Bramley will no longer be with us, and Mrs. Bramley will come into a sizable fortune. Phil is ready to cut him loose, but he wants a backup opinion from a good psychologist. From you."

She shook her head. "I'm retired. And you are, too, if you'd just remember it from time to time."

"Bramley's gone down to a flossy resort in Florida, in the Fort Myers area. That raises the possibility of a vanishing act instead of suicide. In either case, it has to go down on the books as accidental death for the big payoff. All Phil wants you to do is go down there and observe him, talk to him, and on Friday give Phil a call. He needs something more than an itch to refuse a policy like that."

Constance glared at him. “You can’t take jobs for me. I’m not an indentured servant or something.”

“I didn’t tell him anything definite,” Charlie said reproachfully. “I did say that if we agreed, we’d want a week’s vacation at the flossy resort after we finished this little job. On Phil, of course.”

She shook her head. “Go stir the soup or something.”

As soon as he was gone, she opened the drain, pulled the towel from her hair, and turned on the shower. She hated bubble bath; this was a gift from their daughter. Of course, Charlie would be hooked on Lou Bramley—they were the same age. He would never admit it, but the idea of stopping everything now when there was so much to do, time enough finally to do it, that would frighten him. He was not a coward—he had survived too many encounters with near death and had gone back too many times—but he was cautious. He was not ready. His own unreadiness would make it impossible for him to sidestep Lou Bramley, who evidently was ready. Charlie would have to know why. He would have to stop him if he was stoppable.

Constance had called Charlie late in the afternoon of her first day at the luxurious hotel. She had managed to talk briefly with Lou Bramley, she reported. “He’s withdrawing, Charlie,” she had said soberly. “Anyone with half an eye could spot it. He’s not eating, not sleeping, doesn’t finish sentences. He stares and stares without moving, then jumps up and walks furiously on the beach. Nervous energy. He’s so obsessed, he doesn’t even realize he’s got two women pursuing him.”

“Two? What do you mean?”

And she had told him about the woman who was openly stalking Lou Bramley. The bellboys and waiters were betting on when she would land him, it was so obvious.

Charlie did not like having a woman appear. It was possible they planned to skip out together.

He was going to like it even less, she thought. She had learned that the woman was June Oliveira, from Brazil, and Lou Bramley was the first man she had paid any attention to in the week she had been in the hotel. Wherever Lou Bramley went, she was so