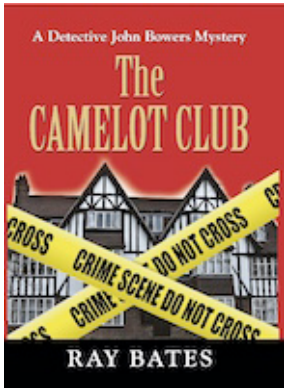


A Detective John Bowers Mystery

# The CAMELOT CLUB



RAY BATES



*The Camelot Club, third book in the Detective John Bowers series, catches John off guard. He's trying to escape the city noise and mayhem but kidnap and murder, plus an ex-wife who plays the grieving victim of a cruel crime, pull him back.*

*His partner Minols Raye is still bent on keeping their sexual trysts alive, even while she wears the Assistant DA's engagement ring. John is torn between two women with opposites agenda for taming the Detective. As the case moves forward, John joins the investigative team and tries to follow the twisting trail of unlikely suspects. A young child falls off the roof of his house. Then disappears. Is it a kidnap? A homicide? Why can't the Police Bureau mount a full charge at the prime suspect? How can John try to save his ex-wife's business and reputation when she's drawn into the sordid details of the crime?*

*John struggles to put it all together at the same time he's juggling his girlfriend Georgie and partner Minnie. How much of a good thing is too much? Can John sort it all out before time runs out? It's too close to call.*

# The Camelot Club

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# **THE CAMELOT CLUB**

With Detective John Bowers

By

**Ray Bates**

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First Edition

## Chapter One

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Sunshine streamed through the stained glass window and cameoed the boy. The top of his head where his flaxen cowlick saluted with a charge of static electricity barely reached the newel post.

He looked away with a tentative frown, trying to avoid one of the adult faces staring down at him. His father was suddenly reproving. Not like the happy, fun-to-be-with dad who praised his little kitchen helper and let him feed the giraffes at the zoo on Sundays. This look the eight-year old saw now commanded obedience. His dad always wore this countenance when company arrived. And manners and courtesy mattered most when his uncles came to visit.

His father touched his shoulder to guide him into the foyer. “Kevin?” His mouth glistened like a sea serpent. “Say hello to Uncle Ray. He’s come just to spend time with you.”

The boy looked at the man with rimless spectacles perched on his pointed nose. Kevin thought how the face looming over his reminded him of a rodent. He imagined the tapered fingernails burrowing like a gopher’s.

As the man took his arm and led him from the vestibule, Kevin looked back at his father.

“Go on and be a good boy, Kevie.” He shook a finger. “Be decent, Ray. I’m on a schedule today. I have a luncheon at two, and I have to get Kevin dressed.”

“No problem, Lyle.” The man tugged on the boy’s hand. “I brought you something, Kevin. You want to know what it is?”

Kevin had never seen his father’s full temper, but he had felt the sting of the paddle more than once when he had defied commands to entertain a string of uncles.

If only all fathers had paddles there wouldn’t be any such things as naughty children at all. That’s what his father reminded him of often enough. Kevin believed it although he was the only one he knew who had been punished for not playing the games his uncles wanted him to play when they were visiting or babysitting. He wasn’t certain if everybody’s dads were strict like that, but when he tried to tell his father why he didn’t want to spend time alone with his uncles, the subject was never allowed to be discussed. So he quit asking to join Little League or have a sleep-over with Grant Mortenson, a boy he met on the van that took him to daycare. His dad always said that was against the rules, too. Anything fun like being with other boys his age who didn’t even know his uncles or his dad was never allowed. All against the rules, but the trouble was Kevin never understood the rules to begin with. So maybe nobody but Kevin had such a strict dad and weird uncles. Or else his dad *did* know and didn’t want to do anything about it anyway. That was the thought that bothered Kevin the most.

“I have a special surprise today, Kiddo.” Ray motioned for the boy to come closer. “I’ll bet you’ll be the first kid in your school who has one of these.” He handed over a plastic sack with a Toys Galore box inside. “Pretty neat, huh? It’s just out. You’ll be the first kid to have one.”

Kevin surrendered his hand and meekly followed the man into the den. The door closed. The lock slipped into place.

Once his son had left the room, Lyle Crummaker turned the dead bolt on the front door and walked into the kitchen.

Lyle was a gourmet cook. He was restaurant editor for the *Cascade Cuisine* magazine and penned a syndicated, weekly column.

He traveled throughout the Pacific Northwest evaluating eateries vying for a toehold in the extremely competitive world of commercial cuisine.

As the local guru of fine food and elegant dining, invitations to his exclusive dinner parties were coveted by politicians, celebrity wannabes and *bon vivants* alike. Lyle loved to amaze them all with his creative displays of Northwest delicacies – seafood fêtes that were legendary and responsible for spicing up menus at coastal clam houses from Vancouver, B.C. to Coos Bay, Oregon.

The kitchen was an extravagant exercise in excess worthy of the celebrated chef. There was a custom-designed, marble pastry deck, two Sub-Zero side-by-side reefers; Portuguese copper pots; an eight-burner, dual-fuel Wolf range; twin over-sized convection ovens, a built-in wine cooler cabinet and a blast chiller. Venetian glass jars containing twenty varieties of pasta filled an imported, nineteenth-century Umbrian sideboard. The floors were Brazilian teak inlaid with Bolivian bloodwood. Overhead, a baroque gaslight fixture rescued from the demolition of a vaudeville house completed his style statement. Lyle was eclectic in his choice of decorating scheme as well as with his penchant for entertainments in the Tudor-style home set on a large corner lot in the exclusive neighborhood of Portland Heights.

He sat at the kitchen table and picked up his cordless phone. As he punched in the number, he heard a cry disrupt the hum of the kitchen appliances – a sound like a puppy whose tail has been caught under the leg of a rocking chair. Lyle looked up for an instant. The only disturbance was the ticking of his antique Dutch clock. He would have to make certain Kevin understood what it meant to act like an unruly brat when company came. If there was one thing Lyle could not tolerate, as everyone well knew, it was disobedient children, disrespectful of their elders. Noisy, discourteous youngsters were not to be suffered by civilized society. Fortunately, Kevin was usually none of those things. His father would see to it things stayed that way.

He turned back to his phone as a pleasant hello answered his call. “Leslie? Lyle. How’s it going, Darling?”

“Fine. Busy.” Her voice sounded charged with energy. Leslie Bowers was always upbeat, always wrestling a hundred little problems with such incredible élan. She was so adept, so reliably competent and always elegant. The perfect dinner companion.

“I’m preparing myself for an onslaught.”

“Oh, that’s right. Your big do.” She smoothed her luxuriant hair with a free hand as she visualized his pork loin pâté and Triple Sec biscotti. “I nearly forgot. You have your journalism luncheon today.”

“I’m halfway to insanity, I think. I come home and find the wine wasn’t delivered. I mean, really. How much notice do these people need for god’s sake? I may have to raid my cellar if things get totally desperate.”

To Leslie a crisis was one of her nursery clients lying underneath the swing sets with a bleeding gash in the head. Running out of wine was not on her list of dire emergencies. “Well, I’m sure you’ll make it. How many students will be there?”

“God only knows. But I planned on seven. Can you believe there are even seven brave souls who plan to make a career of culinary arts journalism? God, it’s depressing, isn’t it?”

“I suppose that depends on your perspective. Right now, I’m up to my eyebrows in alligators.”

Lyle jerked his head up when he heard a rumble – furniture being moved. Ray had better not be making any marks on his Swedish birch floors. There was another sound which Lyle ignored as he returned to the phone conversation. He knew this sound all too well. It was a whimper, the choked cry of a child protesting an outrage. This was the sound of surrender, the pitiful moan of despair. Lyle barely noticed.

“I’m fixing a wonderful bouillabaisse. Truly a work of art. Wish you were here to enjoy it, Hon.”

“I’ll read all about it, won’t I, Lyle?”

He wound the stem of a Gerber daisy over the lip of a Lalique vase and hedged his response. He hated to beat his own drum, but he wished Leslie would acknowledge his genius without the subtle prodding. “You know the reviews will be absolutely ruthless. The scallops are nasty this time of year, Darling – absolutely mushy. But



I have some Willapa Bay mussels that will put you in a state of absolute gastric orgasm.” He feigned a swoon. “Listen, Leslie Darling, when can I see you? We haven’t gotten together for almost a week, and I’m absolutely stir crazy.”

It had been four days actually. He marked the time with a remembrance of Bradley Hoopersmith and the licorice-drop mole on his rosy bottom.

“We went out just last Monday,” she demurred reluctantly.

“Well, it’s been too long. How about tonight? Can I come by about seven? I have my heart set on seeing a Swedish film at the Fifth Avenue Cinema. Have you seen *Willful* yet? I hope not. It’s supposed to be fabulous, Darling. Lots of Gothic angst and that wholesome sophistry Bergman used to convey so splendidly.”

“Let me call you, Lyle. I’m not sure I can get away that early. You know, Fridays a lot of clients come late, and then we have to arrange weekend drop-offs.”

“Oh, have Melanie stay late. Come on. You deserve a break.”

She was tempted. Her assistant could corral the tots for the harried parents sweeping through the nursery school between six and seven o’clock too depleted by the stresses of their busy lives to manage more than a smile for children full of fresh news. “I really can’t.”

“Give yourself a pardon, Leslie. Just this once be lenient.”

“I’ll try. Can I call you?”

“Of course, Darling. Call me before six-thirty, will you? I hate getting late to the pictures. It’s so bourgeoisie.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Lyle.”

“If I don’t catch the opening credits, I feel absolutely deprived.”

“I’ll try.”

“Besides, I’ll have an exclusive post-fête critique for you.” The door to the den opened, and Lyle pulled the phone away from his ear. “Have to run, Love. Call me. Ta ta.”

Ray came into the kitchen, his face shining with a film of new sweat. He was tucking in his Polo shirt and straightening the wire-rimmed glasses.

“Wine?” Lyle offered, getting up. “I’ve discovered a fabulous little Pinot from the Rex Hill winery. It’s got the purity and breeding of a star, Raymond. Extraordinary.”

“No thanks, Lyle. I better get going. Friday is the benefit. Last concert Sunday night.”

“Oh, of course. Maestro versus Bartok.”

Ray clipped on his sunglasses and retrieved his car keys from a trouser pocket. “What he does to Bartok is criminal, but we have such good seats this season.”

“Well, enjoy.” Lyle opened the front door.

“Say, Lyle, about Kevin.”

Lyle raised an eyebrow, holding onto the door with one hand and smoothing a wrinkle on his slacks with the other. “You want to give up Fridays?”

“No. But I don’t like it when he doesn’t want to, you know what I’m saying? I’m not some child molester, Lyle. It turns me off frankly.”

“Don’t worry about it. He’s just being a little shit lately. It’s a stage, that’s all. Kevie adores you, Ray.”

“Have to run. See you, Lyle.” He turned and exited down the winding walk to his SUV parked behind a row of tuberous begonias.

Behind him, Lyle heard his son’s tenuous footsteps heading for the stairs. He closed the door. “Kevin?”

Sky-blue eyes stared back from a seamless expression. “What?”

“Have you been crying?” His face hardened with a look that Kevin had come to respect as a harbinger of reprimands.

“No.” He wiped a hand across his cheek and sniffed. “I just have a cold, that’s all.”

“That better be all, Young Man. I won’t have you being a rude little brat. You hurt Uncle Ray’s feelings by sulking.”

“I’m not! But I don’t like him.”

Lyle took a step up the stairs. “Listen to me, Young Man. I don’t give a shit if you like him or not. You’ll be civil and polite to our guests in this house and mind your manners or I’ll beat your butt for you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now get upstairs and get dressed. You want to come down and eat some of my fritters, don’t you? I made them with tons of powdered sugar just for you, Kevie.”

He answered with a nod and a snuffle.

“Then go and get dressed.” He blew a quick kiss and wheeled around. “And wear that blue Oshkosh with the red stripe. You look fabulous in blue, Baby. It’s your color. Flaunt it.”

Kevin raced up the stairs to his room, opened the door and tiptoed to his bed. He sat down and stared at his hands. It was hard for him to believe that those hands were like other boys’ hands jockeying video heroes through electronic perils and snapping Lego Master Builder pieces together. Sometimes Kevin felt dirty, even after he soaped and scrubbed himself in the bathtub until he was as red as one of the Dungeness crabs boiling in his father’s pots. Maybe he would never get clean, never be just like other boys. Or were they all the same? All of them like Kevin – bad boys who had to be punished if they didn’t do things to please their parents’ friends.

Kevin tugged at his tee shirt and pulled it over his head. He didn’t know anymore how it should be. He couldn’t remember any other way. And there was no one to talk to now. No mother to help him like other boys had. He had no childhood memories of her since he was only a baby when she went away. To where he wasn’t quite sure. But with each passing year, he fantasized she was an angel probably flying around heaven. His father told him she was too sick to care for a baby, so Kevin thought she must have died and gone to meet Jesus. Somehow that made him feel better. But sometimes he wondered if maybe she had been bad, too, and Daddy had sent her away somewhere. So he was all alone now. Just him and his dad, and they’d have to get along together.

Kevin hurried to step out of his clothes so he could dress and join his father downstairs. He loved to be a kitchen helper. Those were the times when it was fun to be Kevin Crummaker. Almost the only times when it didn’t feel like he was such a bad boy.

## Chapter Two

\_\_\_\_\_ v \_\_\_\_\_

Detective John Bowers wiggled his toes in his nappy socks which were now as soft as cotton balls – the difference between a sock worn wrong-side out and one laundered in Woolite, rolled up and tucked in his dresser drawer with all the care afforded an Asian pear. There were definitely some things about his recent arrangement with Georgie Meiers, his duplex-sharing neighbor who had recently become his number-one lady, that were a benefit. For one thing, no more singleton socks in the dryer or missing buttons.

This was the beginning of ecstasy pure and simple. No other way to describe it. That's what it was. Pure joy. Vacation. An entire week free from the Police Bureau rat race and bullshit. This time he was going to be completely on his own, gloriously free to do whatever the hell came to mind. And what he'd daydreamed about since he locked the front door behind him in Portland was an open-air, timbered campsite outside Hope, British Columbia. With the sound of the Fraser River singing him a lullaby every night. With mosquitoes the size of Stukas and a view which excluded RV's, noisy brats and snooping park rangers. His definition of heaven. He was going to stalk the elusive Canadian cutthroat, empty out a few Coors' cans and read a couple Wambaugh books, the only whodunits any self-respecting homicide detective wouldn't be ashamed to wrap around his ears.

"Mr. Bowers? Sorry for the wait. We have the thirty-two-foot Chieftain all ready to go for you. Here are all the keys you need. Do you know about the propane key?"

"Sure." He stood up and took the key ring from the salesman. "Last time I rented a rig from you guys, I had trouble with the reefer. Damned pilot light kept blowing out."

“That was an older model. You won’t have that problem with this baby. The pilot light is a complete redesign. It’s sheltered from those side blasts on the highway.”

“If it conks out, and my beer gets warm, I’ll be mad as hell when I get back.”

“Oh, no. This baby is all checked out and ready to go.” The fawning sales rep had other things on his mind – like the fishy odor in the Winnebago Chief that made his eyes sting on a warm day. He was hoping that Bowers would be far enough down the road when it hit him to make it un-worth his while to come back and demand another unit. The previous renter had unfortunately abandoned a twelve-pound coho in the shower, shut the RV up tight and left it baking on the lot over a hot summer weekend.

AL’S RV had to practically redo the whole interior to kill the stench, but when the cabin heated up – well, by the time this customer was off in the woods and started hauling in his own fish, what the hell? He probably wouldn’t even notice, the detail supervisor had decided as he gave the interior a final spritz of pine scent. Added to the outdoorsy ambiance, didn’t it?

John Bowers pinned the salesman once more before the final handshake. “You sure everything works on this rig? No kiddy pee on the mattress, no running lights out?”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Bowers. You won’t have any problems. We check out these rental return units from A to Z when they come in. This bad boy is all set to hit the road. Just like a brand new unit. You have my word and an Al’s RV guarantee.”

The salesman slapped Bowers’ shoulder and steered him toward the door. A silver-haired couple was waltzing in. Bowers could see their Chrysler launch parked out front. They looked like the slowpokes he always got behind on the Alcan Highway with no room to pass for a hundred miles.

Bowers left the ignition key to his cream-over-burgundy 1960 Oldsmobile under the floor mat. His partner Sergeant Minnie Raye would be coming down to fetch it. Georgie couldn’t help him out this time. She was back in Ohio visiting her sister sick with cancer. Nasty stuff. Bowers was glad to be away from the deathwatch hanging over

Georgie's family. What a homicide cop didn't need on his days off were sick and suffering relations to worry about. He was off for BC, Fraser River fish, fir trees, fresh air and sunshine in his almost-new Winnebago Chieftain rented at a discount because he was a repeat customer. Last time he had taken a Chief out on the open road and headed north to British Columbia for rest and recuperation, Georgie had been his co-pilot and camping partner. They had become bosom buddies and bedmates on that trip.

Maybe it was a mistake for Bowers to use up the last of his vacation time now. He wouldn't have any extra time left over at the holidays, but he sensed it was the right thing to do. He was fed up, sick as shit of the whole damned mess. Twenty-three years in the Portland Police Bureau, and he was flirting with the idea of cashing in, getting out a little early before his ticket expired. Just because his ass ached when he thought about slogging through the same old city swamps, scraping the grit off the bottom of the pan just to get through another ball-buster day with losers, dopers, bangers and all the rest of society's dregs who habituated his world of homicidal actors. Maybe it was time to call it quits.

There were definite moments when he felt he could walk away and hang it up for good. And other times he wondered if he wasn't like an old firehouse horse champing at the bit as soon as the bell clanged. Well, he'd see. Right now, all he wanted to think about was a week's worth of peace and quiet – no women, no perps, no vics, no cops, no phones, no bullshit. Just him and the thirty-two-foot Chieftain rolling up Interstate 5 headed for the Canadian border.

He unlocked the Chief's door and swung it open. A blast of super-heated July stopped him after one breath. He waited for a moment and then climbed the three steps into the Winnebago's cabin. Smelled like dead fish. Must be the imagination on overtime thinking about those cutthroats jumping into his net. He couldn't wait to get his line in the water.

He stashed his fishing gear in the closet and took a look around. The interior of the Chief was a plush blue with a cuddly recliner by the door, a sofa sleeper, co-captains' chairs in the cockpit and a dinette with padded benches that converted to twin beds. The galley

was fitted out better than his duplex kitchen. There was a four-burner gas range with a built-in microwave, a stainless sink and an Amana side-by-side big enough to hold all the fish in the Pike Street Market. At the rear was a roomy head with an over-sized shower and a queen-sized Serta to hunker down on when the sun melted behind the Canadian Rockies – just like the Winnebago brochure's idyllic shots that had hooked him in the first place. The only way to travel.

Bowers' agenda included planting the Chieftain outside of Hope, B.C., close to his friend's cabin. That was Jack Marko, his platoon buddy from Nam. It was a long haul getting to their fishing spots but worth the effort since they wouldn't be bothered by Sunday shnooks with lungy younguns and yapping dogs. Nights, he could come back to his Chief and enjoy all the comforts of home, slip a movie in the VCR, listen to some BB King and Eric Clapton (his favorite musical diversions) and thumb through Wambaugh's alcoholic adventures. Then he could wrap the covers around his ears and sleep until he felt like getting up again. No damn beepers going off at two in the morning when some Blood blew away a homeboy. No overdue reports. No rookie detectives on his beat who couldn't tell shit from Shinola. About as close to heaven as Bowers could get on the sunny side of the sod.

He slipped into the driver's seat and turned the ignition key. The 460 cubic inch V8 fired up without a single sputter. He could barely hear the engine as he trod on the accelerator and checked his rear mirrors for a plume of blue smoke. No gum in the pipes. Ran like a top. He adjusted the seat, set the temp control and headed out through the front gate of Al's RV lot.

The salesman had transferred all his supplies from the Olds to the Chief – an added courtesy Bowers had tipped the guy for. He felt settled in now he knew his Coors was cooling in the reefer behind him, his fishing gear was stowed in the closet, and his clean underwear was folded in the dresser. With a contented sigh, he put on the signal and pulled out onto the freeway, unfettered and northbound at last.

Interstate 5 was thick with the commuter crush headed for the Columbia River and Clark County sleeping communities. The

Chieftain was soon crowded over to the center lane when traffic boxed it in. Bowers had a long way to go so he could handle a little bumper tag. He'd just tool along until traffic thinned out on the Washington State side and enjoy the ride.

He cranked the AC on full. Clapton was lulling him with a bluesy tune on the cassette player, and everything seemed to be in perfect order for a change as the Chief ate up the freeway.

Then he glanced at the gas gauge. "Shit. No juice in this goddamned tin can."

Unbelievable. The sales staff had let him drive out the gate with just enough fumes to tease the indicator off empty. The warning light was flashing. He'd probably come to a clanking, groaning halt right in the thick of rush hour on the Interstate.

Just as he imagined it, it happened. He heard a rattle then felt the behemoth shimmy. Out of gas. Incredible. He'd only come twenty-four miles from the lot. It must have been bone dry. If the dealer had given him a good shove, he could have coasted this far.

Bowers flicked on the flashers and tried to move right, but the traffic refused to make an opening for his battleship, and he was cut off as the Chieftain sputtered to a stagger. Cars honked at him from behind and middle fingers saluted when they pulled around him. Jerks.

He finally horsed his rig to the right and aimed the Chief's flattened nose for the fog line. Rubber screeching, air horns bleating, and a long queue of pissed drivers piled up behind him, but there was no crunching of metal or broken glass shattering so the bastards had found the brakes. The Winnebago shuddered to a stop on the gravel shoulder. He looked at his watch. Five-thirty. Standard Vacation Time.

He set the brake, shut everything down and went back to open the reefer. He pulled out a Coors, popped the top and took a long, icy slug.

Taking the helm again, he picked up the cellular phone and punched in the number on the card the salesman had left on the dash.

*"Hi, Traveler! This is Al's RV world. We're closed right now, but you can leave a message at the sound of the beep. If this is an*



*emergency, call our toll free number and leave your name and number. One of our factory representatives will call you back during normal business hours Monday through Friday. Keep on travelin'. Happy trails!" Beep.*

"Peachy!"

Sweat was sliding down his sides already. Might as well be sitting in a toaster oven. He toggled on the AC and heard a loud grinding noise, followed by a series of metal rattles and then *nada*. The AC was on the fritz. One more thing on his Bug Big Al gripe list.

He punched in another number and sloshed more beer down his gullet.

"Robbery Homicide. Sergeant Raye."

She was as perky as ever. Couldn't tell if her day had been anything like his. Probably hadn't. His thirty-five-year-old partner Minola Raye was engaged to be married to Felix Michael, deputy district attorney for Multnomah County. Why shouldn't she be happy, sappy and gooey this time of day? What the hell did she have to complain about? They had closed two new cases before Bowers took off. Left her in damn good shape. She was working on a society West Hills drug overdose case now. One Bowers was glad he could hand over.

"Hi. It's me," he slurred, wiping his chin as an eighteen-wheeler whipped by less than a foot from his side window and rocked the cabin like a rowboat in a squall. "*Goddam!*"

"What?"

"I almost got blown off the road."

"Where are you? I thought you were going to drive up to Canada."

"I was. Ran out of gas."

"You're kidding."

He didn't appreciate the smirk he knew must be dimpling her face. Running out of gas wasn't something anybody past high school kidded about. "I'm about a mile short of the Battleground exit on I-5. I ran out of juice in this thing." His Coors emptied, and he crushed the can with one hand.

“I can’t believe they didn’t give you any gas. Didn’t you check the fuel gauge before you got on the freeway?”

Now why hadn’t he thought of that? “Hey, I didn’t call you up to play twenty questions. I ran out of gas, and I’m sitting here on the side of the freeway getting blown off the road by every fucking truck that rips by. Christ, where’s the damn traffic control on this strip?”

He wasn’t sure, but he imagined he could hear a faint snicker. Driving was Minnie’s thing, not his, and she must love this opportunity to hammer the point home. Bowers hated to cede any ground to his plucky partner with the hands-on figure and sexy smile.

“So why don’t you call the dealer and have them bring you some gas?”

“Minnie, this thing holds as much as an oil tanker. I’d need to flag down the Exxon Valdez for crissakes.” It was getting warmer inside. He swiped at a bead of sweat trickling down his cheek. He needed another cold beer. And it smelled bad in here. Definitely fish stink. “It’d take those bozos two hours to get here, and by then I might be ready to ring some asshole’s neck. Anyway, the lot is closed.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not a member of Triple A?”

“No. Even Single A wouldn’t take me.”

“Sorry, John,” she giggled.

He couldn’t help himself from joining in. “So how’s it going? You getting dumped on?”

“It’s okay. Your desk is still decent.”

“Sounds like you’re taking care of business better’n me right now.” He could picture his cuddly, Kewpie-doll partner with files piled around her ears while she churned out a report.

“So you want me to ask a County Mounity to stop by with some gas?”

“Something like that. I was hoping your old East Precinct flame could do me a favor.”

He hated being at the mercy of some local yokel slapping the grille and observing the plainly obvious with a know-it-all grin: “*Well, Detective. Run outta gas, did ya?*”

“My ex reserve intern, not boyfriend.”

“His mistake.”

“Wait’ll you meet him.”

“That’s the point. I’m sitting here on the freeway with an empty tank while my vacation clock is ticking. I’m out for pure pity here.”

“I’ll give him a call, John. I think he’s back on days now. Where are you exactly?”

“Half a mile south of the Battleground exit, east side of the road. You can’t miss me. I’m just a few feet shorter than the Queen Mary.”

“Okay. Hang on. Hey, you got a refrigerator and everything, right?”

“Yeah. First class accommodations. AC conked out so it’s hot in here.”

“So have a cool one and just chill, Partner. I’ll call the Clark County Sheriff’s Office. Rolly can come out if he’s on duty. He owes me.”

“Thanks. You’re a doll. Remember I said that first.”

“Sure. But now I’m one up. Think Christmas. Think expensive. Think jewelry. Think *Chanel*. Think –”

“Think again,” he laughed. “Hey, since I caught you in a good mood for a change.”

“What the hell does that mean – ‘for a change’?”

“You get anything new on the West Hills case I might like to know about?”

“Nope. You’re outta here, remember? This is my baby, and I’ll have it wrapped up by the time you get back. Things are starting to break.”

“Good for you, Minnie Pearl.” His nickname for her. A special link they shared.

“See ya. Have fun, Pardner. Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” He hung up.

When he stepped behind the driver’s swivel chair, he inhaled a whiff of fish. Not a faint Chicken of the Sea aroma, but the strong, unmistakable stench of overripe, stinking, spoiled salmon. Cannery offal times ten. Bowers’ mother had worked in the North Coast fish canneries when he was a kid. He could smell her from a block away, and that was fresh stink. What the hell was this? He went to the

bedroom and sniffed again. The Chief reeked like the bottom of his summertime creel.

His cellular phone buzzed, and he walked back to pick it up. “Yeah?”

“Detective Bowers?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“Corporal Rollingsworth, Clark County Sheriff’s Patrol. I just took a call from dispatch. Sergeant Raye at Portland Central called. I understand you have a problem, Sir, with your motor home on I-5?”

His savior sounded like an adolescent twerp fresh from the police academy and eager as a randy jackrabbit to start catching bad guys. Had John Bowers been that gung-ho once upon a time, a long, long time ago? Probably not. He’d been seasoned in the USMC before the Bureau got ahold of him.

“I’m about a half mile south of the Battleground exit on the east side of the freeway. You can’t miss me. I’m the thirty-two-foot can with the flashers on.”

“Copy that. Roger your twenty northbound one half mile south of Battleground exit on east side of Interstate I-5.”

“Right.”

“What’s the mile post, Sergeant?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Copy that. Mile post marker designation unknown at this time.”

Bowers was never that gung-ho. Not even in boot camp.

“My ETA is approximately sixteen fifty-five. I can transport five gallons. Will that get you to a station, Sergeant?”

“In this battlewagon who knows?”

“What’s your AMPG, Sir?”

“My what?” What the fug was AMPG? Next this twerp was going to ask him for the secret code number on his Green Hornet ring.

“Your average mile per gallon, Sir.”

“Beats me.”

“I only have a single five-gallon can. Do you want me to arrange a tow?”

“No. That’ll be fine. It ought to get me a hundred yards or so with a good tail wind. Thanks, Corporal.” He disconnected before he was hit with another Roger-Dodger message.

He grabbed another beer. It was getting hot enough to fry frijoles in this bean can. He’d have to crank open the windows. Setting the Coors down on the table, he flipped the side window latch free and slid the glass back. There was a sudden rush of foul diesel exhaust that masked the stench from the rear of the Winnebago. He sucked in a lungful, coughed and opened the door. Better to wait outside before he asphyxiated on the road fumes.

He stood in the lee of the Chief and listened to a finch squeaking from a fence rail. The traffic speeding by on the Interstate drowned out the sounds of the meadow beyond and spewed carbon monoxide vapors like a London fog. He coughed as a semi’s fart settled on his shoulders. A chip truck on the way to the paper mill passed by doing at least seventy-five and blew back a shower of bark dust. Bowers looked up just as the splinter storm descended on him like a cloud of locusts.

He covered his face in self-defense as a mini tornado whipped past and took his breath away. He was covered with wood chips, and his spit tasted like Pennzoil.

He climbed back aboard the Chief and shut the door. The fishy smell was stronger. There must be a dead stowaway. Bowers brushed himself off and started a search for the scaly cadaver.

Flashing lights blinked through the side window as the sheriff’s cruiser pulled up.

The corporal got out and put his hands on his hips when Bowers approached. “Heckuva place to run out, huh?” He was grinning with a mouth full of beaver teeth and crinkly cheeks spotted with zits. “Gauge go out on you?”

“Dead as a doornail,” he lied. It was easier.

“Too bad you couldn’t have made it just a few miles north. There’s a mini mart and a couple gas stations. Fix you right up.”

“Yeah. Too bad.”

“Goin’ far? Little R and R with the missus and kiddies, huh?”

“Yeah. That's it.” Bowers took the gas can from the trunk of the patrol car and poured it in the cavernous Chieftain tank. Splashing into the labyrinthine hold, it sounded like the waters from Niagra Falls on the long ride down. Five gallons barely whetted the Chief's appetite.

He emptied the can and handed it back. “Thanks, Corporal. I owe you one.”

“Forget it, Sergeant. Glad to be of assistance.”

“No, here,” he offered, getting his fingers on a wrinkled ten. “Take it.”

“No problem. Glad to help out. I owe Sergeant Raye a favor anyhow.”

He realized he had pulled out a twenty by mistake. “Take something anyway.” He flipped open his wallet again to find the sawbuck.

“No way, Sergeant. Clark County is glad to help you guys out.” He made it sound like he'd just found the murder weapon in a capital case. “Good thing I was close by.”

“Appreciate it, Corporal.”

Before he could restow the twenty, the trooper's hand whipped out and snagged the bill. “But thanks. That ought to cover it.”

“Don't mention it,” he snarled.

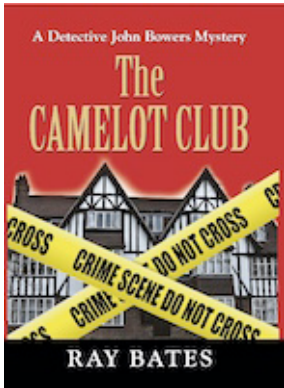
For twenty bucks he ought to own the can, too. But the deputy tossed it back in the trunk and blew a trail of gravel as he pulled onto the freeway.

Bowers climbed back on board, turned off the flashers, started the engine and got under way. The five gallons didn't even flutter the needle on the gas gauge. Fortunately a couple miles ahead he saw the emblem of a Texaco station where for a quick hundred bucks he could feed the beast and make up some lost time. Might as well get more beer and some nuts. An air freshener was beginning to seem like a good idea, too.

He pulled into the gas station and asked for a fill up. The clerk was grinning all the while he fed the Chief. The numbers on the pump screen were flying faster than Nebraska snowflakes in January. Bowers quit counting when eighty bucks flew by. Mercifully it came

to a faltering stop at ninety-seven dollars and thirty cents. Airfare to Canada didn't cost this much. But, he reminded himself ruefully, he had a hot shower, microwave oven and cold beer in the reefer.

Two hours up the highway, his sinuses ached with the ripe stench of deceased fish. It smelled like Charlie Tuna's wake in the cockpit now. Opening windows didn't help, neither did cranking the air conditioner on full blast. It was spitting out about as much cool breeze as Puff the Magic Dragon. Even the Pine Scent Bouquet he'd sprayed in the back was beginning to mimic low-tide perfume.



*The Camelot Club, third book in the Detective John Bowers series, catches John off guard. He's trying to escape the city noise and mayhem but kidnap and murder, plus an ex-wife who plays the grieving victim of a cruel crime, pull him back.*

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