

A killer stalks his prey on lonely city streets.

PONTIAC PIRATES - with Detective John Bowers

by Ray Bates

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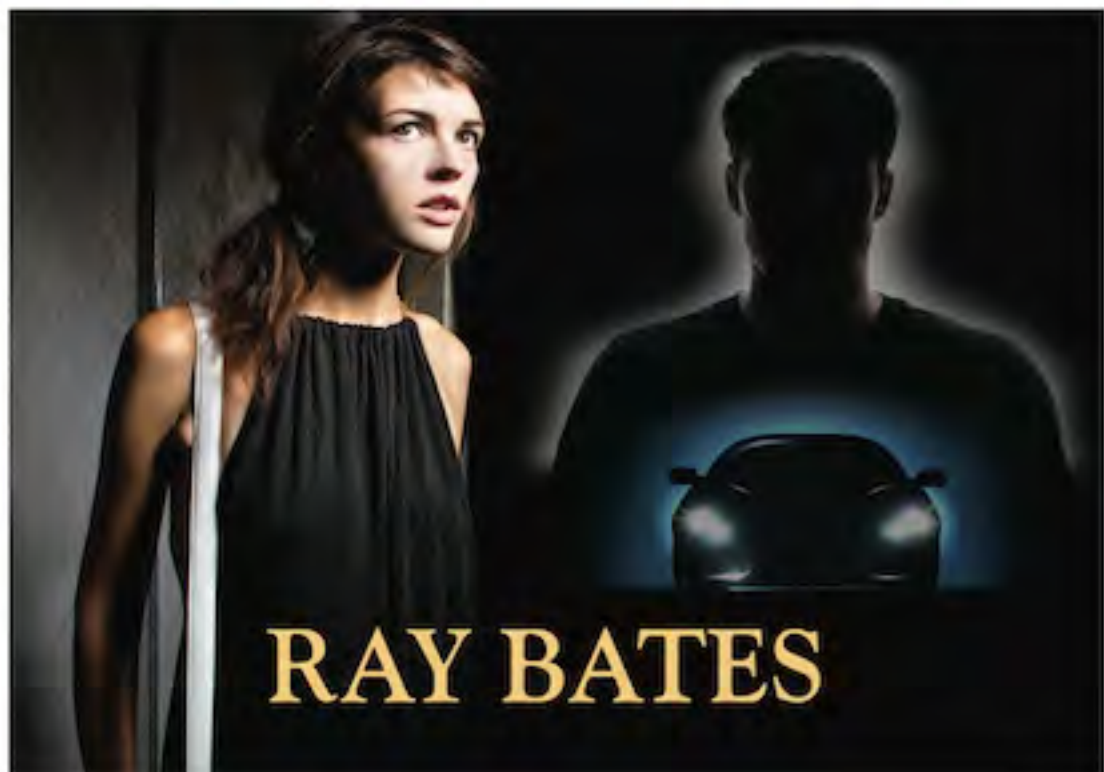
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WITH DETECTIVE JOHN BOWERS



PONTIAC PIRATES



RAY BATES

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With Detective John Bowers

Ray Bates

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First Edition

DEDICATION

For Jacquie who comes to mind so often since we were young and innocent. She had so little time and missed so much.

Ray Bates
August, 1994

*There is nothing so desperately monotonous as the sea,
and I no longer wonder at the cruelty of pirates."*

Fireside Travels (1817)

Detective John Bowers Books

Dark Disciple
Blue Butterfly
Babylon Blues
The Camelot club
Pontiac Pirates
Sweet Sorrow

RayBatesMysteries.com
WriterRayBates@aol.com

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CHAPTER ONE

It happened so quickly there wasn't time to protest. Then it came over her like a cloud, a miasma of evil that wrapped its tendrils around her legs, crept up to press against her belly and chilled the spit in her throat so she could barely swallow.

Tammy was only eighteen-years old. Her petite figure, perhaps a little optimistic with the B cup bra, bee-stung lips and Guernsey-brown eyes helped her get by in a milieu not always considerate of its neighbors. Men had always seemed to grant her special dispensation because of her looks. She wasn't beautiful nor did she have classical features. What Tammy had was a sweetness and wholesome impression that could tame a shrew. It would have been impossible for anyone to take an instant dislike to her. Most people she met couldn't help smiling at her sunny expression and peach-blush complexion.

But this wasn't fair. This wasn't supposed to be happening to her. It was always someone else, wasn't it? Someone who had made a mistake, done something stupid, taken too many risks. Tammy had been careful. She tried to be smart and act mature for her age. She'd always respected her parents, taken care of her little sister and brother, turned in her schoolwork on time, flossed her teeth and attended church every Sunday. And still this was happening—this man could make her so afraid she could hear the pounding of her own heart in her ears and taste the bitter flavor of terror in her saliva.

She would never forget this lesson, never forgive this monster for hurting her, scaring her out of her mind, destroying her youthful optimism in the basic goodness of humanity. Never.

At least she was alive and almost unhurt. It wasn't as if she had been a virgin anyway. She could survive this. She praised herself for having the fortitude and resolve to look hard at the cruel eyes and remember her demon, brand the cold expression on her brain's deepest recesses. She was going to see his sallow skin pitted with acne scars every time her eyes opened. In her worst nightmares this maniac was

going to press his cracked lips on her flesh and slobber on her cheeks with his fetid breath reminding her of hell. Tammy was going to remember him for the rest of her life and celebrate the day he paid for what he had done to her.

When he started to put the tape across her mouth, she felt a stab of panic. It was difficult for her to breathe in the stifling heat mixed with her own fear. Since he had punched her in the face, and her nose had swollen, she had trouble drawing a breath. She gulped a final lungful of air as he slapped the gag in place and lifted her in his arms. He was through with her then, taking her somewhere to abandon her. Somewhere she could escape, recover, sob into the arms of her boyfriend and her mother and be safe again. At least she had survived. She had made it through the worst part.

It was dark when he carried her outside. Tammy had no idea where she was. The buildings were all strange to her. She couldn't get a look at a street sign. Then she was in the trunk of the car, cramped, scraping her cheek on the rough burlap. When he bent over her, she closed her eyes. She didn't want to look at the face which sent her heart racing and made her lungs fight for air. It was best to feign sleep now, pray for him to hurry and leave her. But he didn't.

He grabbed her bound ankles and wound something cold and sharp around her until her skin burned. With one hand, he rolled her onto her belly, mashing her nose against the filthy floor. She stifled a scream which caught in her throat as she struggled to clear her airway. With one hand he yanked her hair up and with the other looped the wire around her neck.

"*Oh, God!*" she whimpered, trying to move her lips to mouth the words shrieking like sirens in her brain.

At last she knew he wasn't ever going to let her go. Tammy knew she was never going to get old, never see her parents again, never hear her sister's voice, never see the sun shining in the sky. Tears flooded her eyes and streamed down her face painting grimy stripes as he finished trussing her like a Christmas turkey. Her muscles ached and burned. Her crying caused more congestion in her nose and throat and made her fight for each breath.

Pontiac Pirates

"Please, don't hurt me!" she tried to moan as he finished and slammed the trunk lid shut, entombing her in musty blackness.

The first time she moved, tried to roll over on her side, she felt the wire cut into her neck. With every breath, the wire tightened. Her eyes were white with dumb horror as she fought for air then fought for life as the garrote took a tighter and tighter hold on her.

By the time he had stopped for his first red light, Tammy had strangled herself blue. But because she was young and strong and wanted so desperately to live, she fought even in her unconscious delirium until the wire sliced through her windpipe. Tammy did not have a chance to die as proudly as she had lived.

When the car stopped, and he opened the trunk, he didn't even look into her staring eyes, frozen in a last look of disbelief. He had seen it before. He just picked her up, dumped her in the old Buick and went home to his supper.

CHAPTER TWO

When Detective Sergeant John Quincy Bowers and his partner Sergeant Minola Raye from Central Precinct Robbery Homicide pulled their gravid Chevy sedan over to the curb, it was five minutes past four. Bowers checked his watch as he yanked open the door. After an unseasonably hot, dry summer searing the leaves of the copper beeches and lazy maples along the boulevard west of Interstate 405, the evening brought a promise of cooling breezes and relief from sweltering days above ninety and night-time temperatures in the seventies. For pale-skinned Northwesterners, a traumatic heat wave.

Bowers was a precinct veteran, on the streets for nearly a quarter century. Minnie Raye was his newest and, he hoped, his last partner. She was a curvy Cajun with Betty Boop eyes and steel-wool grit who didn't understand the meaning of limitations. She was all-out, full power twenty-four seven and dared her peers to try and keep up. Minnie's curly bob barely reached Bowers' shoulder, but she matched him step for step as they left the city sedan and approached the crowd straining to get a good look across the tape ringing the crime scene.

The medical examiner and coroner's investigators hadn't arrived yet. The patrol unit which had first responded to the discovery of the body had already cordoned off the used car lot on St. Helens Road and outlined the forensic boundaries with yellow tape strung from the hood ornament of a 1975 Oldsmobile Cutlass with a cracked windshield to the rechromed bumper of a dented 1985 Pontiac.

In the center of this zone was a 1979 oxidized blue Buick Le Sabre with torn, red leather upholstery and missing wheel covers. The trunk was open; the left rear tire was so bald the steel ply bulged like varicose veins on a charwoman. A Styrofoam cup was wedged against the back glass, stuck to a congealed puddle of brownish goo on the parcel shelf. The license plate tags were expired. The filler cap on the gas tank was missing. A fringe of rust like a tattered hem ran along the rear valence panel beneath one taillight lens repaired with red reflective tape. The

Buick was a steal at only “\$895.00 Special” and ran great. For doubters it said so right on the passenger window, scrawled in white grease pen, circled and verified with an exclamation point.

Sergeant Minola Raye, better known by her peers as Minnie, caught up with her senior partner and jabbed his elbow. “Eight ninety-five for this piece of junk? He’s gotta be kiddin’.” She bent down and kicked the bald tire. “No rubber. Probably no brakes either. Who in their right mind would shell out nine-hundred bucks for this dinosaur?”

“Somebody with nine-hundred bucks and no car.”

She shrugged and followed him to stand beside the uniformed officer looking into the open trunk compartment. The victim was curled up on her left side in a fetal position with both hands tied behind her back. Her mouth was covered with a wide strip of silver duct tape. Bright pink panties bound her ankles. In the waning sunlight, her skin shone like pizza dough.

“Good way to start a Monday, huh, Sergeant?” the officer greeted Detective John Bowers.

“Not very. Tell me who found her, Officer.” Bowers thrust both hands into his pockets while Minnie pulled out her notepad and aimed her pen.

“We got a call from that balding gentleman over there in the shack. Actually, that’s his office. He was showing a customer the vehicle.”

“You’re kidding,” Minnie hissed. “Somebody was actually gonna buy this clunker?”

The officer grinned at the spunky, curly-haired Sergeant with the curvy figure swollen in all the places his eyes lingered. “That’s what he told me, Sergeant.”

“What time was this?” Bowers asked.

“About three o’clock this afternoon. The customer wanted to take it for a test drive.”

“To see *if* it would drive, you mean,” Minnie sniffed.

“Probably right, Sarge.” He grinned at her again. “So he came back in the office and let the customer take the car off the lot. About five minutes later, the guy is hoofin’ it back. Car conked out just up the

street there by the Yankee Pot Roast. So he takes him up there, jump-starts the Buick and follows the guy back to the lot. Customer wants to look in the trunk. So the dealer, that's Mr. Hemperdyne over there, opened it up, and there she was. He called 911, and I responded. I logged it at sixteen-oh-four, Sarge."

Bowers craned his neck and looked up as a breeze flapped a plastic banner over his head: 'HOMER'S HELPFUL SALESMEN ALWAYS MAKE THE BEST DEAL IN TOWN!' "I take it Hemperdyne is Homer?"

"Homer Hemperdyne. He's owned this lot here for sixteen years."

Minnie glanced over her shoulder. "It's taken him that long to sell a car. These all look like junkers to me."

Two more red banners flapped in the breeze. One proclaimed boldly 'BAD CREDIT? NO PROBLEM!' Another promised the would-be buyer down on his or her luck 'NO CASH? NO PROBLEM!'

"How about 'No brains? No problem'," Minnie quipped.

"Did you get any paper on the car?"

"He's getting it for me, Sergeant. He floors all his cars."

"You mean he doesn't even own these wrecks?" Minnie sniggered.

"You run the plate yet?"

The officer nodded. He knew what to do and was good at his job so the homicide detectives always found a clean crime scene. No loose ends. "Last title transfer was to a Trent Peter Moody. I already ran him. Moody's clean. He traded it August of last year. It's been sittin' here awhile."

"And how about the prospective buyer?"

"Sucker, you mean," Minnie mumbled as she wrote. "You talk to him?"

"Hemperdyne says he only drove the thing up the road to the restaurant. Never out of sight with the lot."

Bowers was still working his eyes and nose. He noticed the dust film on the deck lid. They had been four days with no rain. "Minnie, make sure nobody touches this wreck until CID gets it under cover so we can keep this pristine."

The Criminal Identification Division working under the Bureau's Investigative Branch was comprised of criminalists, technicians and

specialists who showed up with the rubber gloves, snap-lock baggies, tweezers, vacuum hoses, thirty-five millimeter cameras, camcorders and more gear than a Snap-On Tool truck. It was the scientific, methodical, organized way to preserve and analyze crime scene evidence, and they were very good at their jobs. No more police crowds tramping around the body, muddying the waters, destroying telltale signatures every killer leaves at the scene. Their first priority on arrival was to seal off the area and preserve the site with video and still film. Little trivial details could turn out to be pivotal features in a crime landscape months or even years down the road. Even responding homicide dicks kept their mitts off the vic until the techies were through. They didn't miss much.

Two more patrol units arrived to help secure the corner. Bowers had already called dispatch and summoned the coroner. Now as he looked up at the whipping pennants overhead, the Multnomah County Medical Examiner's Land Rover pulled in. The lean, bespectacled doctor stepped out and buttoned his windbreaker. The ME's nickname Deacon referred to his stint as a deaconite in the Episcopal Church before he transferred to medicine, worked his way down to pathology and landed in Multnomah County.

"Hey, Deacon, I got a deal for you," Bowers said with a serious face as he approached.

"I'm afraid to ask," the ME answered with a grin.

"A steal at only eight ninety-five. Just the thing for you and the family to take on vacation."

"Looks like a carcass waiting on a buzzard, John. Besides, Mary hates blue."

"Well, wait a couple minutes, and it's gonna be purple. Paint is oxidizing as we speak," Minnie butted in.

The pathologist took another step and peered into the trunk. The wind gusted for a moment and blew a whiff of the corpse's stink up his nose. He looked away as he snapped on his Latex gloves. "Just a kid. Dammit. Any ID?"

"Not yet. We're waiting on you guys to roll her."

The ME's office would fingerprint the victim for identification. A snapshot of her face would also be taken, along with one showing her jewelry and any distinguishing scars or birthmarks for any potential next of kin to identify.

Their first line of inquiry would be the Missing Persons printout to match any similar profiles with their victim. Prints would also be matched through AFIS, the Automated Fingerprint Identity System.

"Uh oh," the doctor murmured as he bent over and leaned his upper body into the Buick's trunk. "This is somebody really nasty, John. Not just mean but nasty. Look here." He pressed a forefinger against the spongy tissue under the jaw. The flesh receded, and a deep purple and black collar revealed itself. Deacon stuck his head in farther, peered behind the corpse then touched a bare foot. "See this? She strangled herself. This is mean. Really mean with some forethought for meanness."

Bowers bent over and looked for himself. With the flesh parted, he could see the deep grooves the wire had cut in the throat, clear through to the windpipe. The piano wire was wound around the nylon panties binding both ankles, pulled up taut behind her back and looped around her neck in a double strand. Every time she had flexed her legs and tried to relieve her suffering, the wire had dug deeper into her flesh, literally cutting her throat as she writhed in panic.

"Jesus Christ," Bowers muttered, wiping a fresh bead of sweat from his brow. "We've got a real bad-ass sadist on our hands."

"Doesn't want to leave any loose ends anyhow."

Bowers swallowed a lump of bitter bile, his interrupted lunch backing up on him. The damned burritos were under done, and the salsa was stale. So much for drive-through cuisine.

Deacon was perusing the litter on the floor of the trunk: scattered Marlboro cigarette wrappers, an empty tissue box, an ax handle with brown smudges, a snow tire carcass with no rim, a dented trim ring, an empty Budweiser beer bottle, a length of radiator hose split open like a wounded snake, a solitary dime by the cadaver's left knee and a cardboard carton full of greasy, mismatched tools: a broken-handled

screwdriver, wooden mallet, adjustable wrench and a set of rusty feeler gauges. Nothing unusual.

"I don't see anything, Sergeant. Might be something under the burlap."

At that same moment, a stocky lady stepped up and smiled at Minnie. "Hi, Sergeant," she saluted with a wave. "When's the big event?" She was referring to Minnie's marriage to the Chief Deputy District Attorney Felix Michael. The wedding was two days away. Lousy time for a new body to turn up on her beat.

"Wednesday. Great timing, huh?"

"Really," Marlene said, pulling up the zipper on her blue CID jacket. "How much time you taking off?"

"Just a few days. We're waiting until the holidays, and then we're going back to see my relatives in Baton Rouge."

"Oh," Marlene smiled with real interest. Baton Rouge sounded as exotic and interesting as Paris, France, to this Gresham girl who had never been farther east than Boise, Idaho. "That sounds like fun."

Bowers stood at the rear of the car and stared at the body as Marlene steadied her camera. She'd use up at least four rolls of film before anyone disturbed Tammy in the trunk of the Buick.

The girl had been pretty before death distorted her features into a hellish mask of bloated, waxy flesh with purple eyes, greenish-yellow cheeks and a thick cow's tongue protruding like a salami from the cyanotic lips. Her hair was light brown, partly coiled in an attractive French braid. She had nice hands, pretty nails with pink polish, gold rings with red and green stones and a dime store bracelet with a gold bar that spelled *Tammy* in delicate script.

Besides her panties, she wore only a pair of stainless steel earring studs. Her navel, distended now as her belly began to swell with the putrefying gases in her gut, stuck out like the puckered tail of a leaky balloon.

When Bowers leaned back and took a breath, he inhaled the stench of feces along with the rot of decaying bodily fluids and spoiling tissues. Some of those brownish stains on the burlap were from Tammy

squeezing out her bowels as she struggled to get a breath of air into her burning lungs before the lights went out.

Bowers walked over to the shack. Greasepaint was striped on all the windows: SPECIALS! WE GOTTEM! COME ON IN AND DRIVE A DREAM HOME! The clunkers on this lot looked more like some poor down-and-outer's nightmare. "You the owner of this place?" he asked when a bald guy with no belt poked his head around the corner.

"Yeah. Damn shame about the girl, huh? Somebody raped her?" His nose hairs grew to the edge of his upper lip. Black pores peppered his face. This was not a good-looking man. Trick-or-treating without the mask.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Bowers, and this is Sergeant Raye from Central Robbery Homicide."

"Helluva deal, isn't it—to find a body like that?"

"Tell me about the customer who came in today and took the Buick off the lot."

Homer leaned against his crummy plywood desk. "Just a customer, nothin' special about him. He was interested in the car, wanted to drive it so I gave him the keys, and the battery was run down. So I went up there and jumped it, and then we came back, and he wanted to check out the trunk, and there she was." He shook his head. "Gawd, that was awful. Never saw anything like that in my life."

"You ever see this customer on the lot before?"

"No."

"You detail the car when you put it on the lot?"

"Oh, sure. Make 'em look good." He avoided Minnie's appraising eye.

"You clean out the trunk?"

"Well, now I can't remember for sure. Might not have. Not much in there as I recall. Just some tools."

"When did you open the trunk last?"

"Before today you mean?"

"Before today."

"Can't say. Maybe not. What's in there? Besides her, I mean."

"You tell me."

"No idea. Junk probably."

"You never looked before. Is that right?"

"Probably. No need to really. At that price, if it runs good, you're gettin' a bargain."

"How many test drives did that car have before today?"

"Have to check. But probably. Let me see." He rubbed his bald spot. "Might be the first time."

"How long you have the car on the lot?"

"Oh, I'd say about four, five weeks."

"You got weeds growing under the tires, if you wanna call 'em that," Minnie blurted from the doorway. "Those rubber things on the wheels."

Hemperdyne narrowed his eyes and spat a stream of saliva her direction. "Ain't no weeds growin' under my cars, Sis."

"Sergeant," she corrected him.

"I can check my records, but I took that car on a trade-in just after the Labor Day weekend, I think it was."

"Last year," Minnie snapped. "Salem says the title transfer was August of ninety-three. It's been parked here all that time?"

Homer tripped over his own flim flam. "Oh, well, could be. Didn't think it was here that long to tell the truth. It's sound as a dollar mechanically."

"Was the vehicle kept locked on the lot?"

"Yeah, sure. All the cars are. Insurance says it's gotta be that way. I keep all the keys inside here." He gestured to a pegboard behind him with a dozen key rings attached.

"So how long had it been since you'd unlocked the Buick before today?"

"Oh, hard to say really. Maybe a week or so. It's been a little slow this month."

"Any other sales associates on the lot except you?"

"Nope. Just me. I own it lock, stock and barrel. She's my show."

"Who else has access to those keys?"

"Nobody." The eyes dimmed for a moment as he sucked in a noisy breath. "I see what you mean. Who coulda got into the car and put the girl there, right?" The light bulb had turned on finally.

"Anybody take it out recently before today?"

His brow knit. "No. Nobody I recall."

"Any break-ins? Locks forced recently? Vandalism?"

"Nope. Nothin' I can think of."

"You see the fellow drive the car off the lot for the test drive?"

"Oh, sure. You gotta keep an eye out, you know how it is. So I seen him drive up the road aways and then pull over on the shoulder. He gets out and starts wavin' and then he walks back and says the battery died so I get my charger, and we go up and I give him a jump, and he drives it back and says 'Can I look-see in the trunk?' and then—jeez."

Bowers turned around and looked out the window through the grease paint. Three people, one assistant from the ME's office and two in CID blue were bending into the trunk of the old war wagon. "When was the last time you hosed the cars down, Mr. Hemperdyne?"

"Uh, I'd say it was on Friday. We like to keep our stock in tip-top condition."

"Uh huh." Didn't look like any of the old beaters on the lot would coast down a steep hill without a good tail wind and a strong push. "So last Friday you would have washed the Buick down?"

"Yeah. You know, hose 'em down, make 'em shiny, like new."

Bowers was thinking about the dusty film on the deck lid and the smudged prints. Some from Homer himself, some from his not too choosy customer and no doubt some from the perp who put Tammy in the car. Must have been late Saturday or maybe Sunday when the lot was deserted that Tammy was dumped.

"You air 'em out, open the hood, pop the trunk?"

Homer nodded. "Yeah. That's right. We do that when the weather's nice. Keeps 'em from gettin' too musty. I had the Buick open on Friday."

"You could have left the trunk open?"

The dealer squinted. "Guess so. Possible. I gotta lotta cars to look after here."

"Who was here on Saturday?"

"Just me and the usual customers. Lookers mostly. Pretty slow with the hot weather. Nothin' special."

"Anybody look at the Buick?"

"Don't think so. Few kids checkin' out the Camaro—people with no credit."

Minnie jerked a finger at one of the signs. "What about your advertisement there? No credit, no problem?"

"Well, they gotta have a job, verifiable income. This is a bona fide business enterprise. We ain't givin' these cars away."

"Uh huh," she mumbled with an off-stage wink to her partner.

"So this weekend, you didn't notice anything unusual? Nobody hanging around the Buick? No other test-drives? Nothing like that?" Bowers waited for the head shakes. "What time you close up on Saturday?"

"Uh, depends on business. About nine. It was a little slow."

"Nobody hanging around?"

"No."

"You closed all day Sunday."

"All day."

"You drive by to check on things? See anything?"

He shook his head, nonplussed by the detective's suggestion.

"Everything hunky dory when you came in this morning to open up?"

"Fine."

"Anybody else touch that car except you and this customer today?"

"Nope."

"Any idea where we can find this customer?"

"He took off when we opened up the trunk. Scared the shit out of him frankly. I've never in my life seen anything like that. I'll never forget it. Jesus, Holy Mary, mother of God." He turned away and wiped at a sweat mustache.

"You don't get any ID when they take a car off the lot?"

"Anybody can give you phony ID. If they're gonna steal a car, they're gonna do it with or without showing an ID."

"What was this customer's name?"

"I think Tyrone or Tyrell. Something like that."

"Describe him."

"Uh, tallish, gray-haired, thin, long-legged sort of a build. About fifty or fifty-five, in khakis and black high-tops. Had a good-looking leather jacket."

"Black, white, Hispanic?"

"Black gentleman. Said he worked at the muffler shop up the road."

"What kind of car did he drive onto the lot?"

"Uh, didn't see he had a rig. He didn't have a trade-in, might have gotten on the bus."

Outside, the morgue van had pulled up. For now, the body would stay in the Buick to allow forensic examination of the crime scene in minute detail.

"We're gonna need your paper on this vehicle," John Bowers wrapped up. "And we'd like to take a look at all your other cars on the lot."

"Sweet Jesus," he fussed, tugging at his baggy slacks. "You're not looking for more bodies, are you, Sergeant?"

"You carry your own contracts?"

"Yeah. Sure." He was still agitated imagining more smelly corpses coiled in the trunks of his clunkers.

"I'd like a list of those active contracts."

"Sure. Sure. Whatever. I'll have to scrounge around and dig this stuff up for you."

"We appreciate it," Bowers said, signaling his partner to step free of the doorway. "We'll be back in touch." He turned on the threshold. "You sure you never saw this girl before, Mr. Hemperdyne?"

"No. Sweet Jesus, never. No. I mean, who can tell? She's just all swoll up and black and blue. Lord, it's horrible."

"Don't know a Tammy with light brown hair, slim build, pretty hands and fingernails, wears an ID bracelet on her right wrist?"

He was shaking his head like a terrier with a rat. "No, no, no."

"Never saw her walking by the lot, waiting at the bus stop across the street there?"

"No. No."

"She never came in to use the phone, the restroom, look at a car, maybe just be friendly?"

Homer's eyes bulged. "No. You think I knew this girl? No way. No. Never. I never laid eyes on her before, so help me god."

Minnie snapped her notepad closed. "You ever been in trouble with the law, Homer?"

"No. Never." He looked past Minnie's stare and bowed his head slightly. "I've had a little trouble with finances in the past, and me and the missus got into it once or twice. That's it."

"Domestic dispute? Were you charged with assault?"

"No. Just arguing, screamin' and hollerin'. The cops come out and talked us out of it. You know, that sort of a thing. Usual thing a couple has in a marriage after almost thirty years. That's all it was."

"How long you been in business, Mr. Hemperdyne?"

"Since I was twenty-six and discharged from the Air Force up at McChord. That's twenty-two years."

"What was your discharge rank?"

"Tech sergeant. I woulda stayed in, but I was married and had three kids."

"Clean record?"

"Not a scratch," he answered with some pride.

"What kind of car you drive?"

His shirtfront was blotched with fresh perspiration stains. "Uh, that black beauty over there." He pointed at a two-door Chevy Nova with knock offs, spinners and vanity plates that spelled CARZ.

"We'll have to take a look at your car. Is that alright with you?"

"Any objections if we come out and take a look around your house?" Minnie seconded.

He shook his head. "No. Look away. Whatever you guys need, no problem."

“Okay if we check out your office here, too? Have a closer look around?”

“Look anywhere you like. I got nothin’ to hide.”

They intended to look anywhere they damn well pleased at the crime scene, but it was useful to test his reaction and try to avoid the hassle and delay of a warrant for an extensive search of his car and home.

“Tell us, where were you this weekend?” Minnie asked.

“Home mostly. My wife can tell you that. She had me workin’ on the fence in back. We’re puttin’ up a chain link on account of the dogs. And Sunday we went to church and then took some friends to a prayer meeting out on Cornell Road, lasted until about ten, I’d guess. That’s why I had the lot closed on Sunday—because of the Church deal we had to go to. Then we came home.”

“You go right home after you closed the lot on Friday?”

“Actually my Pastor came by and picked me up, and we drove over to Warren. That’s where we’re putting up the new church. I worked on the framing till about nine then he took me home.”

“You left this little beauty here all alone?” Minnie jerked her head toward the Nova. He never even noticed her snotty barb. Besides Hemperdyne had a hide as tough as an armadillo. People were hard on used car dealers, treated them like pond scum most of the time. A man had an uphill fight to keep his self-respect.

“It gets a few of the younger kids onto the lot sometimes. My wife drove me in on Monday.”

“We’ll need you to give us a formal statement, Mr. Hemperdyne. Any objections to giving us a blood sample and fingerprints?”

“What for? You think I did something to this poor kid? Christ, it’s sick, just sick. No way could I even think about hurting a kid like that. I’m a married man, got three kids myself.”

“Just a routine procedure to eliminate you from our investigation, Mr. Hemperdyne. That way we can avoid wasting time on you. Any problems?”

“Guess not. Whatever’ll help you guys out. Sure.”

“And you’ll need to stick around the lot until we’re through here. Can you do that?”

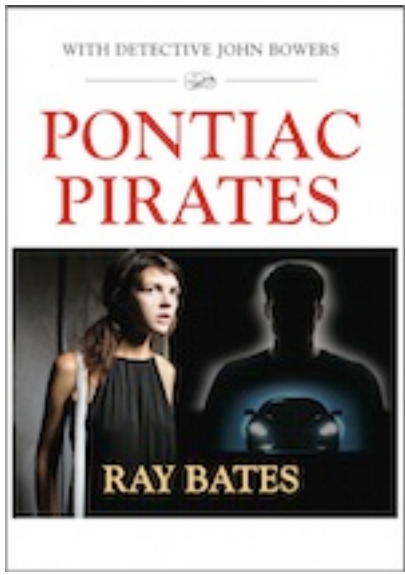
“No problem. When can I open for business?”

“As soon as we’re through working the crime scene. Unfortunately, that takes a while. Why don’t you call your wife and ask her to come down?”

“Okay. You’re going to impound my car?”

“Just long enough to clear it from our investigation. Could you please bring the keys for these other vehicles on your lot? We’d like you to unlock each one and pop the trunk.”

“Holy Jesus, Mary, Mother of God,” he swore, turning around to fumble with the pegboard. “If you find another one, I’ll need to ask my wife to bring my nerve pills.”



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