



The 8th book in the Police Procedural series set at Central Robbery/Homicide Precinct, Portland, Oregon. Detectives John Bowers and partner Minnie Raye are trying to stop a serial killer who stalks single women living alone.

KISS OF THE COBRA - with Detective John Bowers
By Ray Bates

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RAY BATES



Kiss of
the Cobra

DETECTIVE JOHN BOWERS
PORTLAND CENTRAL PRECINCT

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Paperback ISBN: 979-8-88531-072-7

Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-88531-073-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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“Working homicides is a lot like being in the infantry, on the front lines fighting the fault in all our DNA that can go haywire and eat its own kind.”

**Captain B. Barnes, Ret.
Thirty-three-year Homicide Unit Veteran**

**Portland Oregon
1998**

Chapter One

...

He had a thing for cars. Coupes got him hotter than sedans or hatchbacks. Especially red ones with sexy wheels. It started way back when he collected Hot Wheels. Then he had slot cars he ran in the basement. He ogled cars the way other guys tracked pussy. That's why he was working at the car wash, rubbing, polishing getting it on with cars all fucking day. The perfect job for both a dude who was in love with cars and one who liked to track hotties.

When he looked up, he saw a candy-apple red Honda Prelude poking its nose between the brushes. The driver was bending over the dash, slipping in a CD. When the Honda jerked out to his finish station, he rubbed the windshield streak-free and saw her face. She looked up and smiled at him. Nice teeth, and her lips were like his Granny's sofa cushions. Then he saw her hair in the sunlight as the car moved forward. It was the color of polished brass. Long and silky so when she put her head down, it fell over her cheek like a golden waterfall. He was especially attracted to long hair—blonde or honey brown, no dark roots, no frizz jobs. This girl was nearly perfect. He smiled back at her. His lucky day.

While he dried the spots off the side mirrors, he looked up to get a better view of her torso. He especially admired tits like his sister's. Not so big they flopped and seemed to crease the chest wall like they'd been split down the middle. No. Not like that. He wanted the cushy kind, firm, round with small nipples. Like his sister Nadine. Hers were almost perfect. Until she hooked up with that mental dude Rayall and got knocked up. The kid ruined her boobs for good. Now they hung like hams in a butcher shop. Real turn offs.

Kiss of the Cobra

She saw him staring and smiled quickly. He turned away. She shouldn't study him like that, like he was a monkey in his cage at the zoo. He was a person. A very important person who was going to play a very important part in her life. Let her wait. Yeah, he resolved as he flipped his wipe rag in the bin and waved her on. It wouldn't be long before she knew he was.

Wendy Williams was taking the day off and washing her car was first on her list. There was a long list of To Do stuff she'd been adding to all week long. Her boyfriend Devon Maher was going to fix a Chinese dinner for her at six. Another thing on Wendy's list was picking up the rice noodles, mushrooms and Bok choy at the grocery store. Bok Choy? She didn't have a clue. If she was lucky, it wouldn't be as nasty as the sushi Devon had brought over on their third date. That had almost nixed the relationship. Who wanted to eat raw fish anyway? The Chinese must be short on stoves.

Her last stop would be Albertson's to pick up the groceries for Devon's dinner dish. Maybe she could also pick up a cherry pie for dessert. Just as insurance in case the Bok what-ever-it-was turned out to be as icky as the raw fish last time.

Chores completed, she was headed home to get ready for their dinner date. The one positive she appreciated most about Devon was his diligence in the kitchen. That was definitely a good trait for a live-in relationship. And she had considered that option he'd recently suggested. At first, she thought it was just a scheme to avoid paying full rent on his place and getting free laundry service. But lately, it seemed like he was really into the commitment thing. Bad timing on his part because there was a new person on the scene now. Someone who forced her to seriously consider if she and Devon had a future as more than good friends. She'd discuss the pros and cons with her mother on how to balance the two factions. Wendy wanted to set up a common household with someone, and she wanted confirmation from her mother to help her sort it all out. Any marriage plans were still far in the future. After all, her parents lived together for almost three years before Wendy came along. They got married in the Lutheran Church on Wendy's first birthday. And it all seemed to work out.

She turned the corner and pulled up in front of her apartment building. A car was parked in her usual space. Wendy had asked the manager about numbering the spaces so she'd have an assigned space, but it never got done like most of the tenant requests. Still, the Forest Commons apartment complex was in a nice area close to Dosch Road and a little patch of woods in the rear. Five-minute drive to work. At night when she opened her bedroom window, she could hear the creek burble and the wind rustling the Douglas firs in the woods. And most of the traffic on Beaverton Hillsdale highway was muffled this far off Dosch.

The sun steamed behind a thick layer of overcast. Typical November cloudy skies and gray horizons. Her headlights flicked on as she pulled in to the apartment building and parked. She got out, opened the trunk and grabbed the nearest sack. Weighed more than she thought.

“Shit. I’m gonna have to make two trips,” she muttered. “Up the stairs too.” Devon’s condo was on the ground floor. Sure would be easier moving and hefting stuff than up two flights of steep stairs.

“Hey,” he said, stepping out from the shadows.

She turned around and put the sack down on the concrete. “You live here?” Maybe he was the dude who had parked in her space. His smile was barely visible in the darkening light. Wendy felt a flash of tension and then it faded as she took a better look now that her eyesight was adjusted to the murk. He was sort of good looking, maybe thirty with thin lips, black hair, about Devon’s height and dressed in a hoody, Nike’s and jeans. Must be a new tenant.

“Looks like you might need some help.” He reached across her and took hold of the heaviest bags. “Now please tell me you aren’t on the fourth floor.”

“Not that high. Is that your car over there?”

“No way. I’d drive a Mercedes if I had a car.”

“Well, that’s usually my space. My apartment is on the second floor right above the stair landing.”

“Well, I guess that makes me your appointed Sherpa.” He bent over and wedged her prescription sack under his arm. “Let me take these up for you.”

“Are you a new tenant?”

“Sorta. Last month. First floor, East breezeway.”

“Well, usually people respect the spaces they use all the time. Especially if your unit is at the end of the breezeway and like you have to hike a whole block in the rain if somebody from the other end uses your space. You know. Not a rule really, but it’s just courtesy among the tenants.”

“Sure. Good to know.”

She grabbed his sleeve when he glommed onto a grocery bag. “Thanks, but I can just make two trips. I do it lotsa times.”

“I insist. You have a longer walk with some dude in your space.”

“Really, I can get it.” She slammed the trunk down.

He already had picked up the grocery bags and was ahead of her at the ground floor landing. When she caught up, he motioned for her to go first. “You first, Milady,” he grinned.

Wendy shrugged and hurried up the stairs. She unlocked the door, flipped on the lights, and as she turned toward him, he was glancing left and right on the breezeway. “You can just set those down on the kitchen table. And thanks again.”

“No problem. Glad to help.” He set the bags down. Then he held his hand out. “Hi, Neighbor. I’m Rod, friendly beast of burden.”

“Wendy,” she laughed a little. It was awkward suddenly. And besides, she had to pee. Quicker he left, the better. And on closer inspection, she noticed his shoes were ratty looking, and his clothes looked like he’d slept in them. Not as comfortable with his appearance as she was at first glance, she was careful to keep her distance.

She put her package down and walked to the door, motioning for him to go. He did with a little bow. Immediately, she closed the door, turned the deadbolt knob and raced for the bathroom.

Less than a minute after she flushed the toilet, he rang the buzzer. Dammit it, she cursed. Now her phone was chirping. Must be Devon making sure she was gonna be on time for their dinner date. She checked her cell after the last chirp. It was Devon’s number. Before she had a chance to pick up, the call went dead. He’d hung up. The doorbell rang twice more. Damn. She should have skipped the pharmacy and got home earlier. Now she’d be late for Devon’s. She

needed to hit the shower, dry her hair and repackage the things she'd bought for the Chinese dinner. She'd call her mother before she left the apartment. They always talked every afternoon, just to catch up on their days.

She reached for the lock and opened the door just enough to see his face.

"Hi again, Wendy. Sorry but this musta got dropped on the way up. Thought you might need it." He held up her Walgreen's white prescription sack.

"Oh, thanks. Sure." She pulled the door back just enough for his arm to reach in with the prescription. "I gotta phone call waiting. Have a nice night."

She pushed against the door, but it wouldn't close. His foot and knee were braced blocking the threshold. Then before she processed the situation and reacted, he pushed inside the apartment and slammed the door closed. Wendy took a step back, adrenaline rushing through her body in an instant—Mother Nature's survival alarm rising to Defcon One.

"Hey, you have to go, okay?" she warned. "I'm engaged." Only a slight fudge. In fact, she wished Devon was living here right now so she wouldn't face anxieties like this on her own.

He barged in, locked the door behind him, reached out and caught her around the throat with one hand. "Do exactly what I tell you, and I promise not to hurt you, okay?"

She tried to scream, but he was cutting off her airway. "*Oh my god, Jesus, save me!!*" She struggled to breathe.

"Don't scream, or I'll slit your fucking throat. Understand? Nod if you understand me. Don't fuck with me, Wendy." His voice remained calm, like he was asking her to use the bathroom. But his eyes were terrifying. She stared at his face, and he reminded her of visions of the devil in the horror movies Devon liked. Like there was no soul behind the façade.

She nodded, choking and fighting for air with a primal cry before everything fused to black. He dragged her over to the center of the living room before his grip eased, and she gasped. Both her hands fastened like raptor talons on his wrists. Without knowing how or

when, her pulse was racing, a Niagara crescendo pounded in her ears, and tears ran down her cheeks.

“Please, don’t hurt me, Rod,” she gurgled. “You can take my purse.”

“Get in the bedroom and take off your clothes. You make any noise, I’ll kill you.”

“Ohhh, please, just let me go. I won’t tell anybody. I promise. My boyfriend will be here looking for me. I’m late for our date.”

He wrestled her into the bedroom and pushed her against the dresser. “Take everything off. Do what I said, and you’ll make it through this, Okay?”

“Please, I’ll do whatever you want but please don’t hurt me.” Trying to find the control button, she floundered and didn’t even realize her words had no effect on him. This couldn’t be happening for real. It was a terror that always happened to someone else, on a crime show, a story on the news about another rape or homicide victim someplace far off. Now the nightmare horror had captured her, wrapped her in mortal fear like a fly caught in the spider’s web.

He pulled her blouse half off. When she put her hands up in defense, he slapped her so hard she heard nothing but the buzzing in her ears.

“*Please, don’t.*” His second slap hurt more than the first. Her nose bled and dripped off her chin.

“Strip or so help me, I’ll kill you right now.”

Operating on nothing but raging fear and paralysis, she stood frozen as he tore her clothes off then pushed her onto the bed. Wendy listened to the sounds of his undressing, then she felt his body, cold and rigid, press her down, fitting his hands around her neck while she sobbed and whispered for her mother.

“Shut up! Shut your fucking mouth!”

“*Please...*”

His penis penetrated her vagina and made her wince. “Fuck, you’re tight, Wendy. Must turn your boyfriend on, huh? Is he bigger than me, huh?”

He was pumping with his glare riveted on her face and fully dilated eyes searching for relief, for an answer, for escape and finding nothing,

no one to save her. As the first orgasmic wave washed over him, his fingers tensed, both thumbs bore down crushing her larynx until Wendy's grip on his shoulders weakened. She squirmed and kicked as his strangle hold hardened. She couldn't scream or sob even as the room closed in around her. A prayer interrupted her terror as her heart flipped into ventral fibrillation, her airway closed. She expelled a final gush of air, stiffened then gradually relaxed, her stare fixed at his face with the countenance of a department store mannequin. Ninety-three seconds after her heart stopped pulsing, Wendy Williams left the world before she could ever know the origin of the evil visited on her, snuffing out the burgeoning life that coaxed her parents to the altar twenty-two years earlier.

He got off once he was sure she was gone, headed to the bathroom sink and washed away the scent and stain of his victim. His neck was splotched with her blood, and both hands were wet with blood, snot and tears. Before he dressed, he posed in front of the dresser mirror and stroked his flagging erection tainted with Wendy's DNA. That appendage he had not washed. It was part of the drama, the trophy, the serpentine slayer he would pet while he lay on his sofa watching his favorite flick—*Beasts Raiding Tight Cunts*.

Wendy's cell phone chirped again, and he strode naked to the living room and looked down at the screen. Some Dude named Devon. Better turn off the lights and finish his labors before there was a risk of interruption. Dude might have a key so he needed to double lock the front door and close the blinds.

He went back to the bedroom, knelt over Wendy's limp form and opened her labia with his fingers. Still warm. He could wait until she cooled. Then he'd shoot a load into her cold cunt and feel the thrill it gave him. Too bad the bitch couldn't guess what his real game was. He liked a warm pussy as well as anybody. But the ultimate thrill, the passion that drove his appetite was his pulsing cock wedged tight in a cool, tightening joy hole. Life into the void, he called it. And it gave him the most explosive, all-consuming orgasmic highs of his life. Worth risking it all for those brief flashes of euphoria no narcotic could reach.

Kiss of the Cobra

“Fuck, yeah,” he promised his cock, stretching his semi erect assassin to full bloom. “Fuck yeah, Wendy Whoever. Gimme a cold one.”

As the sun melted into the February night, he waited for the golden-eyed serpent to escape his grasp, rise up and strike at the heart of his obsession. His lethal trade had taught him patience.

Chapter Two

• • •

Portlanders liked to ascribe the month of February as the harbinger of spring. A week or two of fair skies, breezes and seeing their neighbors in their yards for the first time since the rain started last October got everybody's blood up. There were exceptions. And when Senior Detective John Bowers stepped through his front door on Fulton Park, the apparent betrayal of the Weather Gods was a disappointment. The overcast chill served notice the mild temps and sunshine signaled the end of the winter lacuna.

Oregonians in general agreed a few drenching months and drizzly seasons was a fair exchange for Midwestern dust storms, tornadoes and muddy-river floods, Eastern Seaboard stifling humidity, congestion and Southern insects of all nasty varieties in even worse humidity and a landscape as flat and uninspiring as a checkerboard. But being true Oregonians or more recent implants required an abiding faith in a future of April flowers and the return of everything that made this portion of the Pacific Northwest so special. Natural beauty and liberal views on politics, religion and personal freedom enticed folks from regions more iconoclastic when it came to outsiders and neocon foreign policy.

John Bowers was born to it all. He grew up in Salem, Oregon, the capital city and a blue star on the Willamette Valley map, a slice of Interstate 5 running north to south through the State. His dad had been a ship builder during World War II, and the Bowers family had lived an ordinary, blue-collar family existence settled among the hop farms and orchards near their house off Silverton Road. When John was ten-

years old, his only sibling, baby sister Aggie, was killed by a hit and run driver. And John knew he and his family all blamed him for the accident. His mother had charged him the morning Aggie died with tending to his sister who was learning to ride her bike. At seven, and unsteady, she veered into the highway while John was playing catch with his buddies a block away. In his US Marine service, that was called dereliction of duty. In every day of his life since burying Aggie, it was just labeled blame, and he bore it like a crown of thorns throughout the rest of his childhood and into adulthood.

Becoming a cop was one way to assuage the guilt and cloud the shame. He kept his torment private to almost everyone except his new wife Georgie Meiers. It was the answer to the puzzle of why John Bowers, an intimidating force at six-foot three, shoulders like a fireplace mantle and a steely stare that Dick Tracy would admire always had a soft spot for females in distress, plaintive ladies on the lookout for romantic B and Es.

So, he was in marriage number three. Wife number one Leslie had been a college sweetheart who had a fantastic talent to point out every smidgen of fault in her husband. Apparently almost half the Bureau's motor cops were much less flawed, and to show her appreciation, she had ridden both their bikes and their dicks. She divorced him to find someone with fewer rough edges and ended up a cynical, bitter accuser even without the ring. The only positive from the split was he got away with no alimony, no kids to dicker over, no support payments.

Wife number two Doris was the bimbo blonde who caught him on the rebound with baby talk, bodacious boobs, an ass like a whoopy cushion and the intellectual curiosity the size of a gnat's ass. It went upside down after four years when she ran off with her Tae Kwan Do instructor. He hadn't heard from her since she crawled back to town on the lam from a drug dealer hubby who almost threw a big enough wrench in the works to trash John's career with the Bureau, his marriage and his self-respect.

But with marriage number three, he had stumbled headfirst into a goddam goldmine. Georgie was a fantastic cook who never nagged about his cholesterol, weight, love for expensive Scottish whisky and a habit of dumping fresh-caught fish in her spotless kitchen. It all

added up to marital paradise as far as he was concerned. He discovered his fortunate find after feeling his way blindfolded around the barn a few times. One excursion was giving in to lust with his munchable partner Sergeant Minola Raye.

Raye and Bowers were both safely married now, but it didn't mean his mind couldn't wander at times although his heart remained steadily fastened to his wife. Best part was Georgie understood the dichotomy. She was a cop veteran after her first husband swallowed his gun with ten years on the Miami vice squad. John didn't have to lay it all out for Georgie. She was psychic when it came to what made him tick. Maybe that's why finally they found each other. It was all coming together and working out. And lustful temptations aside, John Bowers was ready to sacrifice everything to keep it that way. In his fourteenth year on the Robbery-Homicide squad at Central Precinct, he was content with more in his life than he'd ever felt before. But Kenai, salmon fishing and starry nights with no calls, no radio squawk and no perps was calling him from just over the horizon.

As soon as he came through the door at Central, Detective Sergeant John Bowers noticed the white board and the younger detective scrawling another name in black marker.

“Who's Wendy Williams?”

Mac Bando, junior detective on the robbery-homicide unit, looked over his shoulder at the burly senior pulling off his jacket. “Just this morning. Boyfriend called. She never showed up for their date last night. Didn't show for work this morning. So, Mom went over to her apartment, and manager let her in. He called 911 to report a 1054.” Victim down call.

He ran down the initial report that had come in from the field. Wendy was visible from the living room of the apartment when the manager opened the front door. He used his pass key, noting both the Schlage and the deadbolts were locked. The moment he stepped inside, he noticed the unpacked grocery bags on the table. With one glance straight ahead through the bedroom door, he saw her. Before he could speak, Mrs. Williams bumped against his back.

“Wendy! Honey, it's Mom! Are you okay, Sweetheart? Wendy?”

Kiss of the Cobra

She tried stepping around him, and he was able to block her just in time, pushing against him to clear her way to the bedroom.

“No, Ma’am. Don’t go in there.”

“I want to see my daughter! Wendy?”

He had to grab her shoulders and hold her back. He couldn’t let her see what he saw. Even if he had to carry her back out to the landing. No way would he let this sight sear into her brain until the day she died. He thought of his own daughter Corell, and it sickened him.

“Ma’am, please! Please, step outside. I have to call the police. You don’t want to see this.”

Mrs. Williams was sobbing now, knowing what he had seen, and she had only barely glimpsed. Enough to see her daughter’s naked foot hanging over the edge of the comforter. “I want to see my daughter!”

“Please, Ma’am. *Please*, don’t go in there.”

She raised her hands, made fists and beat on his chest, keening and going limp when he put his arms around her. “I’m so sorry, Ma’am, but I think she’s gone. Wait til the police and ambulance get here. You can’t help her now.”

He called 911 on Wendy’s land line. As soon as he hung up, he thought about leaving his prints. Too late to worry about that now.

One last look, and he knew she was dead. Visions etched into his brain from Nam flashbacks—the dead-fish eyes, the pale pallor and mottled purple of blood pooling below midline. Only thing missing was the odor of putrid flesh and napalm.

“Please, Ma’am. Wait outside. They’re on their way. Can I call somebody for you? Is your husband home?”

Wendy’s mother collapsed, sagged to the floor, on her knees, rocking back and forth. She didn’t speak. What did it matter who came? What did anything matter now?

The ambulance rolled within three minutes of the call coming in to the Central Precinct 911 operator. The first act of a murder investigation had started without Bowers. He’d been in the air, Flight 927 from New Jersey, attending an IT seminar. National attendance with law enforcement reps from fifteen states. About as worthless and boring as his high school algebra class.

“Who’s at the scene?” Bowers asked.

Mac jabbed his marker over the *i* and turned around. “Think Deacon and CID still on the job. Check with Hall. I think you’ll be lead.”

Bowers nodded and took off for the corner office where his boss Captain Purvis Hall was already deep in the day’s criminal debris. Fighting a perennial paunch, hypertension and bad lipid numbers his doctor scolded him about once a year, he was buried in paperwork and on the phone when his senior detective rapped once on the door and walked in.

“Hey, Boss. One down this morning, huh? We got anything?”

Hall waved him to a chair and hung up the phone after a final grunt. “Welcome back, John. Glad to see you in harness where you belong. Learn a lot to make the rest of us look like Neanderthals?”

“Doubt it. One thing—know how to restart my PC now. What a useful revelation. Should be worth the exorbitant sum the City of Roses put out for me to fly across country to live off the worst Chinese food in the universe.”

“What kind of dumb ass would eat Chinese in fucking Elizabeth, New Jersey?” He rummaged through a stack of folders, found one, and tossed it across his desk to John, who caught it one-handed. “Here. Homework. CID just rolled an hour ago. Get out there and see what we got. White female, found in bed, sexual assault, deceased. Deacon should be on scene. Talk to him, and see what we got.”

Bowers stood up, file in hand. “You got it.”

As he started for the door, Hall stopped him with a fat grin. “And John.”

“Yeah?”

“Welcome back, you sorry bastard. Some folks around here missed you.”

“Yeah?”

“Marlene and Graciela said they could hardly stand it not seeing your ugly mug every day.”

Bowers flashed a suffering grin and returned to his desk. Marlene was a coroner’s assistant who always seemed to have a blonde joke at the scene of every homicide, and Gracie was the server at the deli

counter downstairs. Always piled on extra horsey sauce on his Reubens.

After a quick, incomplete look-thru at his IN basket, an even faster login and perusal of his PC clutter, he grabbed his jacket and was on his way downstairs to the garage and his car.

The victim lived in an apartment complex off Dosch Road. About a half mile from a rape and assault last year. Seemed more and more like these blocks full of single women were turning into hunting grounds for burglars and rapists. Transient residents for one thing, coming and going at odd hours, hard to tell who belonged and who didn't. If he had a daughter, which he didn't, he'd never let her live in one of these beehive joints. She'd live with her black-belt boyfriend in a gated condo, safe on an upper floor with a security system.

He drove out of the City garage at the MCDC, Multnomah County Detention Center, and headed out Barbur Boulevard, through Raleigh Hills and swerved onto Dosch Road. At the first red light, his cell buzzed.

"Bowers."

"Hi. You got in early?"

His partner Minola Raye. Minnie. "Little. You on scene?"

"Since little after eleven. You on your way?"

"Under ten with this damn traffic. Looks like everybody found the shortcuts today. Deacon still there?"

"Yeah. See ya."

He hung up and braked as the car in front suddenly made a right turn with its left signal blinking. Asshole.

Easy to spot the place. First, it was in a three-block cluster of brick-faced apartments just off the road with an acre or so of brush and second-growth timber shielding a creek. Probably charged extra rent for the "Hidden woods, privacy and solitude" of the "Forest Hills Commons". These days nothing but rats the size of raccoons, plastic bags and assorted beer cans in the creek. Second clue was the oversized CID van with the back doors hanging open, four cruisers with the Portland rose emblazoned on their doors, and a plain-wrapper, brown four-door blocking the parking lot entrance on the West side.

When Bowers parked on the entrance apron, he looked up and spotted CID tech Marlene coming out the second-floor apartment with an evidence sack under her arm. When she saw him, she waved.

“Hey, John!” she hollered. “Come on up.”

He waved back and headed for the stairs. Halfway up, his partner Minnie bumped into him. She gave him a friendly jab in the ribs, trying to keep up with her partner’s two-step climb.

“Hiya, Partner. So how was New Jersey?”

“Boring. Bad food. Good beer though.”

“Got back just in time to catch this one, huh?”

“I’m just a natural-born lucky sonuvabitch.”

They shared a grunting chuckle as they stood in the doorway of Wendy’s apartment.

“John, Minnie,” the Medical Examiner greeted both his colleagues and friends. “Welcome Back, John. You have a chance to get upstate to see why New Jersey really *is* the Garden State?”

“Missed it. Too busy sitting on the pot when I wasn’t sleeping in class. Bad sub gum. Oughtta pass out Milk of Magnesia at the border.”

Deacon shook his head and winked at Minnie. “Usual gripes. Tell me, Sergeant, what kind of potato head orders Chinese in Elizabeth, New Jersey?”

“Already heard that one from Purvis.”

Deacon moved out of the way when Marlene came back up the stairs and walked through the apartment. CID techs were still busy with their evidence collecting while uniforms kept the area clear. No visitors, no cops not assigned to the case tramping through the one-bedroom crime scene. Wendy still lay in the position the manager found her, sprawled on the bed with her legs splayed, and her eyes still glassy as a poached halibut.

The CID team were the critical finders of facts in the initial investigation. Pristine crime scenes were too often sullied by inexperienced officers or civilians trying to do the right thing. Most people watched enough crime dramas on TV these days to avoid touching the deceased or objects in disarray. But there always seemed to be the sleuth wannabes or the relation who knew instantly who was the evil doer if the cops would just take their advice. Seen enough

crimes scenes Bowers reminded himself, and you'd seen just about everything there was to see.

When Bowers looked over Deacon's shoulder at the victim, he filed it somewhere between number three-hundred and four hundred give or take a dozen lookalikes. Naked body on sexual display, tits up, purple, red and black neck, facial contusions. And that cold, violent-death look they always had—utter horror, surprise, fear, pain and an ineffable trace of gratitude for release. Wendy had all those etched in her puffy face. Otherwise, she was an attractive, too-young-to-suffer woman whose last lapse in judgment cost her life.

“What can you tell me, Doc?” Bowers asked. Minnie had her notepad in her chest pocket and was recording the conversation.

Deacon, aka Wyndham Arthur Clivon, Multnomah County Medical Examiner answered to the moniker owing to his stint as a Deacon in the Episcopal Church before deciding to join the forensic Medical Ilk. He had worked his way from a Coroner's Assistant in Seattle to the bottom of the MD VIP list in Multnomah County. Pathology suited him ruling his private lair in the basement where his patients kept cool, literally, awaiting his attention. No complaints, whining hypochondriacs. Just silent questions. “What happened to me when I dived into the river?” “Did my car go over the cliff or hit the semi?” “What was that pain in my shoulder?” “Did my baby survive the fire?”

Even delving into the grisly evidence of homicide and the detritus involved, he was the star athlete in the MCDC. A marathon runner, natural food horticulturist even before Vegan was in the dictionary. He and his Scottish bride Mary were foster parents, adoptive parents and biological parents of a houseful of girls. And, most importantly for the DA's office and the homicide teams, he was the penultimate straight shooter who never threw out conjectures at crime scenes, fumbled evidence, rushed through reports he felt needed time to examine to the nth degree if necessary. Result of all this particular attention to detail, scientific innovation applications and his personal ethics was his perfect record in court without ever being bested on the witness stand by either the Defense or Prosecution. If Deacon said it was A, B and Q not C, bet on it.

Deacon pulled down his mask. “You got sexual assault, manual strangulation. Facial contusions, lacerations. Sinus and occipital fractures, torn labia. You guys got semen and fingernail tissue, lucky bastards that you are. What else do you need?”

“Perp’s Driver’s License, house keys.”

“Let’s see if they turn up at the internal exam. So, based on liver and axilla temps, blood she’s been exposed here since yesterday evening. Lights out so maybe before four-thirty or five.”

“Or somebody turned ‘em off.”

“Exactly. Stage three rigor. Early last evening tentative time of death.”

Bowers turned to face his partner. “Responding uniform here?”

“Office Hernandez.” She pointed to the breezeway outside the front door. “Him. Over there. Bobby.”

Bowers nodded and stepped outside. Bobby Hernandez was a rookie, and so far, he wasn’t sure he was gonna stay in this job. Too much nasty onsite business, drunks, druggies, prossies, assholes and now his first homicide close up. Except for the cushy benefits, Officer Hernandez wasn’t quite sure he could name the main reason that held veterans like Sergeant John Bowers showing up every day.

“Hi, Sarge. How’s it goin’?”

“About usual. So, what time you get the call?”

He tapped his watch. “I was on my way in for court prep when I got the 1054. I responded Code 3 and got here at 2:13. The victim’s mother and the apartment manager were at the unit. He’d gone into the front room and saw the vic in the bedroom. That’s as far as he got. I don’t think the mother went in. He called 911, and the ambulance rolled ten minutes later. The mother and manager waited in the parking lot. The mother was transported to St. V’s.”

“Uh huh. You confirm the vic was deceased?”

“Yessir. I just took a step in the doorway of the bedroom, reached out and touched her toe. She was ice cold. This is my first, but, you know, I grew up on a farm, and it’s not rocket science to see when something’s dead. Her eyes were dead.”

“Gotcha.”

Kiss of the Cobra

“So, I backed out, went out to my cruiser and came back and sealed off the apartment and stairs and called for a detective. Day shift supervisor Ken Long responded.”

“Okay. Wits?”

“Not yet, Sarge. Ken is over there.” He pointed across the parking lot to a guy on a bicycle on the wrong side of the crime tape.

“Lookee-lookee. Okay, thanks. Stay put for now.”

“Yessir.”

“Get the tags on all the cars in the lot.

”Yessir.”

When Bowers started off, Bobby stopped him. “Sarge, I’ve had several major disturbance calls, trespass complaints and B and E’s in this district in the last six months. Mostly restraining order violations and some grab and go car boosts. Worked the scene at a sexual assault at the apartment on the East end there. In July. Known offender. Jorge Sansalvado. Plead to misdemeanor battery. Vic was ex-girlfriend.”

“I’ll take a look-see. Thanks.”

The incident whip moved the biker back on his route and smiled when he saw Bowers coming toward him. “Hey, Big John. Just in time to catch this shitcan. You see the vic?”

“Yeah. Too young. Place looks clean.” His inference meant the apartment seemed like it was well kept, in order and typical for a young woman on her own for the first time. No evidence of anything to worry her folks, no alcohol, men’s stuff, full ashtrays, beer bottles, hash pipes, dirty clothes strewn around, signs of hard drugs. Just normal and boring with a touch of feminine decorating on a meager budget.

“Got a niece her age, John. Lives on campus at PSU. My brother and his wife wouldn’t let her move in with her girlfriend on Fremont.”

“Smart move. If I had a kid or relative that age, I’d hire security twenty-four seven until she married a black belt, retired Navy Seal who packed everywhere but the shower.”

They both laughed. “Got that one right, Sarge.” They headed back for the apartment. “So how was the IT thing?”

Bowers caught him with a lethal stare. “You shitting me? Only thing I learned was don’t eat sub gum in Elizabeth New fucking Jersey.”

“You didn’t know that? Shoulda tried the dogs. Man, they are somethin’. Homemade relish and sauerkraut.”

The detectives stopped at the concrete apron at the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor and Wendy’s apartment. Ken rested a hand on Bower’s shoulder. He had to reach up. Ken was five-nine with his boots on to Bower’s six-three frame barefoot. Lieutenant Long was a point guard at Boise State. Bowers was a varsity linebacker in the Pac Ten. Still at fifty-one, he could move an Amana fridge on his own, press his weight at the gym and run a mile in under seven minutes since he quit smoking. His macho ego also cataloged the fact he could still keep an iron erection for two sessions with his love Georgie before the lights went out.

Yeah, he thought as he shook his colleague’s hand. He was one lucky bastard after all.

Chapter Three

...

By the time Georgie was pulling biscuits out of the oven at home, John and Minnie were working the scene with only one quick pee break. The parking lot outside the crime tape was filling with gawkers, slow traffic on Dosch trying to steal a free peak at some evidence of the crime, tenants pissed off when they had to be checked and directed to another parking lot two blocks away at a dental clinic.

Four witnesses had been talked to. Three were tenants of the building. One was a USPS worker, the best witness named Helen Broszovich who was delivering the mail to the West building wing. She started at the row of metal boxes lining Dosch Road.

“I was a little late. This time of year, my bag’s pretty full. I was about halfway down the west breezeway. I guess the young lady who was attacked is in number 213.”

“Right,” Minnie confirmed, filling in her notepad as the witness spoke.

“I had a few packages to deliver. You know, stuff that didn’t fit in the boxes on the road. So, I have to trek up and down these stairs for that.”

“Sure.”

She shrugged. “Bitch in the rain, but we got some sun today.”

“Right.”

“So anyway, I was delivering a large manila envelope to number 224 down from 213. So, I went right by 213 and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“And what time was that?”

“Probably about four, a little after. Most days, I’m onto the dental building by five so I’d say four-forty, ten till maybe. I didn’t check for certain. You know, it’s my usual run so I pretty much know the time. I know I got out of the van at four ten if that helps.”

“So, you never saw anything that caught your attention?”

“Nothing. Uh uh. Like I said, I went right by 213, never heard a thing, didn’t see anybody on the breezeway. Did hear music as I passed by 221.”

“Your van was still parked on Dosch?” Bowers interrupted. “That part of your routine?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s only about thirty feet to the stairs on building West. If I have any bulk deliveries at East, I drive down to the far entrance and pull up at the manager’s office there. They always get a lot of oversized mail.”

“Uh huh. So, did you go back the same way? Past 213?”

“Uh huh. Didn’t hear or see anything. Got in the van and drove to the dental clinic. Usual deliveries.”

Minnie shot another question just as Helen thought she was dismissed and could finish her route. Her kindergarten son would be waiting for a Big Mac dinner when she made it home.

“When you went up the stairs, describe the cars parked there. In front of the landing.” She already knew Wendy’s red Prelude had been located at the far East end of the complex.

Helen had to think a minute. “You know, I wasn’t even thinking about that. But lemme see a minute. If I run past four-thirty, there usually is a red car parked in the first space there. I do remember seeing an older lady with red glasses coming out of the car once. Maybe a week ago. I remember her because of the glasses. Bright red with one of those things that attaches to the ear pieces and keeps the glasses around the neck. Mostly for near-sighted people I think. My granddad wears those strap thingees.”

“Anyone else come to mind?”

“Not really.”

“But the red car wasn’t in that same place yesterday?”

“Yesterday? Don’t think so.”

“Can you recall if another car was there?”

“Not really.” She shut her eyes for a moment and shifted her stance. Then she stared at the parking space. “Okay. So, the red car wasn’t there yesterday. I saw it down at the East end. I remember that. It might have been a different car, but it was red, and the space in front there didn’t have a red car in it.” She turned to look Minnie in the eye. “When I went back to the van to go down to the dental clinic, there was a car that pulled in at the West entrance. I don’t want to make up stuff I’m not completely sure about, but...”

“Just tell us what your best memory is,” Minnie urged, poisoning her pen.

“The car had a dent in the passenger door and a big sticker on the driver’s side of the windshield—DMX.”

Bowers exchanged glances with his partner. No idea what DMX was all about. Sounded to him like a jock itch med.

Helen caught his expression. “It’s a rap group. They had a Seattle tour last year.”

“Right,” he nodded. File that with the don’t-give-a-shit stuff.

“I remember that.” Minnie had it. The age difference between partners showed up frequently. “What color and make?”

“You know in my job, I see cars all day. On the road so much. I’m a bit of a car geek. My hubby’s a tech at the Beaverton Subaru dealership. I’d say it was an 89 or 90 shit box. Econo junk. Hyundai S Coupe. Dirty silver.”

“Did you catch the tag?”

“Nope. Just got distracted by the DMZ sticker. Like isn’t it against the law to have stickers on the windshield?”

“Washington or Oregon plate?”

“Sorry. Just didn’t notice that at all. But I got a quick peak at the driver. Average, you know. White guy. Nice hair. Wavy, dark. Wearing a hoody, but the hood was not up. Got about a two-second flash so I didn’t notice too much detail.”

“Single occupant?”

“Yeah. Just him.”

“Nobody else you saw in the lot or on the breezeway?”

“Nobody.”

Minnie snapped her notepad closed and hitched up her trousers. “We got your address and number, Helen. If you think of anything else, give us a call. She handed over a card. “Anytime night or day. They’ll take a message.”

“I will. Uhhh... is my name gonna be on the news? I mean, I see these interviews where witnesses describe who they saw at a crime scene.”

“No worries. We don’t give out names to the press. Thanks for your time.”

The detectives turned back as Helen made her retreat. John Bowers nudged his cohort as they ducked under the crime tape.

“We might get lucky on this one, Minnie. Run thru DMV and get a hit.”

“In your dreams, John. Most of those junkers are dead and buried in the salvage yards. I’m wondering why she parked so far from her apartment? The bad dude must have been in her space. Or another tenant. Did he want her to have to walk all the way from the East stairs to the West end?”

“Something to think about. Let’s hit the manager and find out.”

This was the grunt and grind of an investigation. Often they had a dumper, a body left at a place unconnected to the actual killing. No witnesses, no evidence or clues, often even with no vic ID to work with. Wendy’s case at least put them on even ground at the beginning. Maybe they could close the month with a closure on this one. At least, they weren’t operating with blindfolds on right out of the starting gate.

Jerry Riggs had managed the Forest Commons Apartments for twelve years. Some people thought it was a demeaning, noisome occupation dealing with tenants and trespassers, domestics and faulty plumbing every day. But it was just what Jerry had been looking for when he moved from Twin Falls to Portland. He had solitary time most evenings so he could work on “*Time Travelers*”, his eight-hundred-page novel. Someday, he was going to find a publisher who understood his unique voice, and then he was gonna cash the big advance and show all the doubters.

He also liked working with people from all over the country who stayed at the apartments until they found a better place, rented a house

or moved on to a better job somewhere down south. And truth was, despite some people's criticisms, most of his tenants were decent folks. Maybe their take-home pay was less than they could make at the class A buildings in downtown Portland, but for the most part, they weren't druggies or ex-cons or wife beaters. And besides, Jerry got full housing benefits for free. Made his paycheck go twice as far. And the property management company boss only came around to check on him twice a year. Piece of cake. One thing Jerry couldn't put up with was some asshole leaning over his shoulder all the time.

Jerry had heard about a rape at the complex up the road. That was last summer, and he never heard if the girl was okay. But the word he got was she had been a ground floor tenant and left her patio sliders unlocked. So really. She was partly to blame, right? And the paper said it was her ex who beat her up. So really. What do you expect from some people who get careless about who they're sleeping with?

Wendy Williams was a nice, clean, respectable young lady. Her only visitors seemed to be her mother Eunice, once in a blue moon her father who drove a new Mercedes and her boyfriend who looked half Mexican maybe but dressed neat and sometimes never stayed the night after a visit. Nice young people. Shame what happened. He knew it was going to create a lot of confusion and interruptions in his daily schedule. But if it helped find the bum who did this, it would all be worth it. And he also knew the building management company would be installing new locks in all the units.

He clicked off the TV when he saw the detectives outside. He opened the door and barely noticed the ID they flashed as they came inside.

"Hi, Mr. Riggs?" Bowers asked, looking around. Neat digs for a bachelor. "You live alone?" He already knew the answer. He'd been on the phone with the apartment management company in California.

"Yes. I'm divorced. My ex lives in Colorado. She's remarried to a county sheriff." That credential should give him some creds with these guys. If anything, he wanted to be seen as respectable. A notch above the ordinary.

"So, what can you tell me about what happened yesterday and today?"

“Well, hey. You wanna cup of coffee? I got decaf.”

“No, thanks. We’re pretty well oiled up already.”

“Okay. Have a seat.”

Minnie took the sofa, and Bowers stood. “So, just start by telling us what your day has been like?”

“Shitty for one thing.”

Both detectives nodded. Minnie had her notepad prepped. Jerry sat down on the ottoman and clasped his hands. They noticed the slight tremor in his fingers. Body English was always absorbed in detail by seasoned investigators. No matter the subject, no matter the psychological makeup of the interviewee, the human mind could not completely control the physical reaction to stress that always showed tells advertising deceit, fear, hostility. This was one disturbed dude. Considering the scene he’d stumbled on, no surprise he’d live and relive this tragedy for years to come.

“Day started normal like any other. I had a TV connection to fix for Mrs. Ileweyn in 448. Hook up to the cable. The older tenants are pretty helpless when it comes to electronics.”

“Right. What time was that?” Minnie started.

“Uhh... about one, after lunch.”

“Nothing took you outside until then?”

“Oh, well, I always make my rounds, you know. Just outside, checking for trash, homeless people, anybody who doesn’t belong on the property, that sort of thing, anything out of place. Sometimes I see the garbage bins left open, the laundry room left with trash on the folding tables. Nothing too serious usually. This morning, I didn’t see anything to grab my attention. Oh, except the tenant in 404, a new move-in who had taken the blinds down. I made a note to myself to talk about that. Tenants aren’t allowed to remove the fixtures. And the blinds are in that category. They can’t take them down.”

“Nothing else?”

He shook his head with a glance at Bowers standing solid as a courthouse pillar in the center of the room. “No. Nothing else. Didn’t see anything.”

“Normal morning then?”

Kiss of the Cobra

“Yes. I came back from my tour and got busy with the bookkeeping. I have weekly reports to send to Sacramento and then if I have move-outs or move-ins, there’s a lot of paperwork and checking with the credit bureau, criminal records and so on. We vet our tenants. Some places don’t. We’re always concerned with security. You know how it is.”

“Any move-outs scheduled?”

“Not for today. No just the new tenants in 404 getting settled.”

“How long had Wendy Williams lived here?”

“When I came back to the office after... after the police came and everything, I looked at her rental file. She moved in on September twelve last year. So almost a year.”

“She the only one signed on the rental agreement?”

“No. I believe her mother Eunice Williams signed too. You know, to guarantee the rental payments when the tenant doesn’t have permanent employment.”

“She living alone?”

“From what I understood. She found a job at one of the car dealerships on Canyon. I don’t remember which one, but she told me about it when she came in to pay her rent. She seemed happy about being able to handle the rent herself. First time being independent. Just out of school.”

“You talk often?”

“Oh, no. I think it was just that one time. She’s like most of our tenants who drop their rent check in the door slot. So, I don’t talk to the tenants that much. Once in a while just to nod or wave and say hi if I recognize who they are.”

A sad piece of the puzzle. Another nice girl, happy to be alive and being on her own, a good Mom as her shepherd. And then the fucker who took it all away in what was probably less than an hour.

“So, when did you learn something was a concern in Wendy’s apartment?”

“Well, it was the phone call. It was her boyfriend. Sorry, can’t remember his name.”

“Devon Maher?”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t recall. But anyway, he called and asked if I could make a welfare check because they had a dinner date last night, and she never showed up, and when he called, he couldn’t get her on the phone. Then when her mother called him and said she’d got a call from Wendy’s boss that she hadn’t shown up for work or called in, they decided to meet at the apartment and see what was wrong. I guess they thought she was sick or might have fallen down or something like that. So, Mrs. Williams got here and knocked on my door.”

“Did Devon show up with her?”

“No. I guess he was held up. I don’t think he came here. At least I never saw him. He lives in Hillsboro so it’s a bit of a drive.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“She explained what’d been going on and wanted me to unlock the door. Wendy didn’t answer when she knocked. She had a key, but it didn’t work. So, I grabbed my master pass key, and we went upstairs to the apartment, and I knocked and rang the buzzer. After no answer, I tried to peak in the window. The blinds were closed. So, I unlocked the door and stepped inside. I saw grocery bags and a Walgreen sack on the table. There was milk and soda I could see in the bags. TV was off and so were the lights. Looked like she hadn’t come home, so I thought, you know...”

“Thought what?”

“Maybe she was staying over with friends or like that. Youngsters don’t tell their parents everything, do they?”

“Hope not,” Bowers mused. “What did you see when you entered?”

“Well, I could see into the bedroom when I went around the table. The door was partially open, and she was on the bed. On the top bedspread like she hadn’t slept there. And I could see her hips down to her feet. She was...”

“Take your time. I know this has all been a shock,” Minnie said.

Of the two, Bowers had long ago admitted she was the better interviewer. He chalked it down to a woman thing. They were practiced as listeners and comforters rather than as bosses and confronters. Homicide units with women seemed to dig deeper and plow up more info than the guys. Made for good partnerships.

Kiss of the Cobra

“Well, you saw her. Poor little thing.” He lowered his head. “It was obvious she had passed away. She was all laid out, you know with her privates showing, and I thought right away she was deceased. It just wasn’t—I don’t know. Just wasn’t natural seeing her like that.”

“Did you go into the bedroom?”

“No. Never. Her mother was right behind me, and I didn’t want her to see that. Can you imagine the shock? My god, I was trying to keep her away. And I finally got her out the front door where she collapsed on me. I called 911 and we waited outside for the police and an ambulance to come.”

“Neither one of you entered the bedroom?”

He shook his head. “No. Never.”

“Did you call in on the land line?”

“Yes. I mean like I was so nervous and confused and with Mrs. Williams carrying on, I didn’t think about leaving prints on the phone. But mine will be there.”

“No worries. You did the right thing calling right away.”

Jerry looked up and met each detective’s eyes. “Tell me, Officers. Was she dead when I saw her? If I thought maybe there was a chance I could have done something— “

“You did the right thing, Mr. Riggs. Wendy was deceased for hours before you and her mother discovered her body.”

His shoulders sagged. “Thank god. Thank god. I just feel so sorry for Mrs. Williams. Is she okay?”

“She’s under care. Thanks for your concern. I’m sure she’s grateful for your concern.”

He just nodded before he drifted away to the other side of reality, the place where his dreams would stew and tumble into painful nightmares as the months went on long after Wendy was laid to rest.



The 8th book in the Police Procedural series set at Central Robbery/Homicide Precinct, Portland, Oregon. Detectives John Bowers and partner Minnie Raye are trying to stop a serial killer who stalks single women living alone.

KISS OF THE COBRA - with Detective John Bowers
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