

POLICE PROCEDURAL, BOOK 5 IN JOHN BOWERS SERIES SET IN PORTLAND, OREGON'S CENTRAL PRECINCT. A WOMAN FOUND SHOT TO DEATH IN HER CAR. SCENE IS STAGED TO MIMIC A CARJACKING. DETECTIVES MUST MATCH WITS WITH A CUNNING KILLER WHO LEAVES FEW FORENSIC TRACKS TO FOLLOW.

SWEET SORROW

by RAY BATES

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With Detective John Bowers

SWEET SORROW



RAY BATES

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Chapter Two

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So far so good. Even better than good for Detective Sergeant John Quincy Bowers. He had been married four months to Georgie Meiers. The happy couple had just returned from a long weekend at the Oregon coast, stretching out their final day with a walk on the blustery beach to trail a frenzied collie herding western sandpipers.

After the wedding last October in Judge Helen Wynocki's house in Portland Heights, a send-off from their friends and a quick retreat to a honeymoon cabin, they had returned to the city drained and sore from a sexual marathon interrupted only when the firewood ran out, the rain blew in through the wooden shutters or thirst and hunger called with more urgency than their ravenous libidos. What a great surprise for Bowers to discover that his bride was more passionate, even more ardent in matrimony than she had been in unfettered romance. And he had responded with an energy and abandon he thought he had left far behind him with the dregs of his second marriage to a faithless bimbo who wore him out emotionally, financially and physically.

John had fallen in love with Georgie on the altar threshold. Not until then did his desire, loving respect and affection weld with his lust into a true affair of the heart. Their physical bonding on the honeymoon was just a fillip to Bowers' transformation from a semi-restrained lover to a sexual carnivore who couldn't seem to get enough of this woman. And the best part was waking up each

morning to find cradled in his arms not only his adoring wife but also a languorous lover, best friend and loyal companion he could trust with his most dangerous secrets.

All this was rolled up into one incredible paragon of womanhood – a trim, perennially tanned forty-three-year-old blonde who snagged more second looks and envious sighs strolling down the sidewalk than most wannabes young enough to be her daughter. John Bowers knew he could count on this one for the long haul. Georgie wasn't afraid to leap into the black hole of depression and moody blues his job ground into his soul and share the bumpy ride to rock bottom. This time around it was a refreshing juxtaposition – love first and lust later.

So many things that seemed momentous before he married Georgie, emotional luggage he had dragged into this relationship from his two prior marriages, were magically jettisoned after the nuptials. That left just the two of them to discover the depth of their friendship, their desire for one another free from the hang-ups and fears of rejection, abandonment and disappointment. Neither of them had imagined such freedom to be a benefit of marriage, but each accepted this blissful tranquility with gratitude – Georgie, widow of an alcoholic, abusive cop who had opted for the easy way out via his own revolver, and John, the hollowed-out carcass his mother and two ex-wives had bled dry.

After being neighbors in the same duplex for several months, John Bowers had moved in with Georgie. Along with his residential move, he'd gotten a new partner at Central Precinct Robbery Homicide, a vivacious brunette with a petite, hourglass figure, plush lips and eyes like black Jumbo olives – Sergeant Minola Raye. Minnie had infected Bowers like an Asian virus he couldn't shake, and he suffered serious symptoms even when he wasn't overtly sick. He had risked his career by surrendering his good sense to an insatiable urge to devour her like sushi and had jumped pecker-first into a fling hotter than a bowl of jalapeño peppers.

They had problems. Bowers was so guilt ridden after the affair got started that he had knocked on Georgie's door and promptly confessed his sins. Minnie kept her mouth shut. When Minnie

became engaged to Felix Michael, Multnomah County's Chief Deputy District Attorney, Bowers licked his wounds and tried to holster his appetite for his partner. That didn't work too well either.

Now Minnie was married to Felix, and John was married to Georgie, and the funny part was that since the weddings, which were only three days apart, John Bowers was happier than he could ever remember being, and Minnie was stewing in a bitter juice which kept her mouth turned down in a perpetual scowl. The more John basked and bloomed in his union with Georgie, the more Minnie seemed to twist in the wind, feeling she had drawn the short straw when she let John get away.

"God, it's awful," she whined to her partner as they rode together across town in evening traffic. "I can't stand it. I mean, every time I walk in the door, he's *there*."

"He lives there. So where else would you expect Felix to be?" Bowers had difficulty following her train of thought.

She gripped the wheel of the unmarked police sedan and bullied a compact over to the curb as she cut in front and slipped into the turn-only lane ahead of him. "I know he lives there, John. Jesus," she groaned. "But every freakin' time, he's right there by the damn door. Waiting. He practically follows me to the john, and it bugs the shit out of me."

"Look, it's probably just because you're not used to sharing your place with anybody. When are you guys gonna get your own house?"

"Not until fall. I may be a certified psycho case by then." She slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting a bicyclist who darted out from the curb. "Jesus! Jerk!" She leaned on the horn and then finished her right turn. "So what do you do to get some space? How do you keep Georgie from driving you nuts?"

He hadn't thought of it that way. Not in a long time. It was already hard to remember when he had been married to Doris, wife number two, and how he had dreaded opening the front door and staring into those Miss Piggy eyes with nothing to say. "It's just different with us, Minnie," he copped out, knowing she was about to snap his head off.

"It's always different with you. You make her sound like a Missus America clone."

His gunmetal-gray eyes hardened. "Minnie, don't start on Georgie or I'm gonna get ugly all over you."

"Oh, right. Bite my head off, get pissed at me just because I'm human, right? Just because I'm not some tanning-booth babe who stays home and bakes cookies all day."

His hand came over, caught her shoulder and pressed hard enough to leave a mark when she undressed later. "Cool it, Sergeant." He released his grip and left her trembling. "Georgie is strictly off limits between us from now on."

"I should have taken the transfer, right? That's what you're thinking," she pouted. "Go ahead and say it."

She knew that the decision to pass up the Senior Detective Sergeant's opening was hers alone. John had let her make the decision, promising nothing, refusing to acknowledge that their personal relationship could ever resume its intimacy once they were both married. She had stayed at Central Precinct, continued as his partner, and now she seemed to be taking out her frustrations on him. Frustrations because the marriage was more difficult than she had anticipated, and because John Bowers intended to keep his marital vows. Worse, John Bowers *wanted* to keep his promises to Georgie and had actually rebuffed Minnie's thinly veiled invitations to resume their former affair.

"Well?" she demanded.

"That was your decision, Minnie. Leave me the hell out of it."

"You're the one who had the problem with the guilt trip. I could handle it."

"Congratulations. So you're a better liar and cheat than I am."

"All I'm saying is that it didn't hurt anybody. We were good for each other."

"Yeah," he groused, jerking his jacket collar up. "Like matches and dry grass."

"It was good. The very best, dammit."

He hoped it was safe to be honest with her. "It was stupendous. Way past good."

“Awesome. If we had just been a regular couple making out in suburbia somewhere, it might have been different. Hey, it wasn’t that, was it?”

“What?” He knew damn well the forbidden-fruit aspect had added some adrenaline to his pump when he was with her, burrowing into her toasty hollows like a heat-seeking rocket, steeping himself to a simmer in her juices.

“You know.” She turned quickly to check his expression. “Trying not to get caught, the secrecy and sneaking.”

“That was part of it maybe.”

She slowed the car down, a sure sign she was depressed and disappointed with his confession. She flipped on the turn signal and headed north again in sight of the Justice Center. “Well, it wasn’t for me really.”

“Bullshit. You thrive on chaos, Minnie Pearl. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with Felix. He’s too rational, totally in control, too normal. You can’t handle normal.”

Her eyes were blazing like searchlights. “What a buncha crap.”

“We made it in the backseat of the patrol car, in the Winnebago parked right in front of the Commander’s house, and about ten minutes before you put on your wedding dress, you were trying *me* on. Last I checked, that’s not generally considered rational, normal behavior.” He looked out the window. “So tell me about normal, Minnie.”

“We could have gotten together more, gone away and acted like normal people, but you always resisted planning. Like the planning made it worse than giving in to a sudden impulse.”

“Bullshit,” he snapped, feeling his guts churning like an old Maytag washer because she’d hit the bull’s eye. Dead center. It had all been a complicated way to avoid admitting his own infidelity and letting his dick brain overrule his conscience when it came down to the nitty gritty with Minnie.

“If you had just been honest with yourself, John, you’d see it was because you didn’t really want to commit to us.”

"I figured you'd get around to that *Cosmo* crap." He wanted to concede early and avoid her rooting in his guilty nooks and crannies. "Let's call it a draw. Things are different now."

"Worse not better."

"Not for me."

"Maybe for you and Georgie, but I can't handle this marriage."

"Like what's so bad?"

"Like the togetherness thing. Hey, I've been on my own for seventeen years since I went off to college. And now it's like Felix thinks he owns all my time, has to direct traffic for me twenty-four hours a day. Christ, the man can't do a fucking thing for himself."

"Like what?"

"Like if he's hungry, I have to be part of his food-chain agenda."

Bowers grinned. Here he was living with the Northwest's greatest culinary artist, and Minnie was bitching about turning on the microwave for Felix's Swanson's Frozen Dinner.

"If he's hungry, he can eat. And if he notices the sink is dirty, he can clean the damn dishes. What am I – his mother?" She puffed her cheeks and stopped for a red light. While she fumed, she thumped her fingers on the steering wheel. "That woman talks to the man every single day, calls us in the morning before he leaves for work and wants to know if he's feeling alright, if he slept well, what he's going to do today. She might as well have an intercom installed in the bedroom."

"You'll get used to it," he lied. He knew Mrs. Michael. She was the original model for the interfering Jewish mother-in-law. She was like a slab of granite blocking the road – better just to detour and give the scenery the proper respect.

"When I answer the phone, John, she says to me 'How is he?' Shit, I could be dying, and she'd be worried his socks weren't ironed."

"I went through all this shit with my first wife. I'm telling you to give it time."

"I thought you said you were miserable for fifteen years until Leslie dumped you."

He sighed. "Okay. Be nasty. Be mean and bitchy, Minnie. If you don't want any advice, then just keep it to yourself, okay? I don't wanna hear it."

"I was worried about Georgie being able to keep the reins on you, and now I'm mad as hell with Felix, and you're like the perfect couple. Felix is the one-minute man, you know what I mean?"

"No. Don't want to either."

"Always too tired, too busy, too damn preoccupied with his work or his damn mother who knows every little goddammed thing going on. He calls her every day, can you believe that?"

Mrs. Michael not only doted on her only child, she inserted herself into every aspect of his career, his leisure time and now his marriage to Minnie. Butting into everybody's business but her own was her main occupation in life. She had jumped a significant hurdle accepting his choice of a Southern Baptist gentile for a bride, and Bowers had given her a lot of credit for her lack of organized opposition to Minnie. But Felix's mother loved her son enough to know there wasn't anybody else he wanted, and she yearned for a daughter-in-law young enough to give her grandchildren.

Minnie shook her head. "It's unbelievable. She calls, and I tell her he's in the john. She says she'll wait. Unbelievable. Totally unbelievable. Every weekend we go over to her place for dinner, and she's dropping all these hints about us getting pregnant before it's too late. Like I'm a couple steps away from total senility. It's pathetic."

"She wants a grandchild, Minnie."

"*She* wants? Well, what about what *I* want? Do I look like some sorta baby machine?"

"Definitely." A grin cracked his face open at the suggestion. He made a quick inventory of the generous bosom, plump behind and curvy hips. A Madonna in blue.

"You men are all alike. See a female under sixty, and just one thing comes to mind."

He liked this woman so much, felt such a close, warm affection for his partner, his buddy, his lover once. Now he felt weak and impotent for not being able to pull her out of the doldrums, make her sparkle and shine the way she did a year ago. "Minnie Pearl," he

used his favorite nickname for her, “what’s really bugging you? This isn’t just because you’re unhappy about Felix leaving the cap off the toothpaste, right?”

“Can’t you figure it out? You’re a two-time loser so I figured you’d know all about it.”

“You gotta give it a chance to work.”

Her eyes flashed as she blew the Chevy sedan through an amber light. Minnie drove with an aggressive energy more suitable for demolition derbies or Alabama bootleggers than a city employee. Bowers was used to her style behind the wheel by now and was surprised only when she got caught by a red light, failed to pass every car on the highway or avoided rolling over a curb or two.

“I can’t stand being smothered, his always being there, staring at me when I wake up in the morning, coming into the john when I’m soaking in the tub trying to zone out. Talking, always talking to me, John. Never lets me just sit and shut the fuck up.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I mean sometimes you can’t talk to anybody, right? You understand that. I understand that. Hell, every cop knows that. The job follows you home sometimes. Why doesn’t Felix listen when I tell him to back off?”

“You’re newlyweds for crissakes. He’s in love.”

“So what about Georgie?”

“Minnie, dammit –”

“Okay, okay.” She raised a hand to defend herself. “I’m just asking. How does she do it?”

“Georgie was married for twenty miserable years to a cop, a drunk who used to chase her around the house with his gun pointed at her head. She understands this shit, Minnie. Hell, I don’t know. She just knows when to fade out and leave me alone. It works.”

“Since she’s home all day you’d think she’d be stir crazy, ready to talk your ear off when you walked through the front door.”

“She keeps busy, works in her garden, reads, takes care of me and the house.” He grinned as his salivary glands flooded his mouth just thinking about Georgie’s redolent kitchen. “And cooks.”

“How come she doesn’t have a job? She gets by on her husband’s police pension?”

“Nosy, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ve wondered about that.”

“She was a nurse. Pediatrics. But she bought some property after her husband died, and she lives on the income.”

Minnie slowed for the garage entrance and took the turn down the ramp a bit slower than usual. “So she owns a buncha houses or something?”

“Apartments mostly. Owns our duplex as a matter of fact. She does alright.”

Minnie found a space and pulled in, jerked on the parking brake and killed the engine. “Don’t tell me you married a rich widow.”

There was a trace of scorn hidden in her eyes that Bowers pretended not to see. “Yep.”

“So are you going to retire and live off her money?”

His steely stare chilled her like Cascade runoff. What she wanted most as she got out of the car was a reset button. No idea why she blurted such a stupid thing. Probably because she was still mad at her partner for getting it all together when she was left hanging.

She followed meekly as he headed for the elevator to the homicide squad on the thirteenth floor.

The Justice Center anchored the Main Street park blocks to the east. The neoclassical Multnomah Courthouse stood slightly uphill on the west side of the tree line cooled by Irish-green grass and the Roosevelt Elk fountain which back in the day was an oasis for city workers and passersby. Pensive strollers and brown-baggers lolled in the leafy shade of aged elms standing sentinel since the days when the Willamette River was jammed with steamers and clippers from across the Pacific, and horse-drawn cabs clattered on the cobblestones from Old Town to Broadway and jammed Portland’s byways with all manner of transport.

Minnie was first out when the elevator bumped to a stop. “He’s driving me crazy, John. I’m thinking about splitting, cutting my losses and getting out before things get worse.”

“For crissakes, Minnie. Put on the brakes, just chill out and give it a chance.”

“I need my space. I feel like I’m in a prison lockdown, John. I love him, but he’s driving me nuts. I wish I’d never done it.”

“What?”

“Let you go, John. I wish I’d never done that.”

Before his brain could censor his tongue, the words were out and raining all over her moody blues. “Let’s get this straight – you didn’t let me go. I chose Georgie, and you chose Felix. Stop feeling so goddam sorry for yourself and work a little harder on your marriage. Give the guy a break. Felix deserves better than this, Minnie. A helluva lot better.”

It was bad enough for John Bowers that his friend Felix Michael had been cuckolded even on his wedding day. What was worse was the realization for Bowers that he had narrowly missed losing Georgie altogether, thrown over the best relationship he’d had in all his forty-eight years for the thrill of mainlining Minnie Raye’s turbo-charged sensuality through his veins like crack cocaine. Now with the luxury of success, he looked back on his precipitous recklessness with amazement. If he had known then what he knew now. Yeah, yeah. It was called experience. And John Bowers was an A student these days.

“I’m trying, John, but he isn’t making it any easier.”

“Try being nice. Nice works.”

“I am nice. He’s the well-adjusted genius who never misses a chance to tell me what my four major psychoses are.”

They entered the squad room through the security door and headed for their cubes. As he stood at his desk and shed his raincoat, he could feel her eyes burning holes through the back of his head. The good news was he didn’t think about the rest of it, the times they meshed like Ferrari gears, lying tangled in sweaty sheets, hot breath on their faces, losing track of where their own bodily sensations ended and their partner’s began. Now when he looked at Minnie Raye’s dimpled cheeks, he saw an incipient fold of excess flesh tugging at her jawline and noticed fine creases scar the corners of her eyes.

It was getting easier and easier for him to look away when she drilled him with a hungry stare and dared him to stick a finger in the pie. Not anymore. He had stolen his last cherry, sucked on his last purloined fruit. He was surprised to discover how relieved he was considering the fact that he would never have to keep his heart from pounding through his shirt as he stripped and prayed like hell no one would shine a flashlight in his eyes before his pants were zipped.

Bowers watched Minnie unbutton her jacket. The waistband of her slacks was folded over, and her blouse barely concealed her blooming bosom.

"You guys had a nice weekend at the coast, huh?" she asked with an attitude he could do without.

"Great."

"Must be nice."

"Why don't you and Felix get away for the weekend somewhere?"

"Can't. Felix is working. Cranking up for a capital case going to trial on the fifth."

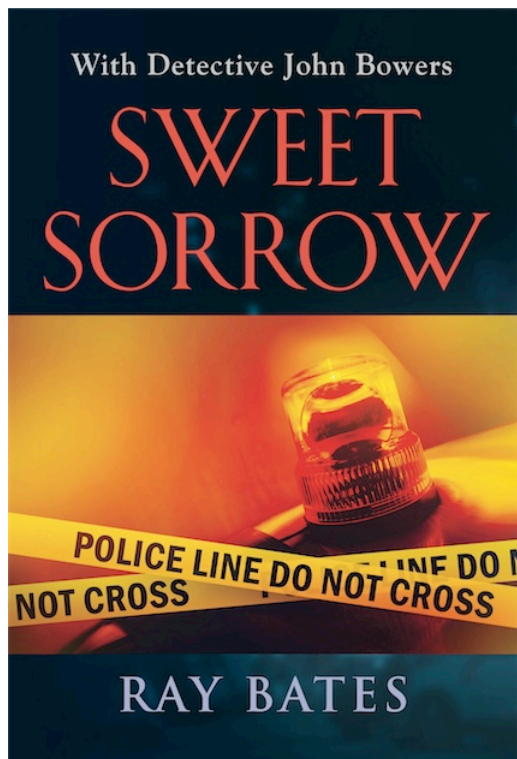
"So what are you gonna do over the weekend?"

"You really wanna know, John? Iron sheets and pillow cases, wash my hair, do my nails, shave my legs and mop the kitchen floor."

He reached for a thick file atop his stack. "Sorry I asked."

"Well, I'm just sorry," she groused, swiveling around to face a stack of incoming.

His phone rang, and he swung an arm out to catch it. "Bowers. Robbery Homicide." He glanced up at the clock. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Minnie Raye slip off her wedding band and put it in her jacket pocket.



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