

CLOSE

A Novella

by

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## CHAPTER 1

Old Market, near downtown Omaha, after 3 a.m.

A man, looking awkward in a sports jacket and tie, walked briskly toward the restaurant where he was supposed to meet his wife for their belated anniversary dinner. She had hinted at something nice to come.

He turned the corner on 12th Street, and a couple sideswiped him, jostling him a little. The man reached back automatically to check for something on his belt, smiling a little as he grabbed only air.

He continued his pace, never slowing, and as he passed an alley, a glimmer caught his eye. He glanced at the light, which was emanating deep from the alley, and his jaw dropped to the pavement.

At the end of the alley stood a knockout Harley Davidson VRSCX, flashing its custom chrome in an uncharacteristically bright light. Next to the hawg, caressing it like one of Bob Barker's girls, was his wife in an evening dress to match.

The man not unexpectedly hesitated for a second or two, shaking his head at the scene. "Honey?" he called to her.

The woman's finger gracefully traced the edges of the aerodynamic fuel tank, her face drawn into a strange marathon smile.

The man matched her smile and sauntered down the alley toward her and the bike.

"Hon? You said you'd surprise me at M's. I never thought –"

When he neared the bike, he tripped over something and looked down. His smile melted quickly into a look of horror. The woman reached up and removed her face and scalp like a mask. Underneath grinned a man with a grizzled beard and a missing ear. The evening dress hung on him in his scrawniness.

The man stood, silently, as his gaze moved from the thing he had tripped over to the earless man and then to the bike, and back again to what lay on the alley pavement before him. Returning to his senses, he reached again for something that should have been on a holster attached to his belt.

A hooded man stepped silently out of a dark doorway and stood behind him. “Nice bike, huh?” asked the hooded man with a cold, passive voice.

The man didn’t have time to answer.

## CHAPTER 2

Preston King, Omaha Police Department's finest homicide detective, was jerked awake at four-thirty a.m. by his cell phone. He grabbed it automatically and swung it open. He listened, then grunted.

He dragged his 53-year old body out of bed. After stopping a moment to let the bones creak into place, he kicked the garbage can hard, sending it through an open window into the night. Aleisha, King's wife, pulled a pillow over her head in frustration.

The alley was illuminated by portable halogen lights, which had attracted a great number of flying bugs. The walls washed red, blue, and white from the police car lights. Yawning news cameramen were assembling across the street behind the yellow tape. The motorcycle was gone.

The bodies weren't.

Lise Featherow, with the daisy-soft look of a desk cop, gingerly lifted the tape and started to step under it. A uniformed police officer stopped her.

It was now or never. Lise showed her badge. "I'm with the detective."

"No you ain't," said the cop.

"Uh, yes. Yes I am. Here's --" She was trying to dig a letter out of her purse. "Where the hell is it?" she asked herself, not realizing she was speaking out loud.

"Save the papers," said the cop. "You ain't with him cause he ain't here yet."

Lise looked around. Everything had come to a halt. She didn't know if it was because she had arrived or because the detective had not.

"I'll -- I'll wait over here, then."

"You do that."

The cop pushed her back a little more roughly than he should have.

"I'm a police officer, just like you," she said, smoothing her shirt.

"Yeah, right," responded the officer.

"I have a letter from the captain!" she said.

"Yeah? I got a letter for him, too." Said the cop, flipping her the bird. "Take that back to him, huh sweetie?"

Lise could not believe what she had just seen.

That would be nothing compared to what she was about to see.

“Look.” Said the cop, since there was nothing else to do but wait. “I got twenty-three years, an’ I ain’t gonna flush it by lettin’ some newbie into the crime scene. If he wants to big brother you over there, that’s his business.”

Lise pulled out a tablet and pen. At least she could find THEM.

“What’s your badge number and name? You’ve got to be the rudest –“

“555-1212. Richard Hertz. Call me Dick, for short. But don’t call me short dick, I get awful surly when you call me short dick.

Shocked, Lise stood back. “You’ve got to be the rudest –“

A big old Crown Vic pulled up to the tape and screeched to a halt. Preston King climbed out of the Vic and headed for the tape. Lise rushed to him.

“Detective King?”

King did not even look at her as he headed toward the lead officer. “Get a statement from the spokeswoman in the morning. I’m trying to work here.”

“I – I’m not the press. I’m –“

King blew by her and ducked under the tape.

Lise finally had it. “Detective!”

“Let the man do his work,” said the cop.

“Let me do mine!” retorted Lise.

King stopped, turning to the cop. “Am I supposed to know her?”

Lise finally got a chance to speak up. “Lise Featherow. Your shadow. Detective in training, you know. Gonsalves put a letter in your mailbox.”

The look on King's face went from sick to miserable. "Oh, shit. Not tonight. No. This isn't a good time. Not at all. Go home and get some sleep, honey. Go home."

Now Lise was steamed. "You wouldn't answer my calls. It's been a week. I've lost a whole week of shadowing, and you know they only give you a few weeks until you meet with the promotion board –"

"Hey!" said King, finally shutting her off.

When she was quiet, he continued. "We've got a double homicide, including one of our own, getting' the shit eatin' outa them by bugs, and the evidence is drainin' into the Missouri even as we speak. So outa' respect for a dead cop and his wife, if nothin' else, go home and let me do my work."

"I promise," said Lise. "I won't get in the way. I – I'll buy you coffee. And food. When you're ready for it, of course. Please. Please let me start tonight. Please?" King looked her over a moment.

"Detective?" called the lead officer.

"Stay the fuck out of my way," said King. He nodded to the cop by the tape.

"This is your lucky day, girly-girl," said the cop. "You get to see a real crime scene. Oooooooo."

The cop let her pass and Lise and King walked toward the scene. The lead officer joined them. "Double homicide. The male has deep lacerations to the back, both inserted with surgical precision between the 9th and 10th thoracic vertebrae."

"Surgical precision," asked King. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that whoever did this knew exactly what he was doing. He was very quick and efficient."

King nodded, they started again toward the crime scene, but the lead officer held them back for a moment.

“Detective,” he said, making King stop. “Get this. The female victim. He took her face and her . . . hair. Her scalp. Like cowboys and Indians.”

King stared at the lead officer for a moment.

Lise wilted back. Maybe tonight wasn’t the best time to start after all.

The lead officer continued, “Whoever did this, had all the time in the world.”

King nodded, and they all three approached the bodies, even more gravely than before.

King looked over at Lise. “You ready for this?”

She wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready for any of this. The razzing she was getting for getting chosen as a detective candidate. The bullshit she was getting just trying to shadow a working detective for a couple of weeks. And now, she wasn’t ready, she was sure, for whatever was under these two sheets. Lise nodded. “Sure,” she said, trying to convince herself. “Sure, I’m ready.”

The lead officer pulled the sheet away from the woman victim first, revealing a beautifully sculpted and toned body, totatally nude. The middle of the neck, just under the chin, had been sliced open deeply, causing the head to lay at a peculiar angle to the rest of the body. The face was uncovered muscle, with little wads of fat at the cheeks. The lidless eyes stared at her, knowingly, it seemed.

“Looks like he put the time to good use,” said King, shaking his head. He turned to Lise, but she was gone. He heard a growl and a splatter behind him, against the wall a few feet away.

“Tell me she’s not fuckin’ up the crime scene,” asked the lead officer, with a slight smile.

King leaned toward him, confidentially. “You already sweep it?”

The lead officer nodded.

“She doesn’t have to know that, does she?” King asked, again, glancing at Lise, who was still trying to get her stomach back out of her mouth.

“If anybody asks me, she just fucked the whole case for us.” Said the lead officer. King smiled a little at him, then looked around for the first time. “Anybody hear anything?” he asked.

“Nobody’s been a hero yet.” Answered the lead officer. “One thing, though –“

The lead officer re-covered the woman’s body and led King around behind her.

“Motorcycle tracks. Recent. Maybe even tonight.”

“Bikers?” asked King.

The lead officer shook his head. “One bike. And no toothless wonder is going to ride this. Can’t say for sure, but I’ve ridden about twenty-two years, and the tread says big fat Harley. Show piece. The ultimate wet dream for rich urban bikers.”

“Good enough to die for?”

The lead officer thought about it for a bit. “Absolutely. I’m just glad as hell I didn’t see it first.”

King patted the lead officer on the back. “Me, too.”

He walked over to Lise, who was leaning against the wall, wiping her chin with her sleeve.

“You ready to look at the second one?” King asked.



Lise lurched and bent over again, heaving the rest of the night's dinner onto his feet.

"That's what I thought," he said.

King headed back to his car. The lead officer joined him. "Can you put the report on my desk?" asked King.

The lead officer nodded.

"I'm gonna get some shuteye."

"What do you want me to do with her?" he asked, thumbing toward Lise.

"Hose her off and send her back postage due," he said, climbing under the tape.

Lise stared after him, and tried to keep her eyes from traveling over to the bodies, still under the sheets. The coroner had arrived, and things were going to get gruesome again really soon.

She thought she was ready to be a detective.

Now she wasn't sure.

### CHAPTER 3

Preston King stood at the hot dog stand, which was set up right out front of the precinct during lunchtime. He was watching Dante Savoy, the hotdog vendor, meticulously put together a custom dog. Dante was ageless because he sported the cornrows of a teenager, the smile of a twenty year old, the clear gaze of a thirty year old, the wisdom of a forty year old, and the wrinkles of a sixty year old.

“Now Mr. K,” said Dante, “Isn't your wife going to be wantin' some of that jumbo dog at that time a' night?”

“Yeah, well.” Said King. “ Gonna have to keep it in its wrapper one night. It's not like it's gonna spoil you know.”

“I think you might be for askin' her if she's up for the dog, you know.”

“No. I -- I think it's time. Tonight.”

Dante shrugged, and handed him the frank.

Lise, coming out of the station, stepped up behind him.

“I'm buying. I'll have one of the same, please.”

King turned to see who was the generous party; an annoyed look immediately crossed his face.

“You sure you can take that? After last night?” he asked.

Dante piped in. “I don't want to hear about these police clandestine relations. It don't sit well with the Dante, it don't.”

Lise was lost for a moment. No, she wasn't sure of anything. But both King and Dante were staring at her. She'd better say something.

“I -- flu. I'm better now. I'll be better now. From now on.”

Dante was not so meticulous putting together her frank.

“There is no now on,” said King.

“You can't --“

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