

NIGHT KILLERS
A Crime Thriller Novel

By R. Barri Flowers

PROLOGUE

Browsing the shelves in the town library, she looked for the perfect book to read for her English class paper—hopefully something that wouldn't put her to sleep this weekend. Or have her so harried for one reason or another that she wanted to scream. Of course, she could think of even better things to do with her time. At the top of the list was hanging out with her boyfriend, Trent. They were both seniors and planning to attend the University of Oregon in the fall. There would be plenty of opportunities then to spend time together without their parents looking over their shoulders. Fortunately, she didn't have to wait that long as they had made plans to get together that very night. Beyond that, she would take his company any and every time it came her way.

There. She zeroed in on a copy of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. The classic had long been on her wish list and would be a great book to study. Now was the perfect time to go for it. *So I will*, she thought.

She pulled the book off the shelf. In the open slot where the book had been, she was startled to see a guy staring at her from the other side. She recognized him from school, but didn't know him personally. For an instant, she thought about saying hello, but he was giving her the creeps the way he just stood there gaping at her through dark eyes with a crooked grin.

Cradling the book to her chest, she quickly turned away and hurried down to the main floor to the checkout counter. She was sure he would follow her, but when she looked over her shoulder he was nowhere to be found. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. Maybe she had allowed her imagination to run wild. Or maybe not. Either way, she just wanted to get out of there and go home. *I'll be safe there*, she thought.

As she took her usual shortcut through the woods, simple or entertaining thoughts occupying her mind, she suddenly had the feeling that she was being followed. It wasn't so much that she heard steps pressing against the dirt path or crunching the autumn leaves that had fallen from trees. No, it was more of an instinct. The type that had rarely failed her in seventeen years of life. *So why should it be any different now?* she mused ill at ease.

Whipping her head around, long blonde hair flying wildly, she looked behind her and saw nothing. Maybe she had allowed herself to be spooked by that creepy guy from the library. Either that, or she may have watched one too many movies about killers in the woods with her half sister or girlfriends.

Chill, she ordered herself, but still thought it wise to pick up the pace.

Then she heard something. Her first thought was that it was an animal. There were stray dogs trying to find their way home through the woods. Most were harmless. Other times, deer occupied the setting, enjoying the freedom of movement and serenity amongst the tall oaks. No, this was something else. Or *someone* else, following her.

Again, she looked around this way and that as panic engulfed her like fire. At first, she drew a blank as nothing but the trees stared back at her in the late afternoon. Then she detected movement. Someone was there, hiding behind a tree, as if to toy with her. She couldn't tell if it was a male or female. No, it was a male, she decided, based on the height and what looked to be part of a tennis shoe.

"Who's there?" she asked, her heart skipping a beat as she walked even faster.

There was no response. Instead, she heard what sounded like heavy steps on the ground. It appeared as if there was more than one person out there, though she wasn't sure if this was an exaggeration. The sounds of laughter that followed made it all too clear that she was being stalked by multiple people.

Her heart lurched against her chest in fear. She had to get out of the woods and into safety. With that thought in mind, she broke into an all-out sprint, having been on the girls track team her junior year. If someone wanted to hurt her, they would have to catch her first. *I'm not about to let that happen*, she thought, feeling an adrenalin rush in her resolve. Why make herself an easy target?

It never occurred to her that instead of running away from danger, she was running right into the hands of it.

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They had followed her from the library, not giving a clue as to their intentions. Having passed the bottle of beer back and forth between them, along with a joint, they had more than enough of a buzz to see this through. That, along with the strong desire to knock her off her high horse by showing her what she was missing and more.

The clear leader of the pack used a combination of cool-headed calculations, charisma, and intimidation to get the others to follow, knowing just how to push their buttons while reaping the most benefits. He had fully anticipated the target's every move and had a counter move to make sure she didn't get away. The others did as they were told and the prey was captured like a pretty, sexy spider in a deadly web from which there was no escape.

While she put up a better than expected fight, it proved to be futile at the end. They got what they wanted from her and some extra while taking full advantage of the situation. Now all they had to do was cover their tracks and everything could go back to normal.

Or would that ever be possible?

CHAPTER ONE

Night, Oregon, was a place that prided itself as having many of the amenities of big city life while maintaining the small-town charm as envisioned by its founder, Joseph Night, a pioneer, way back in the mid-19th century. Located not far from the California border in Hubbard County, in the Rogue Valley between the Siskiyou Mountains and Cascade Range, Night had progressed accordingly through the many decades since, keeping up with modern advancements and attracting new residents and businesses as a reflection of its genial appeal and prosperity.

Police Detective Bradley Pleshette had spent his entire life in Night, including the last five years as a member of the Night Police Department, and couldn't imagine living anywhere else. He had met his wife, Andrea, there and they were raising two preteen daughters. He couldn't imagine them just disappearing with barely a trace. Frankly, the mere thought gave him the shakes. As such, it wasn't difficult for Pleshette to step into the shoes of Mildred and Alan Crowley, whose seventeen-year-old daughter, Tessa, had been missing for three days.

According to the police report filed, Tessa Katie Crowley, a senior at Night High School, had phoned her parents after school to tell them she was going to the library to do some research for a school term paper. She was last seen around six p.m. last Tuesday, outside the Palms Library by two other females. She was alone and had apparently been headed home while taking a shortcut through the wooded area behind the building. Prior to that, it was learned that Tessa had checked a book out of the library, leaving shortly thereafter. The missing girl was described as green-eyed with long, straight blonde hair, five feet, six inches tall, and approximately one hundred and twenty pounds. She was believed to be wearing a purple ski jacket, parfait colored funnel neck boxy sweater, blue slacks, and black low-heeled suede boots; as well as her high school class ring with her first and middle names, Tessa Katie, on it.

"What do you make of this?" Police Chief Ned Breckenridge asked from behind his desk, looking up at him through thick glasses.

What don't I make of it? Pleshette mused. He hesitated to offer his opinion, as he didn't want to give an impression one way or the other at this point. That included the fact that he had been advised by the girl's father that Tessa had run away once at thirteen after getting into a fight with her parents over being grounded for skipping classes. She had returned home after a few hours and well before any police report could be filed, and had apparently not had any such problems since. But the fact that it had happened at all told Pleshette he couldn't rule out that she had taken off again—perhaps with a boy, though he had no reason at this point to believe this was the case.

On the contrary, given that the book she checked out of the library had been found in the woods suggested to him that she had dropped it unintentionally. Or in the process of running away from someone. Or being attacked.

Also, he was disturbed that after three days, there had been neither sight nor sound of Tessa Crowley. Not a good sign. Still, it offered hope that she was somewhere, still alive, if not well.

"I'd rather not speculate at this point, Chief," Pleshette responded evenly, understanding that he was taking the easier way out for everyone's sake. "We're still in the early stages of the investigation. As soon as there's something concrete—"

Breckenridge grimaced. "That better be sooner than later," he ordered. "We can't have something like this hanging over the department. If the girl left of her own accord, find her and bring her back home where she belongs. If something else happened to her, we all need to know, for better or worse—"

Pleshette nodded. "I understand." He did, all too well. The last thing they needed was to have foul play on their hands and one or more killers on the loose in Night. "We'll get to the bottom of

it,” he assured him, running a hand through coarse dark hair, while trying to convince himself as much as the chief.

Breckenridge sat back on that positive note. “Good. Keep me posted.”

“Don’t I always?” Pleshette threw out more sardonically than he had intended, knowing this was nothing to make light of.

Though it wasn’t required and maybe not even necessary at this stage of the investigation, he notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the teenager’s disappearance. He could only hope there was no need for them to get involved in the case, having already bumped heads with them from time to time.

In the meantime, the increasingly desperate search went on for Tessa Crowley. Bloodhounds were used to comb the woods and nearby areas for any leads that could point them in the right direction. The department dispatched helicopters to survey the landscape in wanting to leave no stone unturned in the investigation. Investigators interviewed and re-interviewed those who knew her, knew of her, or even wanted to know her. There were no red flags to speak of. She was dating eighteen-year-old Trent McAuliffe, who had an alibi for the time in question, passed a lie detector test, and was not considered a suspect regarding Tessa’s disappearance. By all accounts, she was a bright, popular girl at school, who also happened to be a student athlete and a member of a church youth group, and had no enemies that came to light.

Seeking to use every tool at their disposal with time of the essence, the authorities, family, and friends of the missing teen circulated and posted thousands of sketches and pictures of the missing high school senior at local businesses, malls and restaurants, parks and theaters, and other places; and handed them out to everyone they came upon, hoping against hope it would lead to Tessa’s whereabouts. A reward of \$25,000 was offered for any credible information that led to the young woman’s safe return home.

In spite of these efforts, authorities drew a blank. Tessa Crowley had simply vanished, as though having never been in existence. What few clues there were, the belief was that it was more likely she had been the victim of foul play than ran off to start a new life to parts unknown.

But believing this and proving it were two different things. It was something Bradley Pleshette had to live with and be haunted by as the years passed and Tessa Crowley would become a fading memory, her disappearance still on the books as missing, and the case unsolved.

CHAPTER TWO

Dawn Whelan had never imagined as a child that her life's work would be about helping other people deal with their psychological problems. But then something happened that turned her world upside down and suddenly she no longer wanted to be a flight attendant or an artist or a singer or even a novelist. Instead, she used her own pain to re-channel her energies and direction. Mental health counseling had become her forte. She had attended college at Washington State University, graduating with degrees in psychology and clinical psychology, before returning to her hometown of Night, Oregon. Difficult as it was, she understood that it was where she needed to be.

Now forty, Dawn sat coolly in the therapy room across from her newest patient named Jerry Donohue. He was just a little younger than her, but looked older, with thinning brown hair, bloodshot brown eyes as though many a sleepless night with bags underneath, and a sagging chin on a long face with a slightly crooked nose. He was dressed in construction work clothing, indicative of his job as a pipefitter.

He was visibly nervous in a setting that she had gone out of her way to make as comfortable as possible with contemporary accent chairs, an antique wall clock, and warm lavender paint on the walls. A square glass top table held a pitcher of water and two ceramic mugs, along with a vase of fresh flowers.

He stared at her as if they were on a date and, for a moment, seemed taken by her high-cheeked beauty and tall, slender physique beneath a gray lapel skirt suit, worn with gray pumps. Or perhaps he imagined what her long and naturally curly raven hair might look like if not in a professional low twisted bun. Then there were her eyes. Deep blue and bold, she considered them to be her best physical attribute. As for the rest, she would leave that to others to judge, never wanting her looks to overshadow her character. Or, in this case, her role as his therapist.

It was at that moment that his gaze took on a more disturbed appearance and Dawn felt a sudden chill, while wondering what was bothering him, as words seemed almost impossible for him to get out. Most of her patients couldn't hold back from sharing whatever burdened them in seeking relief. There were, of course, others that for one reason or another needed extra coaxing.

I'll do my part to ease his mind, she thought. She flashed a gentle smile and tried to reassure him: "Whatever you would like to discuss will not go outside this room. Just take a deep breath and speak when you're ready. I'm here to listen—"

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Jerry Donohue met the pretty eyes of the therapist inside of a nice diamond-shaped face, while wondering if it had been a mistake to come there. He had debated the issue back and forth till his head ached. But every time he chickened out, the burden he carried grew deeper and deeper, affecting every part of his life in ways he once could never have imagined. He knew he couldn't carry this weight any longer. Someone had to carry it with him. Someone other than those who already knew and didn't give a damn, as if it was too ancient and insignificant in their lives today.

But while he was ready to bare his soul, it didn't mean he was an idiot. He had no desire to go to prison any more than the others. Which was why he didn't walk up to a police station and confess his sins. Though not really religious, in spite of a strict Catholic upbringing, he had considered going to a priest, but he wasn't sure that would offer him enough in return that could somehow help him to work through it. If that was even possible.

He hoped the therapist could do just that. He had literally picked her out at random, looking it up on a computer in the library. There were glowing reviews from other patients and ex-patients on how much she had helped them. It was his turn now to put her to the test, knowing that what he

was about to reveal left no turning back for either of them. But, as he saw it, there was no other choice for him at this point. Not even the fact that she wanted to videotape the session deterred him. She said it was standard practice for her, with the patient's permission, in order to better facilitate the best treatment plan. He doubted any treatment could completely rid him of the guilt that ate at him like flesh-eating bacteria. Still, he had to go for it, while taking the therapist at her word that she would keep this just between them.

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"We killed her—" the words slithered from between his chapped lips like a snake.

"Excuse me...?" Dawn wasn't quite sure she heard him correctly. Had she? Killed whom? He said "we." Was he talking about an accident? Or what? *I need to know*, she told herself, more than a little curious. "Who did you...kill?" she pressed.

Jerry Donohue hesitated as though having second thoughts. But his hesitancy gave way to a clear desire to get it out there. He cleared his throat and said: "Twenty years ago, my buddies and I chased down a girl in town...and then raped and murdered her. It wasn't supposed to end that way—not exactly. But things just got out of control and we panicked. We buried her somewhere they would never find her, which they never did, and...got away with it. We weren't supposed to ever talk about it again. But this has been eating away at me for years like cancer. The type that killed my mother and grandmother. I just needed to unload this on someone and finally get it off my chest. I guess that someone is you—"

To say she was speechless would be an understatement. Indeed, it was much more than that. Her entire body was shaking, in spite of her best efforts to the contrary. Trying to come to terms with what her patient just revealed was much more than she ever imagined having to digest.

Dawn's eyes welled with tears. She was sure that Jerry Donohue would assume that it was merely the idea of what he had just confessed. Only it was far more than that.

The timing coincided with the disappearance of her younger sister, Tessa, two decades ago.

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Jerry Donohue studied the psychologist carefully, gauging her reaction to what he had just revealed to her. For an instant, she seemed to get emotional, as though the revelation had a personal effect on her. *Was it my imagination?* he asked himself. But it went away just as quickly and her poised posture of professional detachment returned. He understood that he was laying something heavy on her that she couldn't possibly have anticipated. Yet he felt compelled to unload his burden, taking her at her word that it would go no further than those lavender walls, bound by the therapist-patient confidentiality rule.

Now that he had revealed this deep dark secret, he almost immediately had second thoughts. What if the others somehow found out he'd confessed? Would they freak out and come after him? Or even each other? How would he begin to explain this to his family or anyone else outside the law?

For her part, Dawn was literally floored by the patient's confession—saying it as casually as one might mention a group of teenagers getting together to drink beer, shoplift, or vandalize the school without their parents being the wiser. But rape? Murder? And burying the brutalized student was a different story altogether. She could only imagine what the victim must have gone through in those harrowing final moments of her life. Or even before, when she was accosted from the beginning.

Like an addict in need of a fix, Dawn found herself wanting to hear more about this alleged act of horrific violence before coming to any conclusions and appropriate reaction. Gathering herself, she gave Jerry Donohue an even look and coaxed him into providing more details.

He did just that, as if feeling that with the faucet of truth now running full steam, there was no

way to shut it off. Just the opposite. He seemed more than willing to put it all out on the table, ugly as it was. He answered all her questions, as if on automation, including names of those involved and other pertinent information that had never been revealed by the police or press. That didn't include the whereabouts of the victim's remains, for he seemed to not have a clue. Apparently, the fog of time gone by and being under the influence of alcohol and drugs during the crime had all but erased any memories of this.

But the central question on Dawn's mind that she needed the answer to in order to appease her deepest fears came down to the name of the victim of this crime. It occurred to her that over the course of two decades the confessor might not recall, conveniently having escaped his memory over the safe distance of time.

However, that wasn't the case. After sucking in a ragged breath, Jerry Donohue looked her straight in the eye and said as if not a day had gone by that the name had not popped hauntingly into his head: "Her name was Tessa Crowley..."

Dawn closed her eyes for a moment to let the name sink in. Any thoughts that the victim might have been some other poor girl that wouldn't and couldn't have quite the same effect on her was quickly dispelled. The person that had been so cruelly taken away from her family and friends by this bastard and his friends was, indeed, none other than her little sister. Missing with not so much of a trace of what had happened to Tessa—though it had been assumed by those who knew and loved her that she was no longer able to communicate with them as a living person—Dawn now knew what she had dreaded knowing. Her sister was never coming back, having been robbed of her adulthood and all the wonderful things she might have experienced.

And the man before her was, along with his buddies, responsible for it. Dawn steeled her tattered nerves as she contemplated where to go from here.