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g. p. putnam's sons

new york

g. p. putnam's sons
Publishers Since 1838
a member of
Penguin Putnam Inc.
375 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cornwell, Patricia Daniels.

Southern cross / Patricia Cornwell.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-399-14465-X (acid-free paper)

I. Title.

PS3553.0692S68 1998

98-39751 CIP

813'.54—dc21

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This book is printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Southern Cross

Also by Patricia Cornwell

Postmortem

Body of Evidence

All That Remains

Cruel and Unusual

The Body Farm

From Potter's Field

Cause of Death

Hornet's Nest

Unnatural Exposure

Point of Origin

Scarpetta's Winter Table

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of Ruth Bell Graham*

This is a work of fiction. The events
and characters portrayed are imaginary.
Their resemblance, if any, to real-life
counterparts is entirely coincidental.

TO MARCIA H. MOREY
World champion in juvenile justice
reform and all you've ever done
For what you've taught me

minerals and furs for hatchets, ammunition, cloth, kettles and more fire-water. Slaves were shipped in from Africa. Thomas Jefferson designed Monticello, the Capitol and the state penitentiary. He founded the University of Virginia, drafted the Declaration of Independence and was accused of fathering mulatto children. Railroads were constructed. The tobacco industry flourished and nobody sued.

All in all, life in the genteel city ambled along reasonably well until 1861, when Virginia decided to secede from the Union and the Union wouldn't go along with it. Richmond did not fare well in the Civil War. Afterward, the former capital of the Confederacy went on as best it could with no slaves and bad money. It remained fiercely loyal to its defeated cause, still flaunting its battle flag, the Southern Cross, as Richmonders marched into the next century and survived other terrible wars that were not their problem because they were fought elsewhere.

By the late twentieth century, things were going rather poorly in the capital city. Its homicide rate had climbed as high as second in the nation. Tourism was suffering. Children were carrying guns and knives to school and fighting on the bus. Residents and department stores had abandoned downtown and fled to nearby counties. The tax base was shrinking. City officials and city council members didn't get along. The governor's antebellum mansion needed new plumbing and wiring.

General Assembly delegates continued slamming desktops and insulting one another when they came to town, and the chairman of the House Transportation Committee carried a concealed handgun onto the floor. Dishonest gypsies began dropping by on their migrations north and south, and Richmond became a home away from home for drug dealers traveling along I-95.

The timing was right for a woman to come along and clean house. Or perhaps it was simply that nobody was looking when the city hired its first female police chief, who this moment was out walking her dog. Daffodils and crocuses were blooming, the morning's first light spreading across the horizon, the temperature an unseasonable seventy degrees. Birds were chatty from the branches of budding trees, and Chief Judy Hammer was feeling uplifted and momentarily soothed.

“Good girl, Popeye,” she encouraged her Boston terrier.

It wasn’t an especially kind name for a dog whose huge eyes bulged and pointed at the walls. But when the SPCA had shown the puppy on TV and Hammer had rushed to the phone to adopt her, Popeye was already Popeye and answered only to that name.

Hammer and Popeye kept a good pace through their restored neighborhood of Church Hill, the city’s original site, quite close to where the English planted their cross. Owner and dog moved briskly past antebellum homes with iron fences and porches, and slate and false mansard roofs, and turrets, stone lintels, chased wood, stained glass, scroll-sawn porches, gables, raised so-called English and picturesque basements, and thick chimneys.

They followed East Grace Street to where it ended at an overlook that was the most popular observation point in the city. On one side of the precipice was the radio station WRVA, and on the other was Hammer’s nineteenth-century Greek Revival house, built by a man in the tobacco business about the time the Civil War ended. Hammer loved the old brick, the bracketed cornices and flat roof, and the granite porch. She craved places with a past and always chose to live in the heart of the jurisdiction she served.

She unlocked the front door, turned off the alarm system, freed Popeye from the leash and put her through a quick circuit of sitting, sitting pretty and getting down, in exchange for treats. Hammer walked into the kitchen for coffee, her ritual every morning the same. After her walk and Popeye’s continuing behavioral modification, Hammer would sit in her living room, scan the paper and look out long windows at the vista of tall office buildings, the Capitol, the Medical College of Virginia and acres of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Biotechnology Research Park. It was said that Richmond was becoming the “City of Science,” a place of enlightenment and thriving health.

But as its top law enforcer surveyed edifices and downtown streets, she was all too aware of crumbling brick smokestacks, rusting railroad tracks and viaducts, and abandoned factories and tobacco warehouses with windows painted over and boarded up. She knew that bordering

downtown and not so far from where she lived were five federal housing projects, with two more on Southside. If one told the politically incorrect truth, all were breeding grounds for social chaos and violence and were clear evidence that the Civil War continued to be lost by the South.

Hammer gazed out at a city that had invited her to solve its seemingly hopeless problems. The morning was lighting up and she worried there would be one cruel cold snap left over from winter. Wouldn't that be just like everything else these days, the final petty act, the eradication of what little beauty was left in her horrendously stressful life? Doubts crowded her thoughts.

When she had forged the destiny that had brought her to Richmond, she had refused to entertain the possibility that she had become a fugitive from her own life. Her two sons were grown and had distanced themselves from her long before their father, Seth, had gotten ill and died last spring. Judy Hammer had bravely gone on, gathering her life's mission around her like a crusader's cape.

She resigned from the Charlotte P.D., where she had been resisted and celebrated for the miracles she wrought as its chief. She decided it was her calling to move on to other southern cities and occupy and raze and reconstruct. She made a proposal to the National Institute of Justice that would allow her to pick beleaguered police departments across the South, spend a year in each, and bring all of them into a union of one-for-all and all-for-one.

Hammer's philosophy was simple. She did not believe in cops' rights. She knew for a fact that when officers, the brass, precincts and even chiefs seceded from the department to do their own thing, the result was catastrophic. Crime rates went up. Clearance rates went down. Nobody got along. The citizens that law enforcement was there to protect and serve locked their doors, loaded their guns, cared not for their neighbors, gave cops the finger and blamed everything on them. Hammer's blueprint for enlightenment and change was the New York Crime Control Model of policing known as COMSTAT, or computer-driven statistics.

The acronym was an easy way to define a concept far more complicated than the notion of using technology to map crime patterns and hot

spots in the city. COMSTAT held every cop accountable for everything. No longer could the rank and file and their leaders pass the buck, look the other way, not care, not know the answer, say they couldn't help it, were about to get around to it, hadn't been told, forgot, meant to, didn't feel well or were on the phone or off duty at the time, because on Mondays and Fridays Chief Hammer assembled representatives from all precincts and divisions and gave them hell.

Clearly, Hammer's battle plan was a northern one, but as fate would have it, when she presented her proposal to Richmond's city council, it was preoccupied with infighting, mutiny and usurpations. At the time, it didn't seem like such a bad thing to let someone else solve the city's problems. So it was that Hammer was hired as interim chief for a year and allowed to bring along two talents she had worked with in Charlotte.

Hammer began her occupation of Richmond. Soon enough stubbornness set in. Hatred followed. The city patriarchs wanted Hammer and her NIJ team to go home. There was not a thing the city needed to learn from New York, and Richmonders would be damned before they followed any example set by the turncoat, carpetbagging city of Charlotte, which had a habit of stealing Richmond's banks and Fortune 500 companies.

Deputy Chief Virginia West complained bitterly through painful expressions and exasperated huffs as she jogged around the University of Richmond track. The slate roofs of handsome collegiate Gothic buildings were just beginning to materialize as the sun thought about getting up, and students had yet to venture out except for two young women who were running sprints.

"I can't go much farther," West blurted out to Officer Andy Brazil.

Brazil glanced at his watch. "Seven more minutes," he said. "Then you can walk."

It was the only time she took orders from him. Virginia West had been a deputy chief in Charlotte when Brazil was still going through the

police academy and writing articles for the *Charlotte Observer*. Then Hammer had brought them with her to Richmond so West could head investigations and Brazil could do research, handle public information and start a website.

Although one might argue that, in actuality, West and Brazil were peers on Hammer's NIJ team, in West's mind she outranked Brazil and always would. She was more powerful. He would never have her experience. She was better on the firing range and in fights. She had killed a suspect once, although she wasn't proud of it. Her love affair with Brazil back in their Charlotte days had been due to the very normal intensity of mentoring. So he'd had a crush and she had gone along with it before he got over it. So what.

"You notice anybody else killing himself out here? Except those two girls, who are either on the track team or have an eating disorder," West continued to complain in gasps. "No! And guess why! Because this is stupid as shit! I should be drinking coffee, reading the paper right now."

"If you'd quit talking, you could get into a rhythm," said Brazil, who ran without effort in navy Charlotte P.D. sweats and Saucony shoes that whispered when they touched the red rubberized track.

"You really ought to quit wearing Charlotte shit," she went on talking anyway. "It's bad enough as is. Why make the cops here hate us more?"

"I don't think they hate us." Brazil tried to be positive about how unfriendly and unappreciative Richmond cops had been.

"Yes they do."

"Nobody likes change," Brazil reminded her.

"You seem to," she said.

It was a veiled reference to the rumor West had heard barely a week after they had moved here. Brazil had something going on with his landlady, a wealthy single woman who lived in Church Hill. West had asked for no further information. She had checked out nothing. She did not want to know. She had refused to drive past Brazil's house, much less drop by for a visit.

"I guess I like change when it's good," Brazil was saying.

"Exactly."

"Do you wish you'd stayed in Charlotte?"

"Absolutely."

Brazil picked up his pace just enough to give her his back. She would never forgive him for saying how much he wanted her to come with him to Richmond, for talking her into something yet one more time because he could, because he used words with clarity and conviction. He had carried her away on the rhythm of feelings he clearly no longer had. He had crafted his love into poetry and then fucking read it to someone else.

"There's nothing for me here," said West, who put words together the way she hung doors and shutters and built fences. "I mean let's be honest about it." She wasn't about to paint over anything without stripping it first. "It sucks." She sawed away. "Thank God it's only for a year." She pounded her point.

He replied by picking up his pace.

"Like we're some kind of MASH unit for police departments," she added. "Who were we kidding? What a waste of time. I don't remember when I've wasted so much time."

Brazil glanced at his watch. He didn't seem to be listening to her, and she wished she could get past his broad shoulders and handsome profile. The early sun rubbed gold into his hair. The two college women sprinted past, sweaty and fat-free, their muscular legs pumping as they showed off to Brazil. West felt depressed. She felt old. She halted and bent over, hands on her knees.

"That's it!" she exclaimed, heaving.

"Forty-six more seconds." Brazil ran in place like he was treading water, looking back at her.

"Go on."

"You sure?"

"Fly like the wind." She rudely waved him on. "Damn it," she bitched as her flip phone vibrated on the waistband of her running shorts.

She moved off the track, over to the bleachers, out of the way of hard-bodied people who made her insecure.

"West," she answered.

"Virginia? It's . . ." Hammer's voice pushed through static.

"Chief Hammer?" West loudly said. "Hello?"

"Virginia . . . You there?" Hammer's voice scattered more.

West pressed a hand over her other ear, trying to hear.

". . . That's bullshit . . ." a male voice suddenly broke in.

West started walking, trying to get into a better cell.

"Virginia . . . ?" Hammer's voice barely crackled through.

". . . can do it anytime . . . usual rules apply . . ." The male voice was back.

He had a southern drawl and was obviously a redneck. West felt instant hostility.

". . . time to . . . kill . . . Got to . . . or score . . ." The redneck spoke in distorted blurts.

". . . an ugly dog not worth . . . lead to shoot it . . ." A second redneck suddenly answered the first redneck. "How much . . . ?"

"Depends on . . . Maybe a couple hundred . . ."

". . . Just between us . . ."

". . . If . . . body . . . finds . . ."

". . . not invited . . ."

"What?" Hammer's voice surfaced and was gone.

". . . Use a . . . cold nose . . . Not your piece . . . shit . . . ! Blue . . ."

"Chief Hammer . . ." West started to say more, then caught herself, realizing the rednecks might be able to hear them, too.

". . . coons . . ." The first redneck came back. ". . . not one born too smart for . . . Dismal Swamp . . ."

". . . Got that right, Bubba . . . We covered . . . a blanket . . ."

"Okay, Smudge . . . buddy . . . early morning?"

West was silently shocked as she listened to two men plan a homicide that clearly was racially motivated, a hate crime, a score to settle that involved robbery. It sounded as if the murder would go down early

in the morning. She wondered if a *cold nose* was slang for a snub-nosed revolver and if *blue* referred to a gun that was blue steel versus stainless steel or nickel-plated. Clearly, the psychos planned to wrap the body in a blanket and dump it in the Dismal Swamp.

Static.

“ . . . Loraine . . . ” Bubba’s fractured voice was back. “ . . . At old pumps . . . cut engine . . . headlights off so don’t wake . . . ”

Static, and the cell cleared.

“Chief Hammer?” West said. “Chief Hammer? Are you still there?”

“Bubba . . . ” the second stranger crackled again. “Somebody’s on . . . ”

Static, scratch, blare, blip.

“Goddamn it,” West muttered when her phone went dead.

bubba’s real name was Butner Fluck IV. Unlike so many fearless men devoted to pickup trucks, guns, topless bars and the Southern Cross, he had not been born into the tribe of Bubbas, but rather had grown up the son of a theologian in the Northside neighborhood of Ginter Park, where old mansions were in disrepair and Civil War cannonballs on porches were popular. Butner came from a long line of Butners who always went by the nickname “But,” and it was lost on his erudite father, Dr. But Fluck III, that calling his son But in this day and age set the child up for problems.

By the time little But had entered the first grade, the slurs, the slander and the derision were on every tongue. They were whispered in class, shouted on buses and playing fields, and drawn on sheets of notebook paper slipped from desk to desk or left inside little But’s locker. When he wrote his name it was But Fluck. In the teacher’s grade books he was Fluck, But.

Any way he looked at it, he was screwed, really, and of course his peers came up with any number of other renditions. *Mother-But-Flucker*, *Butter-Flucker*, *But-Flucking-Boy*, *Buttock-Fluck*, and so on. When he re-

treated into his studies and went to the head of the class, new pet names were added to the list. *But-Head*, *Fluck-Head*, *Mother-Flucking-But-Head*, *Head-But-Head*, et al.

For But's ninth birthday he requested camouflage and several toy guns. He became a compulsive eater. He spent a lot of time in the woods hunting imaginary prey. He immersed himself in a growing stash of magazines featuring mercenary soldiers, anarchists, trucks, assault weapons, Civil War battlefields and women in swimsuits. He collected manuals on simple car care and repair, automotive tools and wiring, wilderness survival, fishing, and hiking in bear country. He sneaked cigarettes and was rude. His tenth year he changed his name to Bubba and was feared by all.

This early Monday morning Bubba was driving home from third shift at Philip Morris, his CB and two-way radios turned on, his portable phone plugged into the cigarette lighter, Eric Clapton on the CD player. His stainless steel Colt Anaconda .44 with its eight-inch barrel and Bushnell Holo sight on a B-Square base was tucked under his seat within quick reach.

Multiple antennas bobbed on his red 1990 Jeep Cherokee, which Bubba did not realize had been listed in the *Used Car Buying Guide* as a used car to avoid, or that it had been wrecked and had a hundred thousand more miles on it than the odometer showed. Bubba had no reason to doubt his good buddy, Joe "Smudge" Bruffy, who last year had sold the Jeep to Bubba for only three thousand dollars more than the Blue Book value.

In fact, it was Smudge who Bubba had been talking to on the portable phone moments earlier when two other voices broke in. Bubba hadn't been able to make out what the two women were saying, but the name "Chief Hammer" had been unmistakable. He knew it meant something.

Bubba had been raised in a Presbyterian atmosphere of predestination, God's will, inclusive language, exegesis and colorful stoles. He had rebelled. In college he had studied Far Eastern religions to spite his father, but none of Bubba's acting out had eradicated the essence of his

early indoctrination. Bubba believed there was purpose. Despite all setbacks and personal flaws, he had faith that if he accumulated enough good karma, or perhaps if yin and yang ever got along, he would discover the reason for his existence.

So when he heard Chief Hammer's name over the cell phone, he experienced a sudden release of gloominess and menacing persecution, a buoyant happiness and surge of power. He was transformed into the warrior on a mission he had always been destined to become as he followed Midlothian Turnpike to Muskrat's Auto Rescue, this time for another windshield leak. Bubba snapped up the mike of his two-way Kenwood radio and switched over to the security channel.

"Unit 1 to Unit 2." He tried to raise Honey, his wife, as he followed the four-lane artery of Southside out of Chesterfield County and into the city limits.

No answer. Bubba's eyes scanned his mirrors. A Richmond police cruiser pulled in behind him. Bubba slowed down.

"Unit 1 to Unit 2," Bubba tried again.

No answer. Some shithead kid in a white Ford Explorer was trying to cut in front of Bubba. Bubba sped up.

"Unit 1 to Unit 2!" Bubba hated it when his wife didn't respond to him immediately.

The cop remained on Bubba's tail, dark Oakleys staring straight into Bubba's rearview mirror. Bubba slowed again. The punk in the Explorer tried to ease in front of Bubba, right turn signal flashing. Bubba sped up. He deliberated over what form of communication to use next, and picked up his portable phone. He changed his mind. He thought about trying his wife again on the two-way and decided not to bother. She should have gotten back to him the first and second times. The hell with her. He snapped up the mike to his CB, eyeing the cop in his mirrors and keeping a check on the Explorer.

"Yo, Smudge," Bubba hailed his buddy over the CB. "You on track come back to yack."

"Unit 2," his wife's out-of-breath voice came over the two-way. Bubba's portable phone rang.