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Crossed

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An excerpt from the novel

Crossed

By Meredith Doench

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Prologue

He wasn't a stranger. She knew him from somewhere; this was her first sensation. The girl had been sitting with her back against the cool limestone wall, flip-flops kicked off, while she drew hearts and stars inside her journal. He'd already filled the entrance of the cave before she realized anyone was there. The bright sun obscured his face and the girl's eyes moved down the length of his dark shadow and stopped at his midsection—hips that narrowed so thin. Recognition flashed in her eyes, and with a deep breath, relief washed through her.

“Lose your way?” the girl asked. When he didn't answer, she added, “It's easy to get turned around inside these caves.” Her voice carried along the belly of the cavern and rolled out to the shadow.

When he didn't respond, she spoke again. This time her voice was a bit too loud and her words came out like a helpless bleat toward the stranger. “Most people don't come around here.”

His shadow crept farther and farther over her. She saw the outline of something large and heavy clenched inside his right

hand. There was nowhere for her to go but to retreat deeper inside the cave. The girl hurled at him the only thing she could, the journal, and scrambled away on her hands and knees.

The first blow came hard and quick to the crown of the girl's head. The dark shadow worked quickly near her feet. He lined his tools against the limestone wall: duct tape, a thick rag, an oversized camera lens pulled from the bag. She lay stone-still in a pool of her own blood and listened as he screwed together the pieces of a tripod near her feet.

"Damn it to hell," he grumbled under his breath when one of the legs slipped from his hands.

He bent over to collect the steel beam and the girl took her opportunity. She rolled over and curled her legs against her chest. The shadow turned just as she kicked her feet into his right hip. She held the strength of a seasoned soccer player in those thighs and knocked him down to the ground, the steel leg of the tripod banging against the stone floor. The girl was up and past him before he realized what had happened.

The early August humidity drenched the limestone quarry, thick with summer life. Roping vines wound haphazardly through trees and across the paths. Branches that had once been winter barren now screamed with green leaves and offshoots of growth that clawed at her naked legs, leaving swollen scarlet welts. Bits of jagged stone jutted through the mud-hardened and rocky path that was cockeyed and unpredictable. She left smatterings of blood with each frantic step of her shredded bare feet. The world began to spin

about the girl as her thick, hot, wet blood seeped between her shoulder blades and trickled down her lower back.

Ragged, shallow breaths whistled as though a stone had been shoved deep inside her windpipe. She raced on while the shadow gained on her. There was still a good half mile to go before she would reach the entrance to the quarry, before she could reach safety.

The girl panicked and moved too fast; one foot churned over the next, her arms pumping out of sync with her legs. A stray branch whipped across her left cheek, gouging high on the cheekbone and ripping the skin back to the ear. It was the protruding edge of a large chunk of limestone, though, that caught her toes and threw her forward. Twigs and pebbles bit the heels of her open palms and ground deep below the skin. Her hips jutted out in a travesty of a downward dog position, and for a few seconds her body threatened to collapse beneath her. She shook her head to fight off the sudden flood of oncoming unconsciousness. Cold, gripping fear rocketed through the girl until she was up on her feet. She struggled to keep some semblance of balance and fought to regain speed. She'd only been down a matter of seconds, but it was enough.

The shadow lunged for her, and the swipe of his fingertips grazed the back of her flannel shirt. When she stumbled again, he hooked his thick elbow around her throat and yanked her against his heaving, sweating chest. The girl's legs flew into the air, much like a rag doll's. She kicked wildly, occasionally making contact with his legs, but her efforts were futile. The shadow's vise-grip chokehold slowly closed until everything went black.

Chapter One

Wednesday, January 9

Rowan, my life partner, believes there is a universal truth we all must face: our past never dies. Like a giant wheel, everything circles back around.

Meet everything head-on, Rowan always says. Leave every person and experience with gratitude and peace overflowing inside your heart.

I've insisted on doing things my way, not Rowan's, which is probably the entire reason why I'm back in a town I never wanted to return to. And why I still dream of the man with thin hips.

The town's name, Willow's Ridge, sends my stomach into a burning roil that fills the back of my throat with a bubbly acid. The universe must be playing some sort of cosmic joke on me. Why else would my very first serial case be located in the same town I swore

I'd left forever? White breath clouds escape from my mouth in the cold and I slam my truck door closed. The sky is a dull winter gray with low, thick clouds that seem to rest not far above the tree line. I kick the toes of my lucky Frye boots against the back tire—right, left—knocking loose snow from the intricate and worn treads. Nothing on earth would sound more appealing than to be able to rewind the clock three hours, to go back to when I was nestled in bed with Rowan, safe and so ignorant of what the daylight would bring.

I've worked as a special agent for the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, the BCI, for the past two years. In that time, I've worked a few murder cases and a spree killing, but never a serial. I was trained at the academy for serial murders and profiling, but Ohio isn't exactly a hotbed of Jack the Rippers. Like my dad always said, you have to start somewhere. So my training has been put to work in a number of serial sex crimes and robberies since I landed the job at BCI. I'm always aware, though, that it would only take one serial murder case to write my ticket to the FBI.

Director Colby Sanders's call woke me just after four this morning, his voice as gruff and demanding as he normally is at four in the afternoon. "You got one shot here, Hansen. Understand?" He paused long enough to draw in a deep pull from his cigarette. "Blow this and I'll see to it you land on street patrol with the county cops."

"Yes, sir."

Sanders talks a good game, but I've seen the softer side of him on occasion. He'd been a federal agent, and earlier in his career, he'd worked a number of serial murder cases across the country.

Sanders left the Bureau and came to London, Ohio, to direct the BCI when he turned fifty-five. He has a grown daughter in Columbus and grandkids to keep up with. Sanders knew my father, and I will always be grateful that he hand-selected me upon graduation from the academy.

"I always go with my gut, Hansen. Right now it's screaming you're perfect for this gig—experience or not. Pack for a few days. We've got a third murder in a little over a year."

"A serial."

"Looks that way. The third victim managed to get away from our guy last night but died in surgery about an hour ago."

"Did they get a statement before...?"

"Afraid not." He took another draw on the cigarette. I imagined his leathery face that shows the many hatched lines of sleepless nights and relentless detective duty. His voice carried the weight of years of hard living. "Report to Willow's Ridge station by zero eight hundred hours."

"Willow's Ridge?"

I heard the soft but audible sigh on the other end of the phone and imagined his grit-yellow fingertips grinding out the cigarette butt inside his tin ashtray. "Do I need to assign someone else?"

I kneaded my forehead, the oncoming headache only a few breaths away. "No, sir."

"I'm faxing the files now." There was a shuffling of papers on the other end of the phone. "Good luck, Agent. You're going to need it."

The snow-covered steps lead me up to the entrance of the McCracken County courthouse and police department while nerves

pull at my stomach. Performance anxiety has been my constant companion over the last few years; Rowan says I live in a constant and elevated state of agitation. It doesn't help my nerves to know that the only reason Sanders chose me to work this case over a dozen other agents with many more years of experience is because of my history in Willow's Ridge. My past, not my skill, has landed me a serial—something I never could have seen coming. The wind whips the surrounding flagpoles as metal bangs against frozen metal. A strong gust threatens to plunder the US and Ohio state flags, both nothing more than a flurry of red, white, and blue. Somewhere in the near distance, there is the haunting wail of a train whistle.

Once inside the double glass doors, I drop my satchel on the X-ray belt and dig through layers of clothing for the badge attached to my belt. I flip it open for the young security guard at the checkpoint.

"I can't make the ID. Your head's covered."

I suddenly realize how unofficial I must look. My body is cocooned within my heaviest black coat, one of those puffy ski jackets that always remind me of inflated trash bags. My gray scarf, complete with black dog hair, has been wound repeatedly around my neck and over my mouth. I wouldn't be dressed for this winter weather without my black, Russian-style, faux-fur lined hat with the ear coverings flipped down, a Christmas gift from Rowan. In short, I look a heck of a lot like the Unabomber.

I unwind and uncap myself. "I hate the cold. I just got back from vacation in Maui."

The officer's face softens around the edges of his mouth and eyes as he compares the ID photo to my face. "Welcome to Willow's Ridge. Tonight will be the coldest we've had in years." He flips through a daily log. "Agent Luce Hansen, Captain Frank Davis is waiting for you in the morgue."



The basement's wide corridors feature a line of enormous plate-glass windows with their taupe blinds closed to hide what actually goes on inside the coroner's office. Between the windows, the core values of the Willow's Ridge police and court system have been painted in ornate letters: *honesty, safety, integrity, and self-discipline*.

No matter how you decorate it, though, a morgue is still a morgue. Formaldehyde assaults my nostrils as soon as I push through its glass doors. The lights hum above and cast the quiet lab with an eerie glow of silver and metal. Stryker saws, hammers, scalpels, and other instruments line the counter next to the double sink. Two silver body trays sit side by side in the center of the large room. One holds a white-sheeted body with only the arms, shoulders, and head exposed, while the other holds a stack of case files and evidence bags. Scrapes and multiple bruising appear on the female body. She's fresh. This must be Emma Parks, the young woman that has brought me to Willow's Ridge.

A tall African American man steps out of an office doorway to greet me. "Agent Hansen? Captain Frank Davis." His grip on my

hand is strong and engulfing, his palm probably twice the size of mine. The captain's face looks haggard but kind with smile lines that crease around his hazel eyes and wide mouth. Davis is dressed smart in a crisp white oxford, a navy tie, and pants that have been pressed to show the creases. He can't be much older than forty-five.

Davis introduces me to Dr. John Mitchell, the medical examiner for McCracken and two neighboring counties. What's left of Mitchell's red hair hangs in tight curls around his ears. In the bright lighting, Mitchell looks as though he's in a state of constant blush. "We're sure glad to see you, Hansen."

"How is Willow's Ridge holding up under all this pressure?"

"It shuts down after five, more or less." Davis takes my satchel and coat to hang behind the door. His movements are confident and fluid, which tells me he's a man comfortable leading others. "We've implemented a seven p.m. curfew for everyone under the age of eighteen." Davis finger-brushes his short gray-peppered hair. "There's a lot of panic out there."

As I stand beside the body, I tie my hair into a low ponytail. Davis hands me a mask and a pair of powder-blue latex gloves that are too large for me, the excess rubber pooling in my palms. Although I'm built muscular and probably stronger than most of the law enforcement officers I meet, I'm short—my boot heels push me just over the five-four mark. I've always wanted to be able to palm a basketball and slam-dunk that ball through the hoop. It won't happen for me in this lifetime without a ladder.

Mitchell struggles to snap the latex gloves over his red, meaty hands, then pulls the white sheet down to Emma Parks's waist. The

puckered blue skin of death shows the jigsaw stitching from the autopsy's Y incision, which starts under each of her collarbones. I immediately begin breathing through my mouth, a lifesaving trick I learned early in my training.

I take Parks's cold hand in my own to examine the fingers and the cut of each nail. Sometimes killers will cut the victim's fingernails very short in order to get rid of any DNA evidence. It's hard *not* to be aware of these tricks in our *CSI* television culture. Her nails and hands, though, are a haphazard collection of ripped nails, scrapes, and torn fingertips that indicate she fought her killer. I gently place her hand on the table and lean in closer to her face. She looks so young with her long red-blond hair thrown over one shoulder. Parks turned twenty only a few weeks ago.

"The previous victims had their nails cut and filed after death," Mitchell says.

I nod. "Part of the killer's process of posing." I run my fingertip along Parks's jawline to a large swollen area that had been in the process of bruising at death. "This one ruined his plans when she got away."

Parks, according to the report Sanders sent, had been jogging last evening and was brutally attacked inside the limestone quarry. Somehow she got away from her attacker and gathered the strength to walk out of the forest and into the path of oncoming traffic on the bordering highway. It must have been like a scene out of a slasher horror film for the motorist who slammed on his brakes for the young, naked, staggering woman at three in the morning in subzero weather. He helped Parks into his car and

drove her to the ER. She was taken immediately into surgery and had been resuscitated twice, but eventually she died in surgery. I make a note of the tiny pinprick on her jugular, a possible needle entry point.

“Toxicology came back with strong traces of benzodiazepine,” Mitchell says.

“Roofies.”

Mitchell nods. “Our killer mixed the drug with saline and injected it into the jugular for fast results,” Mitchell explains. “He used minimal amounts so that the victims would be aware of what was happening but couldn’t fight. He wanted to hear these girls scream—the sadistic fuck.”

I let my open hands hover along Parks’s body and move slowly over her shoulders and breasts. When I was in the academy, I was told I look like I’m reading braille. In a way, I guess I am reading the victim and her story. Rowan always says I am unconsciously evaluating the body’s field, pulling information and clues from the residual energy that lingers around the corpse. I’m not sure about all that. All I know is it works for me and I rarely forget a mark on a body because of it.

“He had to have been very close,” I mumble as I inspect a wound on her rib cage with my fingertips. “She trusted him. No other needle entry points?”

Davis shakes his head.

I scan back up to the entry point on the neck. Parks has a relatively thick neck for a young female. It would have been difficult in the rush and the panic of the attack to find the exact

location of her jugular. Such precision on a flailing victim in the center of a forest would be difficult at best.

Roofies are a man’s drug. Forensic psychiatrists have found that some male killers prefer this drug because it makes them feel all-powerful against a woman. She becomes the damsel in distress, making him the prince who must save her. Twisted, but it mirrors our culture’s beliefs that women are physically weak and need a strong hero of a man for protection.

“No DNA found on the body? No semen?” I ask.

“Nothing.” Mitchell rolls the white sheet down to Parks’s kneecaps. “The cause of death was exsanguination. She bled out from the wounds to her genitals.”

Before I can catch myself, I step back from the body. Parks’s vagina looks like it has burst open. Her genitals have been not only stabbed, but sliced lengthwise.

“It looks to us like he was not able to finish with Parks for whatever reason. He started the mutilation and we think he intended to do what he’s done to the other girls.” He opens a file and places autopsy photographs of the other two victims’ vaginas. “Looks like a flower to us.”

Mitchell points to Hannerting’s vagina where it has been cut into six quadrants. Each piece of skin has been pulled back and splayed out like the petals of a blooming flower, with the labia in the center. A long cut below the base of the vagina runs to the rectum as if to replicate a stem. Within each incision are the flashes of white bone. The breath catches in my throat. Although I read about this wound in the chart, nothing could have prepared me for the reality. I’ve

never heard of such a severe wound to the female genitalia before. Sanders has worked on cases where the male victim's penis has been removed, but never one with such severe mutilation to a female.

"The other victim has this cutting to the genitals?"

"Yes," Davis says. "We believe it's some sort of signature."

"Were the victims conscious for the abuse?" I ask.

Mitchell shrugs. "We can't be sure. Most likely they were in and out. Given the level of benzodiazepine, they were certainly groggy and powerless against their attacker. Parks and the others knew something terrible was happening to them."

Davis hands me an evidence bag. "Doctors found this clutched in Parks's fist when she arrived at the hospital."

A gold-colored cross fills my open hand. It is heavy, certainly not pure gold, but some sort of brushed metal. I hold the cross up to the light. The back reads: *May the Lord be the savior of your soul.*

"We found a similar cross with each of the victims." Davis hands me the evidence report. No prints or DNA were found on this cross or the others.

I flip the bagged cross over to study the front of it. Engraved in the lower end of the cross: *Vatican '98.*

"The land of the pope." The cross thumps against the steel table as I lay it down.

"The cross could indicate the killer felt remorse for the murders," Davis says. "He possibly offered a prayer or a final good-bye for each of the victims."

"How generous of our killer," I say. Only Mitchell laughs.

"What do you make of the posed bodies?" Davis asks.

I fall back into professional mode. "Posing usually indicates some sort of ritual that the killer does in order to pay homage to someone or something. He's very precise, a perfectionist. The crosses suggest a possible religious motivation."

Mitchell hands me the other two files. "We may not be in the Bible Belt," he says, "but we have more than our fair share of churches around here."

"There was no sign of recent sexual intercourse on any of the bodies?"

Mitchell shakes his head and then ghosts Parks's body with the white sheet.

"These might not have been sexually motivated killings," I say, "but there are sexual components. The killer might not have raped these young women with his penis, but he used other methods of penetration: the needle to inject the roofies, the knife to the vagina. This suggests possible sexual dysfunction in the killer."

Mitchell chuckles. "Our man can't get it up."

"And he's pissed." It takes a lot of uncontrolled rage to destroy a human body in this manner, years and years of pent-up anger.

One of the files on the stack is filled with notes on the first victim, Vivian Hannerting, whose case has since gone cold. She was killed in December, about thirteen months ago. Hannerting, twenty-three at the time of her death, was a second-year student at the community college about thirty miles from Willow's Ridge. She was last seen by her roommate leaving their rental house on foot to meet some friends at a nearby bar and grill. She never arrived.

Hannerting's body was found three days later by a sanitation worker inside the Willow's Ridge limestone quarry, near the eastern edge of the town. The crime-scene photos show her posed in a seated position, her back against a stone wall inside the quarry, with her arms fully extended and draped over tree branches. Her pale, naked skin gleams against the snow that surrounds her. Hannerting's head is rolled to her right shoulder and tilted down, her eyes wide open as though death had sneaked up on her.

Davis hands me a second file for the next victim, Chandler Jones. "We knew the cases had to be connected, but there's close to a year between the murders. We thought this one might be a copycat."

"Because of the genital wounds?"

Davis nods. "They are very different."

Chandler Jones disappeared a week before Christmas and was found by a jogger with his dog inside the Willow's Ridge limestone quarry on Boxing Day. She was an active member of her Baptist church and was last seen leaving the church parking lot with her car loaded full of food for members of the church who were shut-ins. No one received the food. Her car was found on Christmas Eve in the Miller's Grocery parking lot.

The first crime-scene photograph haunts me: her abandoned car with the backseat of the sedan neatly lined with pink and green plastic containers of food, plastic silverware wrapped in the same colors, along with a crate full of individual milk cartons. The next photograph shows Jones's naked body sprawled out on a snowy wooded patch along the shoulder of the highway near the limestone quarry. Jones's body pose looks like a person placed

inside a coffin, flat on her back with her hands crossed at the belly button. Her intertwined fingers aim down at her genitals. Rather than flowering the skin, Jones's genitals were cut out, leaving a gaping hole in her body. Her long hair had been spread away from her scalp in long red waves, a halo surrounding her face. The coroner found a small cross embedded deep inside her uterus.

I lay out the posed Hannerting and Jones crime-scene photographs beside Parks's body. All three victims were killed around the holiday season, maybe some sort of trigger for the killer.

"The killer's pattern has been broken."

"Meaning?" Davis asks.

I turn away from the body and lean up against the wall. "The killer doesn't know exactly when Parks died, right?"

Davis nods. His long, ropey arms cross over his chest as he rocks forward and back on the balls of his feet. Davis strikes me as athletic, as if always on the cusp of working out.

"He only knows what the media has reported, that Parks managed to flag down a motorist who rushed her to the hospital, and later she died in surgery. He has no idea if Parks was conscious and able to make a statement before her death. We need to use this to our advantage."

"What do you suggest?"

"The media is our strongest ally right now," I say. "We need to craft statements that suggest we know more than we do. We need the media to inflame him with regular reports and statements about the case."

Davis nods again, the furrow of his thick brow knotted in thought. “He is very particular in the way he leaves his crime scenes. The mistakes he made last night must be driving him crazy.”

“He’ll need to fix it,” I tell Davis and Mitchell. “He’ll kill again and soon. Let’s hope the added pressure of the media causes him to make more errors.” Time to start the legwork, so I shift from the killer to his victims. “Are there any indications the women knew each other or are connected in some way?”

Davis shrugs. “Willow’s Ridge is a small town. These young women must have crossed paths at some point, but they didn’t seem to know each other well. They weren’t friends or any of the other social connections that we usually see.”

The parents had supplied the police with high school graduation pictures. All three look out at me from their files: smiling, competent young women on the verge of life. Were these women selected at random? Could it be as simple as being in the wrong place at the wrong time? My gut tells me nothing about this case will be that simple.

“Catch me up to speed on the investigation.”

Davis says, “Two men have been questioned. Both had alibis at the time of the crimes.” He turns to me and rests his hands on the thick belt around his slim waist. “One we’re still looking at pretty hard—Nicholas Sambino. He’s an embalmer at Eldridge Funeral Home here in Willow’s Ridge.”

“Why Sambino?”

Davis rubs the corner of a bloodshot eye; it’s clear he hasn’t slept. “Sambino has had a number of interactions with us, disturbance calls and speeding, you know, minor arrests. Except for one. We like him for this based on a rape charge from last year. He was arrested for sexual assault of a fourteen-year-old female. The victim had numerous injuries and was attacked while jogging inside the limestone quarry. Based on the high publicity of the case and the young woman’s unstable mental health, the family dropped the charges against Sambino. He walked.”

I lean into the wall again, reading Davis’s body language closely. My shoulder holster pulls tight against my back. I hate wearing one, but I’ve got the hips of a twelve-year-old. There’s nothing there to hold up the weight of my service weapon. The only cop bling my low-slung waist holds is a badge looped through the belt. “You’re not convinced he’s our killer.”

Captain Davis gives me a quick smile. “You’re good,” he says. “There are other circumstances to consider.”

“Such as?”

He riffles through the stack of files and pulls one from the bottom. It is worn and splitting, thick with notes and crime-scene information. The very first photograph grabs my heart; it is of the navy eyes of my past. The depth of those eyes strikes me first, an old soul so wise and crippled with sadness. The clarity of those eyes beneath the dark lashes that once seemed to understand everything and knew me much better than I knew myself. I’ve been trained not to reveal emotions in a case, and I’ve mastered the

ability to stuff them down with my poker face intact. I turn away with a fake cough.

“You all right?” Davis asks.

Although I can’t breathe, I manage to nod. It’s that feeling again—I’m being pushed underwater, held down, and choked. I fight, kick, and claw at the hand forcing me down, to no avail. When I finally surrender to its strength and take my first breath, the water gushes in and my underwater grave grows silent. Safe. Sheltered. I’m cradled by the watery arms that hold me.

“You don’t seem all right.” Davis’s words make their way to me through these cloudy depths.

“Damn allergies,” I manage to say. Whether or not he believes such a sorry excuse, it gives us both an escape from this embarrassing moment.

His words gurgle toward me. “Marci Tucker. Murdered in July of 1989. She is the piece I can’t place. Tucker was found bludgeoned inside the limestone quarry, though a different section of the park. She’d been killed near the caves and it looked like an attempted rape gone wrong. The case went cold almost immediately.”

I hear the bubbles of oxygen float up as the water slips over the top of my head. I’m sinking deeper and deeper.

“There are ties between Tucker and the present cases—age, gender, and location. As far as we know, there wasn’t a cross found on or near Tucker. Cause of death was multiple blows to the back of the head with some sort of pipe. A basic drug screen was run on Tucker and came up clear.”

Mitchell says, “We didn’t routinely test for date-rape drugs in 1989, so it’s possible the victim could have been drugged with it. No needle entry points are listed on the autopsy.” The incessant click of Mitchell’s pen echoes inside the dead room and brings me rushing up through the water’s surface.

To catch my breath, I look down at my feet—black boots that are as much a part of me as my left hand. They’re in need of resoling and who knows how many gold-tinted laces I’ve been through. I wiggle my toes and think of my father; the boots were a gift from him when I was accepted into the academy. They were the last gift he gave me. Thoughts of my father always have a way of grounding me and bringing me back to the case at hand.

“If these cases are truly connected,” Davis says, “that knocks out Sambino as a suspect. He would have been about nine years old at the time of the Tucker killing.”

“It could be someone he knows well,” I say, slowly returning to the game. “Sambino’s father. An uncle or an older cousin. Someone he had regular contact with who he admired and made him vow to keep the secret.”

Mitchell rubs his temples that bloom neon. I don’t doubt his Irish descent and wonder if Mitchell has the temper to match as he pulls the white sheet up over Parks’s head. “You mean that Sambino may be carrying on the crimes for someone else?”

I shrug. “We can’t rule out any possibility at this point.”

Work. It’s always been my refuge when my emotions erupt. The obsessive side of me takes over with any case, occupying all my thoughts, puzzling out the details and various crime scenarios in

my mind. I'm like a pit bull that clamps down and locks its jaw on a Frisbee—you can pick the case up and swing it around all you want, but I won't let go until it's solved. It is the mystery of each case that hooks me in, all those unanswered questions. I want the answers. I want it all to make sense. Most of all, I want justice for those who can no longer speak for themselves. Victims just like Parks, Hannerting, Jones, and Tucker.

Chapter Two

My dad always told me that in order to have a successful career in law enforcement you have to be able to bend and not break. Until his fatal heart attack that came out of nowhere, he'd been the Chief of Police for Chesterton County, not more than ninety miles west of Willow's Ridge. He's the only person I've ever met who could bend, bend, bend, and then bend some more without shattering.

Early on in my life, my dad was the one to define my strong instincts as a cop gut. "You've got a strong sensitivity to the truth," he always told me during my training. "Remember, it's all in the breath. When you're calm in the midst of a crisis, you can see the opening into the chaos. Once you're inside, everything begins to make sense." I breathe deep, drive on, and hope that my dad knew what he was talking about. I'm taking him at his word as I step into the center of this chaos.

The two-lane highway known as State Route 55 works as a thoroughfare for Willow's Ridge and connects the small town to the outlying limestone quarry. The highway splits the forest and enormous trees canopy the road. During the summer, there is nothing quite like driving along the rolling hills of State Route 55. If you're lucky enough to have a sunroof or convertible, it's difficult to see anything above your head other than a sea of green foliage.

"Breathe," I tell myself. "Just breathe." I feel as though I'm driving directly into a mouth of madness where everything feels so out of control.

Davis drew a map to the location where Emma Parks emerged from the forest and flagged down the motorist. In order to build a formal profile, I need to set the scene visually in my mind. Most of all, though, I want the time alone. Solitude is how I collect my strength and think through the inner workings of a crime. Thankfully, Davis stayed behind at the station to work with a media consultant on a statement he'll be reading at a six o'clock press conference.

Willow's Ridge is the quintessential small Midwestern town of maybe 5,000. It grew around the limestone quarry with caves that honeycomb the soft stone. The town map shows the almost seventy square miles of wooded forest that make up the limestone quarry along the western edge of the town. A residential area borders a portion of the quarry. It's the flux of the limestone, the unsteadiness of the rock that keeps people from building too close. Many come to Willow's Ridge for its small-town charm and to see the fall colors in the forested quarry. You can always find

photographers hiking the trails to capture the old wood-covered bridges, and children collecting small pieces of limestone in their pockets even though signs clearly state: *Do Not Take the Rocks*. It's the charm and isolation of Willow's Ridge that draws so many visitors in and drives so many of its local teenagers out because of the complete lack of nightlife. With one road through town and few stoplights along its famous brick-lined Main Street, fast food chains and huge grocery stores have been zoned outside of the town limits.

Tourists, however, are nowhere in sight now that the town is coated with the hardness of winter. Despite its small population, Willow's Ridge has a lot of money; some members of its community easily clear \$500,000 a year. A high-tech heart hospital and research center was built a few years ago outside of Willow's Ridge and quickly gained the reputation of the best in the Midwest. It is money that generally insulates Willow's Ridge from the harsh crimes that occur in the bigger cities of Ohio. That is, until recently.

Yellow crime-scene tape cordons off the entire section of State Route 55. An officer sits parked on the shoulder beside the location where it's been estimated that Emma Parks emerged from the forest. I kill the engine behind the cruiser. With a quick glance in the rearview mirror, I re-knot my hair in a messy bun and pull on my Russian cap. Cold seeps in through the edges of the car door and wind gusts gently rock the car back and forth. I brace myself for the assault of frigid weather.

The officer rolls down his window. The stubble of no shave in the last twenty-four hours pocks his face and his lips are windburned. I

show my badge and then hold my arms tight around my body for some attempt at warmth.

“I need to walk the crime scene. How much longer will you be here?”

“Until Davis releases me.” His face cringes against the blast of cold. “Won’t be much longer. The scene has already been processed.”

I slip under the yellow tape. I look back over my shoulder at the officer for a few seconds and then step forward into my past. There is hardly any shoulder to the highway, and I walk into the wall of winter-bare trees sooner than I expect.

“I’m okay.” These words are meant to convince myself, but my voice breaks. The tall trees answer with creaks and moans from the bone-chilling wind.

Shafts of sunlight flicker in and out of the clouds as if attempting to generate warmth. I wrap the scarf over my face, leaving only my watery eyes exposed. Everything around me looks suspended, like an iced-over winter scene from a calendar. I follow the ditch along the side to a clearing into the woods carved out of trees as tall and thick as God.

In the distance, plumes of smoke twist up and away from what must be chimneys. In the last twenty years or so, the land around the limestone ravine has become coveted, and a house overlooking the dense forest had become a status symbol in the Willow’s Ridge community. A neighborhood of huge homes has been built, each with five to ten acres of land. A creek snakes along the ravine at the base of the limestone cliffs and floods regularly, preventing further

development in the area. Officers have interviewed all the people who own homes on the exclusive Willow’s Ridge Lane, but no one reported seeing or hearing anything. Judging from the dense woods and the space between the houses and the road, it would be difficult to hear much at those homes, not to mention that most residents would have been sound asleep at three a.m. Besides, these private types, I’ve learned, tend to mind their own business. They’d be the least likely to report activity to us even if they saw something out of the ordinary.

This clearing hardly leads to what I would call a path, but the brush is thinner and I’m able to maneuver better. The snow covering is scattered because of the naked, billowing branches. Farther inside the forest, the crime-scene team has roped an area off. Small branches have been snapped off recently; I examine the end of one in my gloved hand, the white of the exposed inner wood. There is a fallen tree that blocks the wooded path. Snow and foliage around the trunk have been moved. Blood covers the ground near the tree trunk, the place where he most likely cut Parks’s genitals. I drop to a squat for some quick photographs with my cell phone. The bloodstain is not as large as I expect, given exsanguination. Beside the bloody area, what looks like the slide of a boot marks the icy ground.

This was not a quick dump-and-drive crime scene. The killer or killers would have to be familiar with the tough terrain of the quarry. While it’s easy access from the highway, the killer had to carry or drag Parks deep into these woods. He planned it, scoping out the exact location to leave the body. Outdoor crime scenes are

notoriously difficult to process and this killer had the snow and foliage to help cover up any evidence. I imagine the killer so pleased with his plan: *Scream your head off, honey. You're mine now.* With a gloved hand, I trace the partial track. Parks had been found naked. This is the killer's footprint. He's never left anything close to a print before.

"What spooked you?" I ask out loud.

I push beyond the crime-scene tape a few yards deeper into the woods. There is a change in the landscape, denser pines with thicker underbrush so wiry it grabs at my ankles. *And this is winter.* I follow the thin trail of blood, an area already processed by the crime-scene team. Eventually I stumble upon a rocky cut in the land. My breath catches in my throat and my boot toes hang over the edge of the deep ravine. At least forty feet below rests a round pocket of water that runs so deep within the quarry it's rumored to never have completely frozen. It's a part of the chunky flow of icy water, through a ravine not much more than a deep creek, that shoots off from the quarry and snakes along the bottom of this cut in the land for miles.

When I look up, my father is there beside me, suddenly, the way he always appears these days. Dressed in his police chief regalia, he winks. "You caught a tough one, Lucy-girl."

I smile up at this familiar ghost who haunts my life. "Could use your help here, Pop. Can we talk through it?"

His nod says that he'd have it no other way.

I take two steps back and analyze the scene once more. From my initial observations of the land, I assumed the water ran

perpendicular to State Route 55. Instead it runs parallel to the road. "If the water surprised me, it also surprised Parks."

My father nods and scans the terrain. This has always been his favorite part of a case, climbing inside the victim's and killer's heads to determine their every move. I've never met another cop better at it than my dad.

"She couldn't have gotten around this quarry, especially with the darkness of night," I say.

"Unless the killer only used this side of the ravine."

"Risky move," I say. Even though it had been the dead of the night, the drop site wasn't a foolproof distance from the highway and the winter-stripped land made visibility a bit easier. If he wanted to be sure she couldn't get away, he'd have put her on the *other* side of the ravine.

"He counted on the drugs to keep her from running."

"You think he miscalculated the dosage? Seems out of character for our guy."

My dad shrugs. "The frostbite on her hands and feet indicates that she'd been left in the freezing temperatures for some time."

"Something scared him off before he could finish the job. He left her, certain that she would die out here in the cold or from her wounds."

He nods. "We aren't far from the highway, are we?"

Suddenly it's clear: we've only found the body drop site, and he *wanted* her to be found. We still need to find the location where at least some of the mutilation took place and the killer cleaned the bodies. We're missing at least half of this grand puzzle.

Together, we head back toward the highway. I need to see the forest from the other end. I need to examine other entrance points in the area, perhaps from the neighboring properties' backyards. My father's large body pulls through the snow beside me. In these quiet moments alone with him, I'm always tempted to ask questions about where he is now. But Dad's adamant—his ghostly presence is only here to help me with cases. I reach out to take hold of his hand, but my fingers close on nothing but cold air. *This, whatever it is, I remind myself, has to be enough.*

There are literally hundreds of possible entrance and exit points to the limestone quarry, leaving thousands of potential drop sites. This begs the question, why this particular spot? Why would the killer leave his victims out in the open not more than three-fourths of a mile from major entrances to the quarry? An image of Vivian Hannerting flashes in my mind, a photograph of her positioned with a cross clenched in white-death hands, positioned not far from the main entrance to the limestone quarry park.

"We have ourselves a self-proclaimed prophet," I say to my father. "A messenger of some kind."

Chapter Three

Since Emma Parks didn't own a car, she walked to and from her shifts at Wilson's Photography Shop. Her mile-and-a-half path home created a prime opportunity for abduction. In a town where most people know everyone else, it seems highly unlikely that a passing motorist wouldn't have seen a struggle and recognized Parks. That leaves only one other possibility: she went willingly with her killer.

Earlier, Davis's team scoured the shop and neighboring stores for any witnesses. They talked to Parks's coworkers and managers, but I want to follow up. Sometimes it's amazing what people can remember when a state badge is flashed at them.

The heater blasts on high as I drive the surroundings of Wilson's. Although the business is located on Main Street and next to a relatively active bank, it looks to be the only store open past six p.m. Main Street would be dark and deserted when Emma started

her walk home. Especially in January, when the sky darkens shortly after five p.m.

“Same old story,” I say aloud and pull on my hat. We hear these comments from young people all the time: nothing will happen to me, crime doesn’t happen in my town, I can take care of myself. No one wants to believe that crime could actually happen to her. This is exactly what Parks told herself every night when she walked home from her job at the camera shop. Even though the previous murders in the area had been publicized, Parks would have reasoned that nothing could happen to her, that she was different from those victims.

Jasper Morgan, the manager who had been on duty with Parks last night, ignores my presence and works with the only customer in the small store. His monotonous drone about a camera’s features is enough to put anybody to sleep. The displays around me feature many framed photographs against the backdrop of black velvet. Portraits and landscapes are most prominent, a kid with an oversized yellow Lab and a newborn cradled in their mother’s arms. One framed print isn’t like all the other family or nature themes, but a black and white of a woman lying partially nude in a wooded area. A leafy branch covers her crotch and fresh-cut daisies cover her chest. Long dark hair is brushed over the model’s shoulder, and her eyes are shut as if she’s fallen into a deep sleep. There’s something odd about the angle of the camera, though, a fish-eye view that gives the model an ethereal look. This is a work of art rather than a family portrait.

Could it be Parks’s work? According to the file, she told friends and family members that she wanted to go to an art school to study photography. She’d even applied to the Art Institute a month ago and was waiting to hear whether she’d been accepted or not. Davis mentioned that Parks’s photography had been featured in a few local shows. There is no signature in the corner of this print.

“That’s one of my favorites. I could stare at it for hours and still not see everything in the photo.”

I turn to find a young woman standing behind me in a long white lab coat. Her name tag reads *Kaitlin*. Gothed out, she pulls with black-painted fingernails at her earlobe that holds a large ear stretcher. “It is amazing. Are you one of the lab techs?”

She nods. “Are you a cop?”

“The Ohio BCI.”

“Is that like the FBI?” She has a habit of biting on her lower lip ring, leaving the skin red and swollen.

“Sort of, but on a state level. I work for the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation.”

“That’s really cool,” she says, twisting the ends of her flared black skirt around her knees. She wears black tights and neon-green leg warmers, the only color on her dark outfit. “I love *CSI* and *Criminal Minds*.”

“Hollywood has a way of making everything look glamorous.”

Kaitlin flashes me a near-perfect white smile. Underneath all those piercings and black painted makeup, she’s quite attractive. Her blue eyes and high cheekbones are quite startling. And that body—curves, curves, curves everywhere.

Morgan, the manager, points to Kaitlin and slits his eyes at her.
“Get back to work!”

She doesn’t answer but tucks a stringy lock of dyed-black hair behind her ear. I catch the tip of her head that tells me to follow her while she stocks the shelves.

“Did you work many shifts with Emma Parks?”

“Not many. We’re rarely busy and even less so at night. Only one cashier is scheduled after five.” She lines the film boxes up in neat rows as she talks. “Emma and I did go on a few photo shoots together.”

“Did she mention any customers that may have been bothering her? Anyone who came in regularly on her shifts?”

Before she can answer, Morgan ushers his only customer out of the store. Morgan’s a heavy man, and his polyester pants swish each time his thighs rub together. He turns to me with his pale, doughy face. “You have questions about Emma? Speak to me. I’m the manager.”

Kaitlin gives a dramatically loud sigh and when her eyes meet mine, I give her a quick wink. Jasper Morgan clearly imagines himself to be very important. I flip my badge at him. “When was the last time you worked with Emma?”

“Last night.” Morgan finger-combs his mouse-brown thinning hair. “I already talked to the detectives.”

“Just a few questions. You were the manager on duty last night. What time did Emma leave the store?”

Morgan fidgets with his belt, then hikes his worn pants up over his basketball belly. “The thing is,” he says, “we don’t always have a

manager on duty. Most of our employees, like Emma, have been with us awhile and can act as managers.”

“Was there supposed to be a manager here?”

He pushes up his thick glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Like I told the other detective, it was a Tuesday night.”

“Tuesday? Is that significant?”

Morgan shakes his head. “Tuesday’s our dead night so I went home early. Emma had closed on her own a hundred times. She locked up and counted the till before she left.”

“Did she have a store key?”

“Emma had mine. She left it on the ridge above the door. I got it this morning. Nothing happened to her here, Agent. I promise you.”

“Since you weren’t here, there’s no way for you to know that for sure.”

Morgan shifts his weight. His beady eyes dart from one corner of the sales floor to the other. “It was only an hour! I wasn’t feeling well.”

I jot down the timeline.

“It’s not a big deal,” Morgan reasons. “There were no customers during that time.” Morgan shrugs. “She closed down the till at seven fifty-eight p.m.” He leads me to the register and shows me the close-out tape with the stamped time.

“Mr. Morgan, can anyone vouch for your whereabouts last night from seven to midnight?”

“I told you, I felt sick! I went home.”

“Anyone there with you? A neighbor who might have seen you come in?”

“My girlfriend.” Morgan plants a fist on his meaty hip. “She cooked me chicken noodle soup and stayed with me all night.”

He gives me his address along with his girlfriend’s. I tell him I’ll be contacting her, but there is no nervous response. Judging from his direct answers, I’d say Morgan’s telling the truth.

He scans the floor and finds Kaitlin listening to us. “Get busy! I want to leave here at eight oh-two!”

Kaitlin mumbles back something like “Eat shit,” but Morgan either doesn’t hear it or pretends not to.

“I need a few minutes with Kaitlin. I just have a few questions for her.” Before Morgan can offer much of a refusal, Kaitlin is at my side and leads me to the break room away from his watchful eyes.

Kaitlin’s a nervous type with fingernails bitten down to the quick. Her skin’s near flawless—no zit or blemish to speak of—and she has a cute, tiny drop of a nose. Her torn, vintage clothing screams art chic; she can’t be older than nineteen or twenty. And there is something else: Kaitlin is a lesbian. Sitting across from her at a small table in the break room, I can’t help but read the strong vibes. I’ve been known to have an incredibly accurate gaydar and it’s spinning round and round like an antenna on overload.

She tells me the officers who questioned the other workers at Wilson’s didn’t interview her. No one came to her home, as far as she knows. If that’s true, this is the sort of sloppiness that could get Davis and his department crucified by the media.

Kaitlin pulls back her long hair into a ponytail showing off the fleshy planes of her face and her pouty black-painted lips. “This is about Emma’s date, isn’t it?”

“Date?”

She picks at the remainder of black polish on her nails and avoids eye contact with me.

“Kaitlin, we need your help. Emma needs your help.”

Eventually she nods. “I want you to catch this creepster.”

“Tell me what you saw.”

“I stopped in the other night to buy some supplies. Emma was working alone. That’s when he stopped in to see her.”

“Have you seen him before?”

“Yeah. We both sort of know Tristan.” Kaitlin doesn’t look at me. She continues to pick at her chipping nail polish. “Emma said they got to know each other better a few weeks back at Bledsoe’s in Columbus. Tristan is from here, too.”

“What do you mean *sort of know*?”

Kaitlin shrugs and slumps back in her wooden-backed chair. “I’ve seen him around. If you live in Willow’s Ridge, you sort of know everyone else.”

“What’s Tristan’s last name?”

“Not sure. He’s older than us. We didn’t go to school together.”

I wait for Kaitlin’s eyes to meet mine. “Bledsoe’s? The gay club?”

Kaitlin gives me a stone-cold glare. “I’m not a lesbian.”

Who does she think she’s kidding? Surely not me. “Okay.” I tread lightly for the sake of the interview. “I’m not asking about you. Only Emma.”

“I just want to clarify.” Kaitlin’s sudden defensiveness tells me that sexuality is an issue for her. “Emma never really dated guys and she wanted to meet a great girl. Tristan was with what Emma

called a hottie at the club last week. He promised to set them up last night. He picked Emma up from work and the plan was the hottie would be at his apartment waiting for her. Emma was stoked.”

That’s why no one was alerted to Emma getting into someone’s car. She’d gotten in willingly and with the promise of meeting a girl.

“Tristan was acting kind of creepy.”

“Creepy how?”

“He has this dyed-black hair and like six or seven lip rings.” She waves her hands, as if to say *start over*. “That didn’t creep me out. I mean, *I* have dyed-black hair and a lip ring! It was that he kept telling us about dead bodies. He even said he’d tasted blood. I figured he was one of those vampire-wannabes, you know, *Twilight* shit?” She shivers and hugs herself. “*Twilight* is one thing, drinking blood is another.”

“It sure is. Did you have plans to talk with Emma after this big date?”

“She was supposed to text, but I never heard from her.” Kaitlin’s eyes fill with sudden tears.

I reach into my coat pocket for the supply of tissues that are mandatory equipment for any investigator. “Why didn’t you report this information to the police?”

She busies herself wiping away tears with smears of dark eye makeup. “I wasn’t here when the cops came to do questioning.”

“You could have called. I mean, the story is all over the news. Why tell me?”

Fresh tears spout from her eyes again. “You’re cooler than I expected.”

I laugh. “Thanks. I’ll tell my superiors that.” We sit in silence for a few minutes as she wipes away the tears. “Do you have a record, Kaitlin?”

“Just tickets for speeding. Is that a record?”

I shake my head. Where is this avoidance of the police coming from?

“Besides, I don’t want anyone to think that Emma and I are more than friends. Sometimes that happens.”

“People think you and Emma are a couple?”

“Sometimes.”

“Were you sexually involved with Emma?”

Kaitlin shakes her head, but I’m not convinced. I’m suddenly filled with compassion for Kaitlin. Not only has she lost a friend and possibly a partner, but she is also clearly struggling with herself. It’s not easy to come out in a small town, and I want to tell her everything will be okay, to be herself no matter what. This is what I wish someone would have said to me when I was coming out. But this is my personal reaction, not my professional response. Kaitlin’s personal struggles have nothing to do with Emma. *Focus*.

“You’re doing Emma a favor by talking to me.” I reach out and squeeze Kaitlin’s hand. “What else can you tell me about Tristan’s features? Any tattoos? Race?”

“White. Really pale. I mean, he had to have on some kind of white powder or paint to be that white. He looked the way vampires do in

all the movies. Jet-black hair and black clothing against the super-pale skin. You know, stereotypical vampire-wannabe.”

I can’t help but make the connection that the girl before me has many of these same features. “Where can I find him?”

“He has an apartment not far from here.”

“You said everyone in town knows everyone. Did Emma know the other young women who died?”

Kaitlin shrugs. “Not well. She mentioned partying a few times with Chandler. But Chandler was a cheerleader. They weren’t friends or anything.”

I note the possible tie to Chandler Jones, the second victim. I thank Kaitlin and write my cell number on the back of one of my cards. “Call if you can think of anything—any bit of conversation that comes back to you about Tristan. Even if you don’t think it’s important.”

Kaitlin turns the card over in her hand. “Lucy?”

“I go by Luce.” I wind the scarf around my head.



My truck’s engine eventually turns over, slow and sludge-like, but catching, thank God. While the car warms up, my cop gut pulls at me. I remember the damage to the victims’ vaginas. The precise incisions to replicate some sort of flower or the brutal removal of the flesh. The posing of the bodies. Our killer is an artist of sorts. It seems an odd coincidence that Emma was interested in

photography—a visual art. Coincidences and crimes, I’ve learned from experience, rarely go together.

When I was in the academy, I studied with a professor who claimed all serial killers were artists at heart. The difference between a celebrated artist and a vilified serial killer, this professor said, is that at some point in their young lives the creative vision turns dark. We value art that speaks of humanity, but a serial killer values art that speaks of consumption and death. Instead of the examination of life, serial killers examine what it means to inflict unnecessary pain. I think of Rowan, who paints and sculpts for a living. Like other artists, she’s generally in need of supplies. Wilson’s would provide supplies and the full knowledge of Emma and her schedule.

Before I pull the gear into drive, there’s a tap on my window. Ice patterns splinter and I can’t make out the dark shadow on the other side of the glass. The window’s frozen closed. When I kick the door open with the sole of my boot, it’s Kaitlin shivering in her thin clothing, all elbows wrapped tight around her skinny waist.

“I remembered something else. Emma teased Tristan and said he only knew about blood from vampire movies. He argued with her. I think he said something about putting makeup on dead people.”

Something clicks inside me. I bounce my gloved thumb against the steering wheel. *The funeral home. The dead.* The pieces fit. Emma Parks had been with one of the Willow’s Ridge police department’s prime suspects in the three murders: Nicholas Sambino, aka Tristan.