

2017

Forsaken Trust

Meredith Doench

University of Dayton, mdoench1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/eng_fac_pub

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Doench, Meredith, "Forsaken Trust" (2017). *English Faculty Publications*. 96.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/eng_fac_pub/96

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlengen1@udayton.edu.

PROLOGUE

Ava Washington loved nothing more than kayaking down the Powell River, eventually landing in the vast waters of Wallace Lake. Every Saturday at six a.m., rain or shine, Ava loaded her truck while her mother and younger brother slumbered on. She made her way down to the water's stony edge where she paddled until the Ohio winter months stopped her. It wasn't just the promise of a solid upper-arm workout that kept Ava coming back every week. It was the silence and the way she could hear the sounds of her own breath, the pound of her heart inside her ears, and the slice of the paddle through the current. It was how she felt when the water rushed about the bobbing kayak bringing with it the smell of the surrounding river and woods. Unlike the other kayakers she encountered on the waterway, Ava used no music. She despised those tiny earbuds that drowned out the sounds of nature, particularly in late October when the river and all its inhabitants were preparing for a long winter. Ava's life during the week was so noisy; she wanted nothing but quiet. Despite the thick fog that coated the land and wafted off the river today, Ava hoped the sun would burn the fog away, allowing her to stay on the water until sundown.

Ava was a sophomore at Wallace Lake High School and had never enjoyed school. She wasn't an athlete or the cheerleader type; she fell somewhere on the spectrum between the smart kid with no social skills and the talented but low-achieving student. Then, a few months ago, everything changed.

Ava went to her first bodybuilding practice with her best friend, Sadie Reid, mostly because Sadie had begged her to. Bodybuilding wasn't something Ava would have ever thought of trying on her own, but everyone had a crush on the new coach, Mr. Allard. She wanted a chance to check him out, and now that Sadie had a job helping out the team, Ava could do so with her friend at her side. Joining the team also meant Ava could be around Sadie even more, and truth be told, this was the real motivation for her joining the team. Ava knew that Sadie had it rough. She had been taken from her mother, a heroin addict and rumored prostitute, and had lived with her grandmother ever since Ava met her in second grade. Since then, there were two rules that Ava's mother regularly pestered her with. One, stay away from heroin, that insidious drug which had sucked the life from their town ever since the factory jobs left. And two, stay away from Sadie Reid.

The oaks, elms, and pines were losing their summer greens and exploding with oranges, yellows, and reds. Ava wound the paddle in the figure-eight motion. When she hit a patch of rushing water, she let the paddle rest on the rim of the kayak and took a deep breath while the water around her bubbled and tumbled on itself. The thick morning fog allowed her to see only a few feet ahead, and she let the crests of the river waves and the swelling movement of the water pull her along.

Eventually, the water slowed to a crawl as Ava neared the bend in the Powell River. Beyond was the junction, the place where the river met Wallace Lake. The locals called the point of the river's connection to the lake Dead Man's Point, mostly because of the road that ran along the waterway. The site of many auto and motorcycle accidents, the road had a hairpin turn that froze easily in the winter and covered with water in the summer, sending cars hydroplaning to crash through the guardrails and into the river. Many had lost their lives on that turn, and it was a popular spot for ghost stories around Halloween.

The water level was low, and when Ava rounded the corner, she saw the twin land bars, one mass in front of the other. She'd heard

a teacher describe them once as the broad, mossy-brown backs of two hippos cresting the water, and she now understood that image. Most days, Ava couldn't see so much of those higher patches of silt, rock, and sand; today, they took her by surprise. Something white caught her eye, something so white it nearly glowed. She looked hard. Then again. There, spread-eagle on top of one of the bars, was what looked like a person lying facedown.

Ava shook her head. She told herself it was only the fog playing tricks on her eyes. *I've been watching too many of those crime shows.* No matter how many times she shut her eyes and reopened them, though, the figure was still there. Maybe, she reasoned, it was a mannequin or some sort of sick joke meant to scare people on the river and carry on the haunted name. But it certainly *looked real.* Ava pulled the paddle back hard to stop the forward motion of the kayak. She fought to cross the current over to the exposed bar of land.

“Hello?” Ava called. “Do you need help?”

The body was naked—a white woman with her heavy breasts shoved into the earth of the sandbar. Dark shoulder-length hair was strewn across her face. Ava docked the kayak and climbed out, but the boat's rocking motion left her balance unstable. When Ava took a step, her knee gave out. She fell forward, her hands breaking the fall not far from the woman's leg.

The woman didn't move. Slowly, Ava reached out her hand. *Just a quick touch,* she told herself, *just to make sure it's real.* The woman's skin looked so pale and hard. Ava's fingertips grazed the cold calf before her. The breath seized in her throat, and she felt the heavy pulse of blood thumping in her head. A strange voice echoed in her mind and it took a minute before Ava realized it was her own: *Take a deep breath, stand up, and call for help.*

Ava pushed herself up to her feet and rushed back to the kayak. Her cell was strapped to the waterproof compartment on the side of the boat. As Ava's foot sank into the sand next to the kayak, she saw it—a gray, lifeless hand floating just under the water's surface. Ava's eyes followed the hand to the bend of the wrist and forearm.

She saw the tattoo, that wavering image dulled by the river's water. Her eyes followed the arm to the shoulder of the submerged body below.

Ava screamed, and her heart felt like it could rocket out of her chest.

Was it her? My God, Ava thought, could it really be her?

CHAPTER ONE

Day One: 8:30 a.m.

I held the pillow over my head and tried to will the incessant banging on my front door to go away. It was a cop's knock, that loud fist bang we all learned in the academy. Dammit, I wasn't in the mood to be around cops so early in the morning. I'd fallen asleep in my clothes and on the couch again. Judging from the sunlight seeping through the only window in the apartment, it had to be before nine a.m. Much too early for me to be up and about during my weeklong vacation.

"Come on, Hansen." That familiar fist pounded against my door again. "I know you're in there!"

"Vacation," I shouted. "Come back next week!"

"No such thing as vacation. Open up!"

I tossed the pillow on the floor. Colby Sanders was not only one of the most stubborn men I knew, he was also my boss: Director of the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation. He'd also been a close friend of my father's before my dad passed on. My dad always told me Sanders was a good man, someone I could trust.

"This better be good," I mumbled, one socked foot stumbling over an empty cardboard case of beer. I twisted the two dead bolts and swung the door open.

Sanders grunted hello as he pushed past me into the apartment. He'd just taken a shower; the scent of aftershave and shampoo

trailed after him. He wore his standard work uniform: black suit pants, a short-sleeved white button-up, and a black tie. This wasn't just a friendly house call.

"Come on in." I shut the door, my sarcasm lost on him.

Sanders stood inside my TV room/ dining room/ den, only about five steps from the front door, and reached for his cigarettes. "You mind?"

"Go ahead." I knew Sanders couldn't go more than an hour without a cigarette. There were no ashtrays in the apartment, so I grabbed an empty beer bottle from the floor.

"Jesus, Hansen." He lit the cigarette. "I heard your new place was a dump, but come on. You can do better than this."

"It's not the best area in Columbus," I agreed, "but it works." In truth, I hated the apartment and the undergraduate neighbors that came with it. It was nothing like the home I'd left, a place that felt comfortable and safe.

"Huh." Sanders turned to me, his thick white eyebrows squinting together the way he does when he's putting a crime scene together in his head. His eyes gave me a good solid look up and down. I definitely didn't look my best: I'd been wearing the same worn and wrinkled Fleetwood Mac T-shirt for a few days, complete with remnants of a recent meal dribbled down the front. My cutoff jean shorts were so desperately in need of a laundry cycle, they could probably have stood on their own. In my bare feet, I suddenly felt exposed like I was naked; I crossed one leg over the other and my arms over my chest.

"What's going on here, Luce?"

I couldn't look Sanders in the eye. He was seeing me at my worst, and I didn't like it. "You could have called." I pushed a thatch of greasy hair away from my eyes. God, when had I last taken a shower? I'd lost track of time.

"Goes straight to voicemail. Where's your phone?"

I picked up a towel on the couch along with a few stray socks and located the cell that was stuck between two cushions. Dead battery.

Sanders asked again, "What's going on here, Hansen?"

“I’m fine,” I tried to recover. I pulled my mass of hair up into a knot at the top of my head in an attempt to hide its rattiness. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“You’re in a bad way,” Sanders shook his head. “You should have told me.”

I almost laughed. Me call him for help? Maybe in some other lifetime. I tried to explain. “When your girl leaves you and takes everything, there aren’t too many options.”

Sanders blew a stream of smoke through his nostrils. “It’s been months since you split with Rowan.”

“Only seven,” I said, more defensively than I meant to. Then, as if it could make the sorry fact that I was still devastated any better, I added, “She kept the dogs.”

“I’m sorry,” Sanders said in a soft voice.

His sudden stroke of kindness brought on the sting of tears collecting in the corners of my eyes. I willed them not to fall.

“You haven’t been eating,” Sanders said. He nodded at the empty cases of beer scattered around the room. “And you’ve been drinking too much.”

“A regular Sherlock.”

Sanders reached out to me then, his warm, solid hand surprising me. He gave my shoulder a quick squeeze. Although Sanders was never a man who was good at expressing his emotions, concern laced his touch. I waited for him to pull away; his touch felt strange, foreign. Other than running into the random person on the street or nudging up against someone on the public bus, his touch was the first I’d felt in weeks. I almost forgot that I was mad at him.

Almost.

“Why are you here, Sanders?”

He took a drag on his cigarette. “We might have something.”

I perked up. “A serial killer?”

He nodded. “Two bodies were found this morning along the Powell River. Two more were found a few months ago in the same location, where the river meets with Wallace Lake.”

“Let me see the file.”

Sanders shook his head. “We need to get to Wallace Lake. Shower, and we’ll talk over breakfast.”

“Tell me about the case first.”

Sanders held firm. “Shower. Make it fast.” He reached for the TV remote and flipped the channel to the morning news. “And pack a bag. You’ll be there a few days.”

The morning news anchors squawked as I closed the bedroom door behind me. I knew what Sanders was doing—scanning the stations for any breaking reports on the murders. Once the media caught hold of a possible serial killer, an investigation could descend into chaos in a matter of hours. Sanders’s actions told me one thing. This case at Wallace Lake was going to be a big one.

Inside the bathroom, I peeled off my well-worn clothes, ignoring my image in the bathroom mirror. It alarmed me to see myself; I looked a whole lot like a woman who had nothing left to lose.

The shower stream of cool water felt good—the smack of it against my bare skin—and I let it run over my face until it warmed up. I reached for the gold Irish cross that was always around my neck to make sure it was still there, and then let the water pound against my breastbone. The collection of rowdy undergrads next door took about fifteen showers a day and sucked up the majority of the building’s hot water. Every day, I missed the house that I’d been in the process of renovating with my ex, Rowan. Every day, I missed the land that surrounded our house, the quiet of suburbia that bordered on country. And every day, my heart ached for the dogs I’d left with Rowan, Toto and Daisy. Leaving them with her was the right thing to do; the Labs wouldn’t be happy without their yard, and they had bonded more with Rowan, who stayed home most days to do her artwork. After all, I’d bought the dogs for her when we first moved in to the house. *An added layer of safety*, I told Rowan. *Criminals stay away from homes with dogs*. She’d reached for me then and smiled. *I have a strong detective to protect me, but I love the dogs*. Nothing made the pain in my chest go away when I thought of the dogs and the home I’d left behind. And Rowan.

I scrubbed clean my hair that stank of stale beer. I’d let it grow since Rowan and I split, giving my brown hair and everything else in my life very little attention. It had grown down to the middle

of my back. Rowan would like it, I thought, fingering through the dirty strands. What did my hair or anything else matter, anyway? Rowan was gone. She said she couldn't compete with what she considered to be the other woman in my life any longer—my job as a special agent with the Ohio BCI. Rowan might have thought the other woman was my job, but what really held my heart was the water. It had saved me once from a serial killer and had been saving me ever since.

I toweled off and wrapped myself up to move to the bedroom. The towel went around my body farther than usual. Sanders was right; I hadn't been eating much. I also hadn't been keeping up with my exercise routine. I always swam three miles in the morning before my shift, but I hadn't been in a pool in over two months. My nights had been filled with bad TV and cheap beer or boxed wine. I'd gotten soft and thin. I stood still for a few moments, took a long, deep breath, and finally listened to my body for the first time in months. I found that I was hungry. Starving, actually.

I dug into the closet for some work clothes. The apartment was small, and outside my closed door, I could hear Sanders rummaging around in the living room and kitchen.

"I'm famished," I called out to him. "What are you doing out there, anyway?"

"Just giving you a hand." Sanders turned the volume down on the television. "Did I tell you to bring your suit? I booked a hotel with a pool."

The pool. A wave of guilt washed over me. I'd been apart from the water for too long.

I pulled on my only clean work shirt, a blue silk button up, and cursed Sanders under my breath. He was trying too hard to be nice, and I could smell the stink of his guilt complex all the way in my room. I didn't appreciate him showing up at my apartment. Yes, my cell was dead, but he could have sent an agent out. He could have met me at the office. I hadn't spoken much to Sanders in months other than to discuss my weekly case reports. He knew I was angry. I knew I needed to get over it—it wasn't like I could get away from the man anytime soon unless I quit my job.

I pulled the legs of my black pants up to the knee and stepped into my Frye boots, a good luck charm I always wore to work. My dad had given me the same boots he'd worn throughout his entire career as the Chesterton Chief of Police when I graduated from the academy. It was the last gift my dad ever gave me, and I missed him every day. As I laced the boots, I thought about what had happened over the last eight months of my life.

Last January, Sanders elected me for my first serial killer case. It just so happened that case was in Willow's Ridge, Ohio, a town I had history in as a child. In the summer of 1989, my first love, Marci, was murdered. Her case went unsolved, and Sanders knew there could possibly be a connection with the current crimes. He sent me in, anyway. He used my past to unlock the case, to get in deeper and faster than any outsider could have. After the case was finally closed and the killer had been caught, Sanders promised me that my work would put me in line for a shot at the FBI. Sanders, however, had made promises he couldn't keep; he blamed it on the lack of positions in DC and pointed out regularly that he needed me on his team. I let his words run in one ear and out the other. I'd trusted him. He was my father's friend. I never thought he'd manipulate me to solve a case. Yet here he was in my apartment commenting on my struggles partly brought on by *his* actions. It didn't matter that he was now sorry for what he'd done. I'd lost my trust in him. What hurt me most, though, was that it wasn't just my exuberance for the job I'd lost after the Willow's Ridge case. I'd also lost some of my trust in the criminal justice system. Ethics and personal commitments, it appeared to me, were something of the past.

The bottom line in our business is that we are paid to catch serial criminals. How Sanders went about completing that mission wasn't really the point—it was all about the capture. He succeeded in the Willow's Ridge case by ending the reign of a murderer who'd killed seven young lesbians, and those who helped the killer were now in jail awaiting prosecution. Job done and done well. In the grand scope of things, it didn't really matter that Sanders used my past as a way into the case or that he'd put me in harm's way, both emotionally and physically. He got the job done. There wasn't much

room for sensitive feelings and hurt egos when it came to catching serial criminals.

My father always told me I needed to toughen up if I wanted to go far in the Bureau.

“Think Ice Queen, Luce,” he told me. “And always remember, there’s no crying in baseball.”

I missed my father. While he’d been gone for a few years, his ghostly image hadn’t. He had regularly appeared when I worked tough cases. He’d been a huge help to me on the Willow’s Ridge case, the one who helped guide me through those explosive minefields of my past. Since that case ended, though, I’d rarely sensed or seen my father’s presence.

My fingers reached toward my neck again for the confirmation of the Irish cross. It was still there, the sharpened edges of the cross dulled with time. I hadn’t taken the necklace off since the day Marci’s brother gave it to me in memory of her. I’d been touched beyond words at the family’s generosity when we closed the Willow’s Ridge case. I’d always felt like they blamed me for Marci’s death; in fact, it was me who couldn’t stop blaming myself. Marci’s Irish cross provided me with comfort—a physical reminder that she was always with me.

I unlocked my safe and clipped the badge to my belt, now a few notches tighter on my shrinking waist. I checked the gun’s safety lock and pulled on the shoulder strap, a device I was forced to use given my boyish not-there hips. I reached for the black suit coat next to my mirror and caught sight of my hair. It would take too long to dry. Instead, I brushed through it and weaved one long braid down my back.

In the other room, I heard commotion. I opened the bedroom door and found Sanders standing at a kitchen sink full of soapy water, holding an overflowing trash bag. He wore my purple dish gloves that came up to the middle of his forearms and smiled at me. “You have a lot of dirty dishes, Hansen.”

I stared at him for a long minute. Could I really be seeing this scene correctly? Sanders doing my dishes and collecting my trash? In *purple gloves*? Once I started laughing, I couldn’t stop.



I followed in my truck behind Sanders's beige sedan, a ride he thought was completely nondescript but actually screamed *cop*. He took a no-name exit, and we wound our way through rural routes where the woods grew thick and road signs warning of deer and animal crossings ticked past every few miles. Lucinda Williams had been on constant spin in my truck's CD player since my split with Rowan. Her songs spilled from the truck speakers about the need for love and forsaken trust. There was something about Lucinda's throaty knowledge that I recognized, truths that resonated deep within me. I was almost disappointed when Sanders turned and we rolled into the battered and pitted lot of The Breakfast Nook where the sign promised locally grown, homemade food.

The waitress dropped off a bowl of oatmeal for Sanders and a heaping plate of scrambled eggs and waffles for me. Sanders loaded his oatmeal with pepper and then handed me the shaker. "You sure you're ready to get back on this horse?"

"What horse is that?" I filled my mouth with a forkful of syrup-dripping waffle. "A serial killer?"

Sanders nodded. "You know how dark these things can get. You're the best I've got, Hansen. I just want to make sure you're up for it."

"I've been cleared by counseling. I'm good to go."

"You know that's not what I mean. I need to hear it from you."

I took a deep breath and savored my bite. Real food—fresh and homemade—not the take-out crap I'd been surviving on the past few months. I didn't want to talk about counseling or the state of my mental health. Sanders knew I'd completed the required counseling that all law enforcement had to participate in once they shot or killed anyone while on duty. I'd killed Nick Eldridge, the serial killer in the Willow's Ridge case, not because he deserved it or because I wanted to, but because there was no other choice. He would have killed me if I let him live a second longer. I never let on that the death of Nick Eldridge bothered me, but I wished the outcome could have been different. Death was the easy way out for him since he didn't have to

face any jury members or survivors of the victims. There would be no long hours in the prison cell for him to contemplate his actions. He checked out far too early, and I'd wanted the man to face justice. Instead, *I* was left to contemplate his death and what I could have done differently and why it took me so long to find him. That didn't feel much like justice to me.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out, Hansen," Sanders started.

I shrugged. "You made promises you couldn't keep."

Sanders nodded and swallowed a mouthful of coffee. "For what it's worth, the DC gig isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"Maybe not. I should have been given the chance to figure that out for myself." I leaned against the back of the chair and considered Sanders across from me. It was much easier for me to confront him about the job rather than the real violation I'd suffered. He'd never apologized for what hurt me most—the exposure of my past for his gain and the trust I'd lost in him because of it.

"I need to know something," I said.

"What?"

"Did you really send a letter of recommendation to DC for me? Or was that your way of appeasing me after Willow's Ridge?"

He almost dropped his fork. "Are you serious? Do you really think I wouldn't send a recommendation letter for you? I gave you my word," Sanders said. "I have it saved on my computer if you'd like to see it."

I said nothing. A letter from someone as respected as Sanders carried a lot of weight. I wanted to believe he'd supported me but wasn't sure I could completely trust him.

"Hansen, I'm sorry it didn't work out, but it had nothing to do with me."

An awkward silence settled between us until I finally broke it. "You know as well as I do what makes me tick," I said. "I have to work. If I don't, I'll drown in whatever is going on back there in my apartment."

Sanders stirred his oatmeal and considered me across the booth. Finally he said, "It's a lonely life. We're hunters, Hansen. Not many can survive the sidelines in our lives."

“Is that why you’ve been single forever?”

Sanders chuckled. “There have been a few women here and there. It’s hard, though, to be the ones who watch us become so obsessed and climb inside those dark minds in order to capture them. It’s the rare woman who can stand us, I tell you.”

I thought of Rowan, along with the many arguments we’d had over my obsession with work and the late nights.

“I can work on it,” I tried to promise her.

“I don’t think so,” Rowan said. “You’ll never be able to leave a case at the end of the day, come home to me, and really be here. We just don’t fit together, Luce.”

“There are always the times I’m in between cases.”

Rowan shook her head. “I’m nobody’s backup plan. I won’t be anyone’s second choice.”

I realized then that Rowan had always had a plan in mind, an image of what we would be like together. She wasn’t willing to alter that image in any way—something I admired and hated her for, all at the same time.

Sanders wiped his mouth and pushed his plate to the side of the table. “You ever been out to Wallace Lake?”

“A few times. One of Rowan’s friends had a boat, and we went waterskiing with them on the lake.”

“They’re nearing the end of their busy season. The water sports and camping might be the only things keeping that town afloat. They tried to put in snow skiing a few years back, but it never really took off.”

I’d heard about many of the factories closing up that way and leaving so many in the rural areas of Ohio without work. “So, fill me in. What’s waiting for us in Wallace Lake?”

“I’ll spare you the photos while we’re eating. Basics—four bodies dumped in the Powell River and Wallace Lake area. White females all over the age of fifty. Only the first two victims have been identified.”

“No strong leads?”

Sanders shook his head. “Nothing has panned out.”

I opened the file and picked up a crime scene photograph. A much-too-pale body was lodged on a log at the river’s edge. Facedown with her arms spread too wide, her long, thin fingers pointed downriver.

“Who were the first bodies found?” I asked.

“Betty Geiger, fifty-eight, and Mary Kate Packard, sixty-two. Drifters, as far as anyone can tell.”

“What ties the bodies together?” I asked. There had to be something more than location that connected these four dead women to the same killer. Rivers and waterways were notorious dumping grounds for all kinds of killers, particularly in the Midwest.

“Besides the location, gender, and age, they all have signs of drug abuse—track marks and decayed teeth.”

I loaded my fork with another bite of waffle. “This part of Ohio is notorious for opiates. Drug deaths can be slippery.”

Sanders agreed. I watched him closely; he was holding something back.

“Come on, Sanders. There has to be something more for you to come knocking on my door and drag me out of my vacation.”

Sanders twisted his near-empty coffee cup between his hands. “There are tattoos.”

“Matching?”

Sanders grunted a yes and reached for his bag.

“Interesting.”

He pulled out two photographs, close-up shots labeled *left inner wrist*. The tattoo featured two plump bright red hearts seated side by side, with the right edge of the left heart spilling over into the left edge of the right heart. In that shared space of the two hearts was a black number 2.

“No connection to any groups or churches in the area?”

“Not that anyone has found so far,” Sanders said. “All the victims have them in the same spot. Those photos have enlarged the tats. They aren’t any bigger than a half-dollar.”

“Could it be a marker for human trade?”

“They’ve looked into that, but no known runners use the hearts. Besides, these women are older and wrung out with drug abuse and prostitution. Not the sort of girls the runners are looking for.”

“Anything else?”

“The two earlier victims died of ethylene glycol poisoning. We’re waiting for toxicology on the two found this morning.”

Antifreeze poisoning was a very painful way to die as the body shut down, organ by organ. Since the liquid was odorless and sweet tasting, it could easily be masked inside a soft drink or sports drink, a favorite method of poisoners who don’t want their victims to know they are dying until it’s too late.

“There’s also a change in the murder method. The two women found today were stabbed from behind. One has multiple stab wounds. She put up a real fight, apparently.”

The violence against the victims was escalating, a telltale sign that the killer was gaining confidence and possibly spinning out of control.

“We’re up against a clock here, Hansen. You know as well as I do that once a killer gets a taste for violence and power, it’s only a matter of days before another victim is killed. Everything inside that person needs to match that first perfect high.”

Addiction, I’d found, took many forms including murder. It drove so many of the crimes we worked, leaving destruction and loss in its wake. “No signs of sexual assault?”

“Not on the first two victims. No word yet on the two found this morning.”

“Wallace Lake is a small community. Has the local PD turned up anything?”

“Wallace Lake PD started locally with the drug angle,” Sanders said. “They’ve looked into a few known dealers in the area, a pimp or two. I guess the latest excitement with the heroin epidemic in the area is to lace the drug with propofol. The dealers are making money hand over fist.”

“Propofol. That’s the drug that killed Michael Jackson, right?”

“That’s it,” Sanders said. “It’s what they use in hospitals to knock people out before surgery.”

“Jesus.”

“It’s something, isn’t it? I mean, what twisted thing will dealers think of next? Anyway, the local PD came up empty. Our best chance is for something to hit on the two women found today. We need an ID on them, and hopefully, some evidence will be found at the scene.”

“So we’re heading into this case with next to nothing.”

“That’s why they need us,” Sanders said. “That’s why they need you, Hansen.”

Sanders didn’t need to convince me to work the case. My mind was already circling with possible profiles for this killer. Before I realized it, the hooks of the case had already sunk into me. I couldn’t have stopped the pull toward these women if I tried. For the first time in months, I’d forgotten about Rowan and the disappointment in my job.

My body was on high alert with a sort of vibration pulsating through me, my breaths deeper, my heartbeat stronger. I was ready for the hunt. I was ready for the chase. And I was more than ready to go into that dark place once again.

I felt alive.