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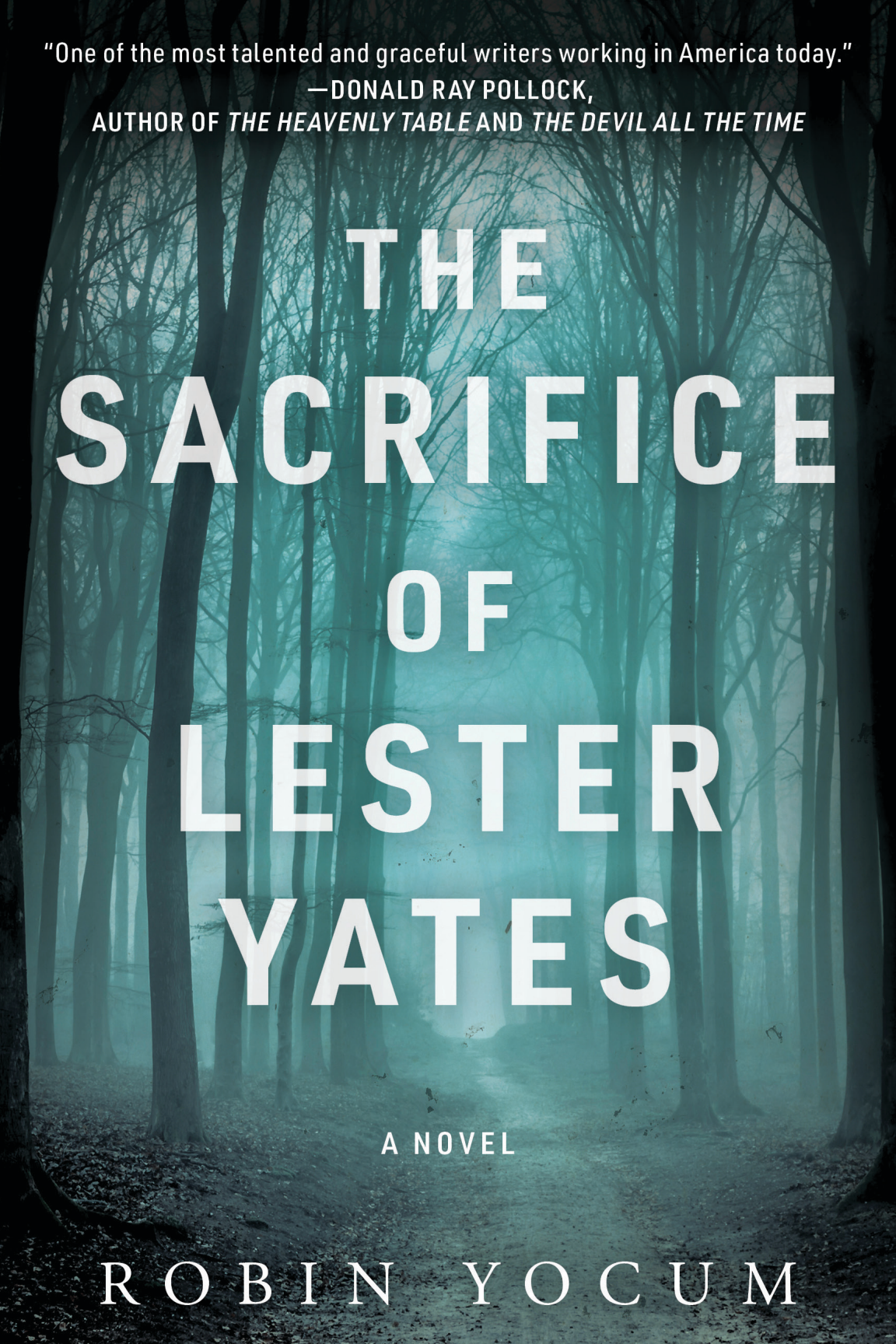

THE SACRIFICE OF LESTER YATES

A NOVEL

ROBIN YOCUM

THE SACRIFICE OF LESTER YATES

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Fiction

A Perfect Shot, 2018
A Welcome Murder, 2017
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Dead Before Deadline, 2004
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THE SACRIFICE OF LESTER YATES

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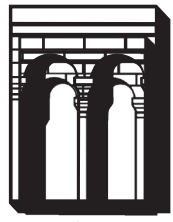

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This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To Ryan, Ashley,
and Jaclynn

Acknowledgments

I have a great agent in Colleen Mohyde, who has now put my sixth novel into print. Colleen has been a warrior on my behalf for more than a decade, and I am very appreciative of her efforts.

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Lastly, thanks to my beautiful wife, Melissa, who is a constant source of inspiration. Her support and encouragement make the task of writing a novel infinitely easier.

In memory of the Egypt Valley Eighteen

Donna Herrick
1969–1993

Betsy Bergen
1967–1993

Identity Unknown
Died 1993

Anne Touvell
1973–1994

Angel Brown
1964–1995

Johnnie Jo Sephardic
1963–1995

Denise Brown
1971–1995

Maddie Kaminski
1969–1996

Tina "T" Pavlik
1969–1997

Teri Lynn Mason
1967–1997

Stephanie Wetzel
1964–1997

Divina Gardner
1963–1998

Gretchen Essex
1978–1999

Allison "Stormy" Wethers
1972–2000

Danielle Quinn
1971–2000

Nancy Farmer
1970–2001

Rayanne Schmidlin
1967–2001

Louise E. Love
1979–2001

Prologue

Ed Herrick was playing out the string, waiting patiently to die. He was two days past his eighty-fifth birthday when I interviewed him on the back porch of a two-story frame house that was as worn and sagging under its own weight as its owner. It was a slate gray morning, cool for June, and the leaves on the sugar maples had turned up in anticipation of the storm that would blow through the Upper Ohio River Valley later that morning. We sat on a pair of paint-starved rocking chairs and watched the waters of Wheeling Creek churn under the Blaine Hill Bridge on the old National Road. It was the house in which Herrick had been born, lived, and planned to die. He seemed to be grateful for my company, even if it was to discuss the murder of his youngest child.

Herrick had rheumy eyes and features that had been sharpened by age. Translucent skin stretched taut over hands that were flecked with wine spots and appeared to have the fragility of butterfly wings. A fine line of tobacco juice flowed like a slow leak from the crevice that stretched from the corner of his mouth to his stubbled chin. He smelled faintly of urine, the tang of stale testosterone, and the chewing tobacco that was crammed into his jaw. He called it "my last vice."

"The doctor won't let me have whiskey no more," he said, rubbing at his belly. "I got bad ulcers. You ever had an ulcer?" I told him I had not. "The doc didn't have to do a lot of convincin'. You

don't want whiskey with an ulcer, I can tell you that, but I sure do miss it."

He was sickly thin, a feature exaggerated by a baggy red and black checked flannel shirt that was worn thin and white around his bony elbows and green pants that were cinched tight at the waist, the excess leather from the belt lying limp between his thighs. He had outlived his wife, two daughters, and his savings. On several occasions during our talk, his sunken eyes filled with tears and he groaned that he was tired of living and wanted "to go see Mom and the girls."

Periodically, I would lose him. His eyes would drift out over the rushing waters and focus on a time and place to which I was not privy. When he turned his head back to me, he would ask, "What was I talking about?" After one such lapse, he said, "It's hell to get old."

The death of Donna Herrick weighed heavily upon him, wearing down his bones and his will to live. He wished he could reverse time and go back and save his daughter. Not once in two decades had he stopped blaming himself for her death. It was an absurd supposition. How does one stop the wanton action of an unknown killer? You don't. But he was a father. It had been his duty to protect his little girl, and in his mind he had failed. He had held that belief since the day they had found her body, and he would surely take it to his grave. When his daughter needed him most, he wasn't there. "I buried my wife and that was bad, but nothing hurts like the pain of burying a child."

Donna Herrick had been young and a bit of a hellion with a quick smile and a lust for life. She was the youngest of his four children, a surprise that came fourteen years after the son that he and his wife believed would be their last. Ed Herrick was forty-eight when Donna was born, and by his own admission wasn't as strict with her as he had been with the older children. By the time Donna was fifteen and hitting her hormonal stride, her father was sixty-three and out of gas.

"She was my wild child," Herrick said. "She wasn't a bad girl, but ornery as all hell, always pushing the limits. When she was little, she would always fight with the boys; she was a scrapper, that one.

When she got a little older and found out she had something boys wanted, things changed. She was fearless; wasn't afraid of a damn thing. I always figured that was what got her killed." He pulled a balled-up, yellowed handkerchief from his hip pocket and dabbed at his eyes and blew his nose. "Donna always said that she wanted to be a movie star. She used to say, 'Pops, someday I'm going to be famous.' Well, she is, but for the wrong reason." He looked out over the water and slowly shook his head. "I still miss her—every damned day."

On July 17, 1993, a Saturday, Donna Herrick left her job at an automobile parts distribution warehouse south of Wheeling, West Virginia, and drove back across the Ohio River to the three-bedroom ranch in St. Clairsville that she was renting with two friends from high school. Donna cranked up a Def Leppard CD and the three young women laughed, sang into their hair brushes, made piña coladas in the blender, and smoked a couple of blunts before heading back across the river around nine o'clock to make the circuit of the clubs on Wheeling Island—the Merriment, Lou's Voo Doo, and Tin Pan Alley. Donna was twenty-three and loving life, dancing and drinking; it was another raucous Saturday night on the island. The last time her friends remembered seeing Donna, she was at the bar at the Merriment. She had a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. No one saw her talking to anyone particular. No one saw her leave.

She was there.

And then she wasn't.

Some forty miles to the west along Interstate 70, Piedmont Lake was overflowing its banks and spilling into the surrounding lowlands, filling the marshes and backwater inlets. These coves normally drew just enough water to create fetid mud bogs that supported little more than moss, sickly honey locust trees, and water moccasins. But after three days of rain the swollen lake had filled the back bays, including an inlet on its western edge near where Township Highway 357 dead-ends, the remainder of its southern route lost to the depths when Stillwater Creek was dammed in 1937 to create Piedmont Lake. The moss that had thrived in that dank inlet rose on the floodwaters, creating an emerald pool that shimmered

when the sun finally showed itself on the morning of July 24, a week after Donna had disappeared.

It was just a few hours later when Merle Dresbach parked a Ford pickup truck that was more primer than paint along the berm of Highway 357. He and his grandson, Nick, grabbed a tackle box and two rods from the bed of the pickup and maneuvered over a sodden path that led to the water. Merle had his fishing gear in one hand and two sack lunches in the other.

By the time I started looking into the death of Donna Herrick, Merle Dresbach was fifteen years gone, having succumbed to black lung, the consequence of four decades spent mining coal deep beneath the hills of eastern Ohio. But his grandson remembered that day, if only through the eyes of a boy who was barely six. He remembered following his grandfather down the path and trying to step in the footprints left by his work boots, which seemed gigantic to him. The overgrown grass and foxtail were still soaked from the rain and they bent over the path like the arched roof of a cathedral, brushing against the young boy's face like so many wet paintbrushes. He remembered his grandfather stopping suddenly, dropping the lunches and the rods and tackle box, its contents of lures, hooks, and orange bobbers spilling over the damp soil.

"My grandpa was a pretty tough old bird, but when he saw that girl in the water, that really spooked him," said Nick Dresbach. "He didn't think I'd seen anything, but I did. I was little and there was a gap in the cattails, and I could see right through it. I saw that girl floating on the water; she was face down and her black hair was fanned out in a perfect circle. It was floating on the moss like a halo."

She was naked from the waist down and had been strangled with a dirty, rawhide shoe lace.

His grandfather scooped Nick up in his arms and ran, his diseased lungs pulling hard for air and producing a strained wheezing. Nick remembered being disappointed that they weren't going fishing and how his grandfather's white knuckles wrapped around the steering wheel as they sped to a nearby house to call the sheriff.

The sphere of interest in Donna Herrick's murder was centered in the Upper Ohio River Valley. Reporters came to Ed Herrick's house for interviews and asked for photographs to accompany their

articles, and for the next week stories of her death dominated the front page above the fold. But a story works its way out of a newspaper in concentric circles, like a pebble dropped in a still pond, or a body dropped in a man-made reservoir. Other people die in car crashes, mayors and city councils clash, a highway construction worker is crushed to death in Yorkville. The latest victim is always the star. Donna Herrick's connection to an even larger evil had yet to be discovered, so the headlines faded. She was buried in a hillside plot in the Catholic cemetery overlooking the little town of Lafferty, and her life began to drift in memory except for those who had loved her.

The Belmont County sheriff assigned two deputies to the case. But where does one go when there are no witnesses and precious little physical evidence? And, after all, it wasn't like Donna was the daughter of a state senator or bank president. Her daddy had worked in a glass factory in Bellaire. As the stories disappeared from the newspaper, so did the leads into the sheriff's department, and soon Donna Herrick's file yellowed in a steel cabinet.

It would be another five months before a deer hunter found the body of a second woman, Betsy Bergen, in a thicket near the Old Egypt Cemetery. She was naked, with ligature marks on her neck and a green Christmas scarf with embroidered red reindeer lying at her feet. Then came the spring thaw and the badly decomposed remains of a third woman—to this day unidentified—was found in a stand of cattails on the western shore of Piedmont Lake near the 4-H camp. Seven months later, turkey hunters would find the body of Anne Touvell lashed to an elm tree near Egypt North Road; she had been garroted with baling wire that remained embedded in her neck.

The Egypt Valley Wildlife Area is a protected expanse of more than eighteen thousand acres in eastern Ohio. It was named for the extinct farming town of Egypt, which had grown up around a flour mill that pioneer James Lloyd erected near the banks of Stillwater Creek in 1826. The little town had a school, general store, post office, and a Baltimore & Ohio Railroad train station, but not much else. Egypt disappeared sometime in the early 1900s when the surrounding farmland, known as the Egypt Valley, was purchased by

the coal companies, and the vast majority of the Allegheny Plateau was stripped away. The wildlife area was reclaimed after strip mining operations had extracted the last of the Pittsburgh No. 8 coal seam that lay beneath the surface. The dense Egypt Valley Wildlife Area horseshoes Piedmont Lake, a 2,270-acre reservoir with thirty-eight miles of shoreline.

The Egypt Valley was wild, isolated, and full of timber, brush, and concealed inlets. In short, it was the ideal place to dump a body.

It was a newspaper editor at the *Ohio Valley Journal*, Mitch Malone, who finally discovered the pattern. He began researching unsolved murders and documented eleven deaths—all women—over a five-year period. The victims, he noticed, were largely disposable members of society—prostitutes, drug addicts, petty criminals, and the occasional wild child, like Donna Herrick. He presented his findings in an award-winning series of stories in which he dubbed the killer, the "Egypt Valley Strangler." Newspapers all over the country picked up Malone's stories, and the remote Egypt Valley of eastern Ohio and its strangler became known to all.

Malone's series of stories ended, but the killings did not.

Sheriff's offices and small police departments along the Interstate 70 corridor began comparing notes and looking at old case files.

They had a problem.

The strangler continued to use the Egypt Valley as his killing grounds. Frustrated sheriffs called in the FBI for assistance, but they were no more successful than the locals. The national media descended on the little towns of Flushing, Hendrysburg, Holloway, and Sewellsville, interviewing residents. Some speculated it was a local man, a hunter perhaps, someone familiar with the woods and terrain. Others suggested an over-the-road trucker who passed through the area on occasion. In the four years after Malone's series of stories, another seven women—making eighteen in all—would be found in or near the Egypt Valley.

The murderer's ability to ply his craft with impunity was an embarrassment to law enforcement. Thus, it was with great fanfare in late October of 2001 that they announced they had their man.

This, however, did little to ease the troubled mind of Ed Herrick. He used a yellowed nail to pick at a chip of paint that was arching its back on the arm of his chair. "I'll die not knowing for sure what really happened, who really killed her," he said. "They say it was that one fella, that white supremacist boy, but I don't think they know for sure. I think they wanted to clear up all those murders, so they blamed 'em on him, and that was that. Case closed. It's important for fellas like you to find the killer. That's what you do. I don't worry about it anymore. I don't know if he did or he didn't. Either way, it doesn't bring my daughter back, does it? She's gone, and I understand that he'll be gone pretty soon, too. I suspect I'll be dead not long after that. Maybe I'll find out what really happened when I get to the other side."

★ ★ ★

The higher you climb in the justice system, the less interaction you have with the Ed Herricks of the world, the victims, the individuals left to pick up the pieces and whose lives are forever broken by the cruelty of others. The day I drove to eastern Ohio and interviewed Ed Herrick and Nick Dresbach was the first time I felt like I had done legitimate investigative work in the nearly three years since I was elected attorney general of the state of Ohio. I had been dealing with the so-called elite of the criminal justice system, the white-collar stuff, graft, misspent campaign funds, scams. The men—they're always men—I dealt with wouldn't sully their hands with a Saturday night special, but they had no compunction about bilking an eighty-year-old widow out of her life savings.

Losing a life savings, however, is nothing like having a cop show up at your front door and tell you that your daughter has been found face down in a lake. For that reason, law-enforcement professionals tend to dehumanize the victims. They push to the outside limits of their consciousness the photographic images of the victim's smile or tales of their tenderness. They treat their cases as if they are complicated puzzles to be solved and devoid of humanity. It is a coping mechanism that keeps them from losing their minds with grief.

I had done it many times. I immersed myself in the technical, scientific, and legal machinations of the case in order to put a man

in prison or see him sentenced to death. But at some point, I would find myself across the table from a grieving father or wife seeking answers for their loss, my technical world colliding with their raw emotions.

That is why I became a prosecutor. I sought justice for those who could not fight for themselves, either because they were dead or because they were survivors thrust into the violent world of predation. Regardless of my motivations, the worst part of the job was dealing with the Ed Herricks of the world, those souls who would go to their graves with a hole in their heart as real and ravaged as one from a bullet.

As I drove back to my office that day, I was oddly rejuvenated by the misery of Ed Herrick. I had shared in his pain at the loss of a woman who would be perpetually twenty-three and full of life, and it was a reawakening. I remembered what I had been born to do, and once again my life had real purpose.