

PROLOGUE

Along the north edge of Cleveland lies a beach that extends the length of the city. It's a blank slate where waves from Lake Erie sculpt elevation lines marked by broken shells and debris. The morning of February 23, 1937, high wind coming off the water spit spray and raised thin curtains of stinging sand. Just outside Euclid Beach Park, a ragged pile of clothing that looked like it had washed up on the previous night's incoming tide lay fluttering madly. Drag marks and deep footprints, coming and going, marked the sand.

The pile of rags hid the torso of an unidentified woman—the eighth human being murdered, dismembered, and left lying around Cleveland by The Butcher of Kingsbury Run. The murders had started with the so-called “Lady of the Lake” left along the shoreline in September, 1934, and showed no signs of stopping.

In December, 1935, Mayor Harold Burton had recruited Eliot Ness of Chicago fame as Cleveland Safety Director. The Butcher handed Ness one of his few defeats, month after month, as he kept killing and escaping detection. The new safety director had plenty of distractions. Cleveland's rival gangs did not let-up with the repeal of Prohibition. Times were tough for everyone and the mafia intended to get its share.

With auto manufacturers closing their doors—at one time Cleveland factories produced 115 automobile makes—the good times had ended.

That day in 1937, during the second dip of a double-dip depression, the Holy Rosary Soup Kitchen in Little Italy provided a lot of hot meals, but couldn't begin to take up the slack. Torn newspapers, cigarette butts, and dirt swirled into the faces of silent people hunched, heads down against the gale, standing in line, bellies growling, waiting and hoping something would remain when they got to the head of the line. A few cars crept along the street like dry, drifting leaves, drivers bent over steering wheels. Unkempt apartment buildings, backed by the New York and Erie tracks, lined the west side of the street and railroad cars rumbled through to some unknown, unimportant destination.

This is the city where Bobbi Bowen sang for her supper. Beginning during that second downturn, she scratched her way up a ladder of notes, seeking security that eluded her, again and again.