

HAVE YOU SEEN HER?

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, September 26,
Raleigh, North Carolina,
10:00 a.m. ~

The fact that he'd seen more horrific scenes over the course of his career was should have made this one easier to mentally process.

Should have.

Didn't.

Special Agent Steven Thatcher loosened his tie, but it didn't do a thing to help the flow of air to his lungs. It didn't do a thing to change what he'd found in the clearing after the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation received an anonymous tip leading them to this place.

It certainly didn't do a thing to bring the poor dead woman back to life.

So Steven centered the knot of his tie right over the lump in his throat. He stepped forward carefully, earning him a glare from the rookie Forensics had sent because the rookie's boss had picked the week they discovered a gruesome, brutal murder to take a cruise to the Caribbean.

Now, looking at the mangled corpse, heavily scavenged by whatever creatures lived in these woods, Steven couldn't help wishing he was on a boat far from civilization, too.

"Watch your feet," the rookie cautioned from his hands-and-knees position on the grass next to the body, irritation in his voice. Kent Thompson was reputed to be quite good, but Steven would hold his judgment. However, the fact Kent hadn't thrown up yet was a stroke in his favor.

"Thank you for the lesson in crime scene investigation," Steven replied dryly and Kent's cheeks went redder than chili peppers.

Kent sat back on his heels and looked away. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'm frustrated. I've checked this entire area three times. Whoever left her here didn't leave anything else behind."

"Maybe the ME will find something on the body," Steven said.

Kent sighed. "What's left of it." He looked back at the corpse, clinical detachment on his face. But Steven also

noted the flicker of controlled compassion in the young man's eyes and was satisfied. Kent would do his job, but still remember the victim. Another stroke in the newbie's favor.

"Sorry, Steven," said a ragged voice behind him and Steven turned to find Agent Harry Grimes taking labored breaths as he slipped a handkerchief in his pocket. Harry's face was pale, although the green tinge had passed along with the Big Mac Harry had downed on his way to the scene.

New to the SBI, Harry had been assigned to Steven for training. Harry showed a lot of promise, except for his very weak stomach. But Steven couldn't blame him too much. He might have lost his own lunch had he taken the time to eat any. "It's okay, Harry. It happens."

"Have we found anything?" Harry asked.

"Not yet." Steven crouched down next to the body, a pen in his gloved hand. "Nude, no ID or clothing anywhere around. There's enough left of her to know she was female."

"Adolescent female," Kent added and Steven's head shot up.

"What?"

"Adolescent female is my guess," Kent said, pointing to the corpse's torso. "Pierced navel."

Harry's gulp was audible. "How can you tell?"

Kent's mouth quirked up. "You could see if you put your face a bit closer."

"I don't think so," said Harry in a strangled voice.

Steven balanced himself on the balls of his feet, still crouched. "Okay, an adolescent female. She's been here at least a week. We'll need to run a check through missing persons." He gently rolled the body over and felt his heart skip a beat at the same time Harry cursed softly.

"What?" Kent asked looking from Steven up to Harry and back at Steven. "What?"

A grimness settled over Steven and he pointed his pen at the remains of the young girl's left buttock. "She had a tattoo."

Kent leaned closer, then looked up, still squinting. "Looks like a peace symbol."

Steven looked up at Harry who wore a look of the same grim acknowledgement. "Lorraine Rush," Steven said and Harry nodded.

"Who was Lorraine Rush?" Kent asked.

"Lorraine was reported missing about two weeks ago," Harry said quietly. "Her parents went in to wake her up for school and found her bed slept in but empty."

"No evidence of forced entry," Steven added, looking at the corpse with new concern. "We had to assume she'd run away. Her parents insisted she never would run, that she'd been kidnapped."

"Parents always insist their kids would never run away," Harry said. "You still don't know that she didn't and just met up with some rough character along the way."

Steven could see in his mind's eye the picture of Lorraine as she'd been, the smiling girl in the photograph on the Rush's fireplace mantel. "She was sixteen. A year younger than my oldest son." Steven let his thoughts briefly linger on his troubled son who'd undergone such a radical change in personality in the last month. But that was another worry. He'd dwell on his very personal problem of Brad when he'd put Lorraine Rush out of his mind. Whenever that would be.

"Damn shame," said Kent.

Steven pushed himself to his feet and stared down at what was left of what had once been a beautiful, vibrant young woman. Pushed back the primal rage at the monster that could take the life of another so brutally. "We'll need to inform her parents." He didn't look forward to that task.

Breaking the tragic news of a loved one's murder should have been easier after all these years.

Should have been.

Wasn't.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

Thursday, September 29,
8:55 a.m. ~

"How are you, Steven?"

Steven looked up to find his boss, Special Agent in Charge Lennie Farrell, looking down at him with that troubled expression that made Steven want to groan. When most people said how are you, they meant how are you?, but when Lennie Farrell said how are you, it meant they were going to have a chat which in Steven's case would almost certainly include a discussion of 'the incident' from six months before. Which Steven didn't have the emotional energy to go through. Now now.

Not after yet another argument with seventeen-year-old Brad last night over his oldest son's month-old attitude that gave 'sullen teenager' new meaning. They'd

fought, screamed at one another and Steven still didn't know why or who had won. Which meant nobody had won.

Not after yet another over-breakfast argument with his Aunt Helen over the 'nice young woman' she'd lined up for him to meet this weekend. Helen never understood that he was determined to remain a widower for the foreseeable future, at least until all his boys were grown.

Steven pressed his fingertips to throbbing temple. And especially after trying to hug his youngest son before leaving the house and once again having seven-year-old Nicky push him away. Nicky and 'the incident' were inextricably intertwined.

And Steven would rather date one of Helen's debutantes than talk about it again.

But Lennie's expression said that's what he'd come to talk about and although Steven had learned from experience that Lennie would not be deterred, he did know his boss could be distracted. So to his boss' how are you, Steven replied, "About like you'd think after looking at pictures of a mutilated, animal-scavenged corpse." He pushed the folder to the edge of his desk.

Lennie took the bait, flipping through the pictures of the body in the clearing, his seasoned cop's face showing no sign of emotion. But he swallowed hard before closing the folder and Steven knew he'd been as impacted as Steven himself had been.

"And our suspects?" Lennie asked, his eyes still on the folder cover.

"Not many," Steven said. "Lorraine Rush was a well-liked girl, a cheerleader at High Point High School. Sixteen, no boyfriends her parents knew about. Her friends are stunned."

"And her teachers?"

"Nothing there either. We've checked her whereabouts every day for three weeks before she was reported missing and nothing stands out. Lorraine was a clean-cut all-American girl."

"With a tattoo on her buttock," Lennie said, his tone clearly indicating that butt-tattoo's did not fit his picture of the all-American girl.

Steven shrugged. "She was a teenager, Lennie. They paint and pierce themselves, God knows why. In my day it was dyeing your hair green and sticking safety pins in your nose. We ran a tox screen on what was left and didn't find any evidence of the usual teenage party scene."

"So, in other words, no suspects," Lennie said, frowning.

"Nope."

"And the Forensics report?"

"She was killed there in the clearing. Her blood was found soaked three inches into the soil."

"It's been so dry lately," Lennie murmured. "The ground just drank her up."

Steven eyed his half-drunk coffee with new distaste. "Yeah. Cause of death may have been stabbing, but the ME wouldn't swear to it. There just wasn't enough of her body left. She'd been there five days based on the larval state of the maggots that were busy eating what the animals left behind. She was probably raped, although the ME wouldn't swear to that either."

Lennie's mouth tightened. "What will the ME swear to?"

"That she's dead."

Lennie's lip twitched. Once. Through all the horror, they had to find ways to lighten the stress. Humor normally sufficed, as long as they kept it to themselves. But the humor was a trapping, a cover that just hid the horror for a moment or two. Then it was there again, staring them in the face.

Steven sighed and opened the folder. "Kent also found what looks like a new tattoo on the Rush girl's scalp. Whoever killed her shaved her bald and left his mark on her."

Lennie bent down and squinted at the picture. "What is

it?"

"Not enough left to say. Kent's investigating. Whoever shaved her head didn't do it there in the clearing or if he did, he's one meticulous sonofabitch. We picked at the grass with tweezers for two days and didn't find a single hair. Nothing," Steven added irritably.

It was Lennie's turn to sigh. "Well, now you've got another place to look."

Steven straightened in his chair. "What are you talking about, Lennie?"

Lennie pulled a folded sheet from his pocket. "We got a call from Sheriff Braden over in Pineville. His sister went in to wake his sixteen year old niece for school this morning and -"

Dread settled in the pit of Steven's stomach. Two of them. Two meant the 's' word. Serial killer. "And the girl was gone," he said woodenly.

"Bed slept in, no evidence of forced entry, window left unlocked."

"Could be unrelated," Steven said.

Lennie nodded soberly. "Pray they are. This one's yours. I have to ask if you can handle it."

Irritation bubbled and Steven let just a little of it show. "Of course I can, Lennie. I wish you'd just leave it the

hell alone.”

Lennie shook his head. “I can’t, you know that. I don’t want one of my lead agents cracking in the middle of what could turn out to be a high-profile serial murder case. I also don’t want you to have to go through another case where children are stolen out of their beds.”

Like Nicky had been, six months before when a wife-beating, murdering cop took his littlest boy hostage to make Steven back down. Nicky was returned, physically unharmed, in large part due to the heroics of the cop’s abused wife, but his baby had not been the same. Gone was his infectious laughter, the way he’d hugged them for no reason at all. Nicky had allowed no hugs since that day six months ago. He hadn’t slept in his own bed, either and he sure as hell hadn’t slept through the night.

Steven knew this because he sure as hell hadn’t slept through the night either.

Lennie broke into his thoughts. “So tell me now, Steven. Can you handle this or not?”

Steven looked at the picture of the mutilated body of Lorraine Rush and thought about the newest girl, missing from her bed. These girls deserved justice, above all else. He looked up at Lennie, his smile a mere baring of teeth. “I said yes, Lennie. I can handle it.”

Lennie handed him the report, concern still evident in

his eyes. "Her name is Samantha Eggleston. Her parents are waiting for your call."

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Thursday, September 29,
11 p.m.~

Thunder rolled off to the east. Or was it west? It really didn't matter, he thought, scratching the back of his neck with the flat of the blade. With his very sharp blade. He grinned to himself. One slip would be the end of him. He glanced down at the ground and raised a brow thoughtfully. One slip would be the end of her, too. But never stop with just one slip. Not when he'd gone to so much trouble. Every movement must be planned. And savored. He rolled up his left sleeve, then transferred the blade from one gloved hand to the other and methodically rolled up the right while she watched, her blue eyes wide and terrified.

Terrified was good. Just looking at her lying there tied, and scared - and nude - made his skin tingle with anticipation. She was completely under his control.

It was like ... electricity. Pure electricity. And he'd made it. He'd created it. What a rush.

Rush. As in Lorraine Rush. No pun intended. Lorraine

had been a good practice run. A good way to return to the game after so long on the sidelines. He'd forgotten just how damn good it felt.

This new one, she hadn't made a sound yet. Well, she was wearing a thick strip of duct tape over her mouth to be perfectly fair. But he'd take the tape off eventually and she would. She'd try not to. She'd bite her lip and cry. But in the end she'd scream her head off. They always did. And it wouldn't make one lousy bit of difference. That was one good thing about Hicksville. There were places you could go and scream bloody murder and nobody would ever hear a single word.

Another roll of thunder rattled the dry ground under his feet and this time he looked up to the night sky, totally annoyed. It could actually rain. How irritating was that? "The best laid plans," he muttered, then had to grin as he punned once again. Laid. That was the operative word. One of 'em anyway. Then the wind changed and his grin faded. Of all the sonofabitch nights to rain.

He crossed his arms over his chest, holding the ten-inch blade out to one side, and frowned. He could just get it over with, but that seemed anti-climactic. He'd planned for quite a while to bag this little doll. She'd been so unsure. "I just don't know," she'd whispered into the phone, trying not to wake her parents and sound breathy at the same time. In his mind he mocked her maidenly refusals. If her parents only knew their little darling was a real little slut, meeting a stranger after

they'd gone to sleep. No brainiac here. They'd raised a slut and an idiot.

He closed his eyes and brought the image of another to mind. He could see her face in his mind. So incredibly beautiful, so ... pure. He'd have her someday. Soon. But until then ... He looked down at the huddled form at his feet. Until then, this one would have to do.

Thunder rolled again. He needed to make up his mind. Either hurry up and finish before the rain closed in or pack her up and store her until the storm passed through. Either way he was taking a chance being out here in the rain. A hard rain would leave the ground soft. Soft ground left footprints and tire prints and cops were pretty good about tracking those kind of clues these days. Damn forensics. No matter. He was as smart as they were. Smarter.

Hell, a baboon was smarter than the cops. If he'd waited until the cops had discovered little Lorraine's body on their own, there wouldn't have been enough left of it to identify.

And he wanted little Lorraine's body identified. He wanted everyone to know. To fear.

Fear me. Your daughters aren't safe even in their own beds. Fear me.

He'd wait, he decided. He'd rushed the last one and it was over too fast. Like an amusement park ride

you stand in line for two hours to ride and the damn ride only lasts three and a half minutes. He'd gone longer than three and a half minutes with the last one, for sure. But it was still over too fast. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. It had been his only mistake, he thought, rushing the grand finale. Everything else he'd done to perfection. Not a single thread of evidence left behind. No surprise there. He was thinking much more clearly now.

Carefully he sheathed his blade and slipped it under the front seat of his car, popping the trunk latch on his way back to where she still lay, eyes still wide with terror.

"C'mon, sugar," he drawled, scooping her up and tossing her over his shoulder. "Let's go for a ride." He dropped her in the trunk with a loud thud, then patted her bare butt fondly. She whimpered and he nodded. "Don't worry, we'll come back tomorrow. Until then, sit tight and entertain yourself. You could think about me," he suggested brightly. "You do know who I am." She shook her newly-bald head hard, denying the inevitable and he laughed. "Oh, come on, Samantha. You have to know who I am. Don't you watch the news?" He leaned a little closer and whispered, "Don't you have a good imagination?"

Her eyes shut tight and she pulled her nude body into a fetal position, shaking like a leaf. Two tears seeped from her eyes and slid down her cheeks.

He nodded again and slammed down the trunk. "Good

girl. I guess you do."

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by

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