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Opening Extract from...

Have You Seen Her

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Prologue

Seattle, three years earlier

'I wish they'd fried his murderin' ass,' declared the first man bitterly, breaking the silence that had become explosive in its intensity.

Murmurs of heated agreement rippled through the small crowd that had gathered to watch the moving van being loaded. God only knew why they had. There really wasn't anything to see. Sofas, chairs, antiques of all shapes and sizes. Vases that probably cost a year's salary of an average working man. A grand piano. Simply the belongings of an opulent family forced to flee the rage of an incensed community.

And the guards the family had hired to keep the crowds at bay. That was all.

The off-duty cop dressed in old jeans and a Seahawks sweatshirt wasn't sure why he himself was there, standing in the cold Seattle drizzle. Perhaps to prove to himself that the murdering sonofabitch was really leaving town. Perhaps to get one last look at his face before he did.

Perhaps.

But more than likely it was to torture himself over the one who got away. The cruel, demonic, sadistic brute who got away. On a goddamn technicality.

There would be no justice for the grieving community, still in shock. *Not today, anyway*, he thought.

An elderly woman shook her plastic-rainhat-covered head as the movers loaded more boxes into the unmarked truck. 'The chair wouldn't have been good enough, not after what he did.'

Another old man squared his once-robust shoulders, staring at the darkened house with contempt. 'Shoulda done to him what he done to those poor girls.'

His wife made a soft clucking sound in her throat from under the umbrella she held over them both. 'But what decent person could they get to do it?'

'How about the girls' fathers?' her husband returned, helpless fury making his voice tremble.

Again murmurs of agreement.

'What I can't believe is that they just let him go,' a younger man wearing a Mariners baseball cap said in a bold, angry voice.

'On a technicality,' added the first man who had spoken, just as bitterly as before.

On a mistake. An error. A goddamn technicality.

'Cops arrest 'em, damn lawyers let 'em go,' said the man sharing the umbrella with his wife.

'Oh, no,' said the man in the Mariners cap. 'This technicality was the fault of the police. It was all over the front page. The cops fucked up and this monster goes free.'

It was true. But he knew it wasn't 'cops'. It was only one cop.

'Richard,' shushed the younger woman at Baseball-cap's side, grabbing his arm. 'There's no need to be vulgar.'

Richard Baseball-cap shook off the woman's restraining hand. '*He* rapes and butchers four girls and *I'm* vulgar?' he declared in loud disbelief. 'Don't be an idiot, Sheila.'

Sheila looked down at the pavement, her cheeks crimson. 'I'm sorry, Richard.'

'Yeah, whatever,' Richard muttered, looking up at the

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house. 'It just pisses me off that rich people hire rich lawyers and get away with bloody murder.'

Agreement again passed through the group and the conversation turned to the inequities of the modern legal system until the movers loaded the last box and sealed the truck's back doors. The truck pulled away to a cacophony of jeers and name-calling that did absolutely no real good at all, unless it made the crowd feel better. But how could it?

Then the small crowd hushed as one of the doors of the three-car garage slid open and a black Mercedes sedan emerged. No one said a word until the Mercedes was upon them, gliding by on the wet street. Then Richard Baseball-cap yelled, 'Murderer!' and the cry was taken up by the others.

Except for the off-duty cop in old blue jeans and a now-soaked Seahawks sweatshirt who said not a word, even when the Mercedes rolled to a stop next to where he silently stood.

The crowd hushed again as the heavily tinted window rolled down, revealing the face that haunted his dreams, asleep and awake. Cold dark eyes narrowed, filled with unleashed fury. It was subhuman, the face and the eyes and the mouth that curved in a smug smile that he wanted to slice right off the subhuman face. Then the smug mouth spoke. 'Go to hell, Davies,' it said.

It's no less than I deserve. I'll meet you there, Davies returned through clenched teeth.

The woman in the Mercedes's front passenger seat murmured something and the subhuman raised the window. The engine gunned and the tires squealed against the wet asphalt as the Mercedes leapt forward, sending up a fine cloud of charred steam that burned his nose.

And off they go, Davies thought. *Off to have a life.* Unfair. Inequitable. A vicious, sadistic murderer robbed four teenaged girls of their lives and was set free to have a life of his own. *For now.*

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Because soon enough the blood lust would rise up again and more girls would be at the murderer's mercy. More girls would die, because the murdering sonofabitch had no mercy.

More girls would die. *But the next time I'll be ready.* The next time there would be no technicality. The next time the murdering, sadistic monster would pay.

Neil Davies watched the Mercedes turn the corner at the end of the street and then it was out of view. *Next time*, he vowed to the four girls. To himself. *I'll get him. He'll pay. I promise.*

One

*Present Day, Raleigh, North Carolina,
Monday, September 26, 10:00 A.M.*

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

Should have.

It 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 were 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 Egg McMuffin 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 breakfast 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?'

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'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 acknowledgment. '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 Rushes' 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 who 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.

It wasn't.