

MISSING WHITE GIRL

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The back of a van or truck, she guesses, but hard, anyway, and ridged. She rolls on the turns, slams into solid steel when the vehicle brakes suddenly. A hump that keeps ramming into her spine might be a wheel well. Head pounding, blindfolded. Duct tape holds an awful rag stuffed in her mouth and straps down her hair, bites her flesh.

No idea how long she's been riding, or who took her.

Or why.

No idea....

Any other time, there would have been cameras there, a press corps. An American family murdered in their home—that was newsworthy, Patrol Lieutenant Buck Shelton knew, even in today’s world.

Except this wasn’t any other time. This was week two of the disappearance of Elayne Lippincott. Sixteen, blonde, popular in school and with two local modeling jobs under her belt, Elayne’s kidnapping had drawn hundreds of reporters to Cochise County in Arizona’s southeast corner. Buck had been out to the Lippincott estate and seen the broadcast trucks corkscrewing the sky and the white vans emblazoned with network logos jammed together on the sweeping paved driveway, evidence of America’s obsession with the case.

Victor Lippincott, Elayne's father, was a prominent banker in Sierra Vista. His wife Beatrice would likely have been referred to, in a more urban setting, as a "socialite." Their Santa Fe-style adobe mansion was surrounded by a broad expanse of lawn that summer's rains and a gardener's careful attention had left uniformly green. On that lawn a white tent had been erected to shield the press corps from Arizona's sun and the monsoon rains. Red ribbons tied to the guy lines fluttered pennant-like in the stiff wind, while beneath the tent's peaked roof, reporters and crews flocked together like too many ducks crowding a too-small pond. Every time the Lippincotts showed themselves, the reporters waiting outside pelted them with questions. At night the crews thinned but didn't dissipate altogether, as the well known and well paid visited local restaurants and hotels, only to return in the morning, rested and fed, to continue their slow-motion stalking.

Buck (given name Hawthorn, God only knew why) had heard the term "media circus," seen some on TV surrounding the O.J. Simpson, Laci Peterson, and Robert Blake cases, and others. But he had never imagined that sleepy Cochise County would host one.

So while papers from nearby Douglas and Bisbee would send reporters out, the national press was too consumed by the latest missing white girl to pay any attention to the wholesale slaughter of a black father

and a Mexican mother and their mixed-race kids. Buck didn't know if race entered into the decision to ignore the murders, but it for sure owned responsibility for all the fuss over Elayne Lippincott. Nothing, he had observed, boosted news ratings like a story about a missing white girl.

Trouble was, law enforcement and local officials paid attention to where the media spotlight fell. Cochise County's sheriff, Ed Gatlin, had become a regular face on the Today Show, Wolf Blitzer's Situation Room, Larry King Live and half a dozen other news programs. As a result, he had marshaled the full resources of the Cochise County Sheriff's Office, as well as officers loaned by the Arizona Department of Public Safety, to find Elayne Lippincott.

Twelve days later, Elayne hadn't turned up. And Buck Shelton had a houseful of bodies on his hands.

The Lavender house was a single-story Territorial adobe, decades old and showing the years; not something that would ever grace the pages of Su Casa magazine, the way the Lippincotts' showpiece had. All it had in common with the Lippincott home, which nestled against the southeastern flank of the Huachuca Mountains with a view all the way across the San Pedro Valley, was that it was made of mud, as houses had been in this region for a thousand years, and flat-roofed, with wooden vigas and ceiling beams.

It was a working ranch house squatting tentatively on a patch of high desert scrub, not an ornament at the end of a sweeping paved driveway. There wasn't a Kokopelli or a coyote wearing a bandanna or one of those fake pueblo-style ladders or a wagon wheel to be seen, but up against the corrugated metal barn was a tire that had come off a tractor sometime in the last decade.

Somehow, the house's plain façade almost made it worse that its interior held five dead bodies. These were not rich people who'd led charmed lives, but hard-working folks, and they'd ended up butchered just like their own stock.

Buck shook his head sadly. He had known the Lavenders since they'd moved into the area seven years before. They raised goats and geese, some swine, ran a few head of cattle. They had planted an orchard that threw a few apples their way, once in a while. Mesquite erupted from the grassy fields like the splashing drops of the devil's own rainstorm, and they cut some of it, selling it to El Real Mexican Fine Foods for stove wood.

He glanced at the vast blue bowl of the Arizona sky. Towering clouds marched in from the southeast, some shredding at their bottom edges, dumping rain down in Douglas, no doubt. The summer monsoon. The morning had been still and hot, but a wind was working itself up and those

clouds would be here within the hour. They'd not only slice several degrees off the day's temperature but also wash away any footprints or evidence that might have been left behind outside by the killer or killers. Buck longed for one of those professional crime scene teams you saw on TV, trained scientists with their flashlights and evidence kits. He had a kit of his own but it wasn't the glossy, high-tech looking things on the tube, and he didn't have any beautiful young people to examine the scene for him. He had himself and Scoot Brown, the young deputy who had been first on the scene, and neither was anyone's idea of a beauty queen.

Responding to a call from a UPS driver, Scoot had gone into the house, then stumbled back out and puked onto the ground, kicking dirt over it when he was finished. Now he sat inside his car looking green, and the delivery guy leaned against his brown truck with his arms folded over his chest and a bitter expression on his tanned face. Not much help there.

Nodding to Scoot, Buck approached the house. Scoot had tacked a sign-in sheet by the front door, and Buck wrote his name on it. He'd rubbed on some apple-scented lip balm and touched a dab of it on his mustache, just below his nose—not enough to mask any evidentiary odors but enough, he hoped, to lessen the impact of human bodies cut open and left to rot.

It wasn't.

Later on, Sheriff Gatlin might be able to kick loose a team of criminalists from Bisbee. But for now, Buck and Scoot Brown were the only resources the sheriff felt he could spare. They were two fifths of the staff of the Elfrida substation. Buck was the senior officer and he wanted to check out the scene for himself. The coroner's people, if they came at all, would stand up numbered cards and take pictures and measurements. Finally they would haul out the bodies. Before all that happened, Buck wanted to form his own impressions of what had happened to the Lavender family. He knew these people. Someone had murdered them. He didn't want to leave to strangers the task of finding out whom.

The front door opened into a living room. The Lavenders had a couple of dogs, as most everyone in these parts did, and the dogs tracked mud in, especially this time of year, but Manuela Morales Lavender followed behind them with a vacuum cleaner as best she could. The dogs, a yellow Lab and a mutt who was part Shepherd with a lot of other parts mixed in, were tied to the fence now, and if they had seen anything they weren't telling.

The furniture inside was old but clean. A brown cloth couch was worn on the seat cushions and frayed at the arms. An oak coffee table served as resting place for a coffee can that held remote controls for a TV, a

DVD player, and a boom-box stereo system all arrayed against the opposite wall on a discount store entertainment center made of pressboard and covered in wood-grain paper that peeled at the corners. Some of it, near the floor, looked as if it had been gnawed away, possibly by one of the dogs. The light brown carpet it all sat on had eroded in the high-traffic areas, like a field overgrazed by livestock, but under the entertainment center and the coffee table and near the walls it was still full and unfaded. Green leafy houseplants were scattered around the room, as if the foliage outdoors stole inside when no one was looking.

Pictures had been hung almost randomly on the white interior walls; most were the type you could buy, already framed, at Target or Kmart. The largest was an aerial photograph of the Waikiki coastline at dusk, with Diamond Head brooding in the background. Buck noticed a smear on the wall near the photo, which hung off to one side of the entertainment center, almost in the hallway. Too high up to be a dog's paw, unless one of the mutts had stood on his hind legs to reach up the wall. And though it was turning brown, as if the wall had begun to rust, liquid red shone at its core. Someone with blood on his hand had touched there, steadying himself maybe. Buck turned away from the dining room and kitchen, which Scoot had already told him were empty, and forced himself into the hallway.

The smells that had assaulted him as soon as he passed through the door were worse. Lemon Pledge fought a losing battle with the slaughterhouse smells of blood and shit and raw meat. Nothing he hadn't encountered before, but rarely to such a degree and in such a confined space. This was no slaughterhouse, but a small ranch house. He let his mouth hang open, breathing through it.

A longer streak of blood marred the wall at the same height from the ground as the first one. He found another on a doorjamb. Clicking on a flashlight so he didn't have to touch light switches, Buck shone it through the door, revealing a bathroom. Dark stains on the sink faucet showed that the killer had washed his hands. The sink was wiped clean, but not the handle. On top of the toilet tank was a box of tissues with a minute stain near the perforated opening. Probably the killer had used those to swab out the sink, then flushed them. They could be recovered from the septic tank, if absolutely necessary, but the blood on them would be from the Lavenders, and any transfer from the killer would probably have been washed out by the flushing or contaminated beyond usefulness.

He skipped the next two doors. The kids' rooms, he was sure. He wasn't ready to face those. The door at the end of the hallway led into the

master bedroom, and horrible as it would be, at least he would probably find adults in there.

The master bedroom had its own bath and a large closet. It was the kind of room that country-style decorators tried to emulate, but this one was the real deal. A quilt covered the brass-framed bed, and another one, in process, draped over a wooden quilt rack near one wall. A big cedar chest crouched at the foot of the bed. A couple of paintings decorated the wall, landscapes that had probably been in the family for so long their subjects no longer had any particular meaning to anybody.

Buck found Manuela Lavender, wearing a nightgown, face up on the floor. Her legs splayed awkwardly and the nightgown had ridden up almost to her left hip. He wanted to pull it down, to allow her some modesty, but he knew the integrity of the scene had to be preserved until it could be photographed.

Her face was bruised, lips split, a couple of teeth knocked out. She'd been hit hard with something. That hadn't killed her though. The hole over her breast had probably done that. The cotton nightgown was singed at the hole's edges, and blood had infiltrated the cotton fibers like a battalion of tiny saboteurs. Two flies twitched lazily around the wound. Gently, Buck

prodded with the toe of his boot, turning her just enough to see the fist-sized exit hole between her shoulder blades.

He moved on to Hugh, also on the floor, closer to their unmade double bed. Rolled over on his side, arms flopped out, legs bent. Hugh wore pajama bottoms with no shirt covering his muscular chest. He'd also been shot, in the back of the head. Most of the top half of his face was gone. Bits of brain and skull and flesh littered the quilt and clung wetly to the wall above the bed, shellacked there by a spray of red. Hugh's had been an old man's face, prematurely aged by sun and wind and work. His dark skin had taken on a grayish cast over the years. As with many ranchers, there had been a permanent ridge above his eyes where his hat rested every waking hour unless he was eating or in church. All gone, now. Buck bit back a curse.

He couldn't stomach much more of this, but he forced himself to keep going.

The next room was the one he'd been most afraid of entering. The two younger kids, boys, shared it. He knew their names, Kevin and Neal, made himself say them out loud. They were eight and six. The room looked like a boys' room, with action figures and children's books and Scooby-Doo sheets on the bunk beds. The boys had been handsome kids, Buck had

always thought, inheriting golden brown skin, their father's tightly curled hair, and their mother's almond-shaped eyes.

Those eyes were closed now, mercifully. Both had been stabbed in the chest and stomach, not shot—stabbed twice in the case of Kevin, the older boy, three times in Neal's. Blood had soaked into the sheets beneath Kevin's body, and no doubt the mattress as well. Neal was on the floor near the lower bunk. His fingers were abraded, and Buck wondered if he had fought to protect his brother.

One door remained. Buck remembered the last time he had seen Lulu Lavender, down in Douglas on the fourth of July. She had been at the park for the fireworks display with a young man from Bisbee. They had been holding hands, kissing, laughing together. She was a beautiful girl, with coloring and eyes like her little brothers had but with a glow all her own. She was eighteen, slender, active in the community, always pushing a petition or putting up posters about some cause or other.

He swallowed hard, closed his eyes. Tapped the flashlight anxiously against the outside of his thigh. He didn't want to go in there. He wanted to mount Casper, his white Arabian stallion, and ride high into the Mules where the air was clean and fresh and no dead teenagers waited for him.

Lulu wasn't a hard case like some teens, or a Goth or a punk or any of those other things kids got into these days. A good student at Cochise College, she worked part-time, babysitting and the like, but put most of her efforts into classes and her causes. She respected her parents. On the walls of her room she had posters of bands she liked, photos of animals she'd raised during her 4-H days, more photos of herself with friends and family from vacations, picnics, school trips. Her bedspread was a quilt she and her mother had made together.

He was surprised to find the room empty. Her bed was unmade, blankets and sheets snarled up like a twister had struck, but he couldn't see any blood. Lulu hadn't been murdered in the night, like the rest of her family. At least, not in her own room.

He hurried through the rest of the house. The dining room and kitchen he had ignored earlier. A walk-in pantry. A mud room.

No Lulu.

The Lavenders had a barn, a corral, a little well house, and almost eighty acres of land. If Lulu's body was out there somewhere, he'd find it. But if it wasn't, only three other possibilities came to mind. She could have spent the night with that boyfriend, up in Bisbee. She could be missing, like Elayne Lippincott. Or she could have done all this. Buck didn't think that

was likely. It took a certain type of individual, cold and empty, to kill her own family, and he couldn't see Lulu as that type.

Anyway, her purse, wallet and cell phone had been in her room. If she had gone someplace voluntarily she would have taken those.

Rage rose in his throat like bile. Someone had come into his territory to kill these people. He took it personally. Unprofessional, maybe, but he had become a cop in the days when trusting gut instincts was more highly valued than science. He had developed a cop's gut, and he continued to rely on it, maybe more than he should.

Buck exited through the mudroom door. Scoot Brown had emerged from his car and paced outside. "The girl's missing," Buck said. "Lulu's not in there."

"I haven't seen anything out here," Scoot offered.

"Call it in, then check the barn. You don't find her in there, I want you to walk every square foot of this property."

"Right," Scoot said.

Buck saw footprints in the dirt around the house, but he'd have to check the feet of the family members, rule them out before he knew if they meant anything, and he'd have to make casts of the tracks before the rains came. Same with the tire tracks in the dirt drive and the unpaved road that

led off Davis Road. Follow Davis about six miles till the pavement started and it ran straight into Douglas, another ten miles south. In the other direction it hit McNeal at Highway 191, which ran through Elfrida and on up the Sulphur Springs Valley.

At the other edge of Douglas was the Mexican border. If Lulu had been taken there, she would be outside the reach of American law enforcement. He just had to pray that wasn't the case.

He glanced down Larrimore Trail, away from the backdrop of the Pedregosa Mountains and the Swisshelms toward Davis Road. Another house nestled in a little hollow there, surrounded by scrub. He jabbed his thumb toward it. "That's where the new folks live, right? The old Martin place?"

The young deputy nodded, chewing on his lower lip. He hadn't started for the barn yet. "That's it."

"Know their name?"

"Mailbox says 'Bowles.'"

"How long since they moved in?"

"Late winter, early spring, seems like," the kid said.

"So maybe six, eight months," Buck said, mostly to himself. "He teaches at the college?"

“What I hear,” the kid said. His eyes were big, liquid. Probably his first murder scene, Buck thought. Different than car accidents or UDAs freezing or dying of thirst in the desert. Harder to take, even for him.

Going to have to have a look at the professor, Buck thought. He had no particular reason to do so but proximity, and that gut of his. The Lavenders weren't wealthy; no one would mistake their house for someplace where a lot of cash or high-end electronics would be found. Anyway, the brutality, the savagery on display here indicated something more personal, some emotional component, which meant the murders had likely been committed by someone who knew them. A neighbor, maybe.

Scot stood beside the house, as if the order to leave it had given his feet roots. Buck would check the barn himself, then. He needed to make a more thorough pass through the house with his kit, collecting whatever evidence he could find, but first he wanted to make sure Lulu was no longer on the property. Reminding Scot to call Sheriff Gatlin's office in Bisbee and then to cast those shoe and tire tracks, Buck headed toward the barn, silently promising the Lavenders that he would find Lulu, and discover who had violated them in such a horrific way.

“...Jessica Drake reporting from Sierra Vista, Arizona. Jessica?”

“Thanks, Martin. I’m here at the Lippincott house, where we’ve just learned of a potential breakthrough in the abduction of Elayne Lippincott. Authorities today say that they’ve received a tip from what is described as a reliable source, which they believe might lead them to the present whereabouts of Ms. Lippincott. As you know, Elayne Lippincott was abducted twelve nights ago from the house you can see behind me, here in southeastern Arizona. At the time, police found some evidence in the house but not enough to point them in any specific direction. With this new tip, however, police may well be able to locate and rescue Elayne Lippincott and return her to the family that misses her so deeply. Martin, back to you.”

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