



# In Her Prayers

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**Category:** Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

**Description:** When a church bell tower collapse reveals decades-old remains, Sheriff Jenna Graves is haunted by ghostly hymns in her dreams. As she unravels a web of disappearances dating back to the 1950s, Jenna must confront long-buried secrets that threaten to shake her small town to its very foundations.

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# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

Caroline Weber's heels clicked a solitary rhythm on the cracked pavement, a lonely echo to the raucous applause that had followed her last note of her last gig at the Centaur's Den. She could still smell the mix of stale beer and fried food clinging to her performance dress—a tangible reminder of where she stood in life: on the cusp of change.

Midnight draped Trentville in silence, the air warm with the promise of summer. Streetlamps cast pools of yellow light at intervals, more for ambiance than necessity; few people ventured out after dark in this small town. Caroline passed by shop windows, dimmed now, which by day showcased everything from handcrafted furniture to the latest fashions. Each window reflected a part of her life story—a story she was poised to abandon come morning.

Memories tugged at her—the countless days spent balancing trays at the Hank's Derby truck stop, the nights pouring her soul into song, hoping for that elusive break—a break that she finally had to admit couldn't possibly come in this rural town. But soon she'd be more than just a wannabe blues singer working by day in small town truck stop. Chicago shimmered in her mind like a mirage, its opportunities vast, its challenges unknown.

The echoes of a heated conversation from a week ago still resonated in her ears. The voice of her boyfriend Zach Frelander had been desperate and pleading. He couldn't see beyond the borders of this small town while she yearned for the expansive stages of Chicago. "You're dreaming, Caroline," he had said, his frustration evident. "This is your home." But her dreams were too big for Trentville, too vivid to be contained by

such familiarity.

With each step away from the life she knew, the image of Zach faded, replaced by towering skyscrapers and endless possibilities. She was sorry they'd had to part on such a bitter note, but she couldn't see any help for it. She didn't begrudge him his contentment with the ordinary, but she could no longer share it. Her path was illuminated by stars above and the luminous glow of ambition.

As Caroline continued her midnight promenade, St. Michael's Catholic Church came into view, its tall bell tower piercing the night sky. The old stone church stood majestic and unyielding, a guardian of hallowed ground and keeper of countless confessions. Though she had never knelt in its pews or whispered prayers in its confessionals, the church had always beckoned to her with a silent invitation.

She paused, gazing up at the intricate facade, the gothic arches and stained glass that spoke of a world steeped in ritual and mystery. For someone who had crafted her life around tangible melodies and smokey bars, the allure of the sacred space was inexplicable. Yet it was there—a pull towards something eternal and profound.

Caroline's fingers brushed against the cold, wrought iron railing as she ascended the stone steps of St. Michael's. The moon, a silent witness to her late-night trespass, cast its pale light upon the church's facade, illuminating the tall bell tower that stretched towards the heavens. She had passed this landmark countless times, its doors always firmly shut. But now, as if by some twist of fate on the eve of her departure, one of the heavy wooden doors stood slightly ajar.

A shiver trailed down her spine from the thrill of the forbidden. She'd always wanted to sing here, but not in the choir. And right now was her chance to fill the sacred space with her blues—a private performance for an audience of saints. But did she dare?

With a gentle nudge, the door groaned open. She hesitated on the threshold, heart

pounding with an exhilarating fusion of fear and desire.

She briefly wondered whether she should ask Father Delaney for permission, but she quickly dismissed the thought. The old priest was surely asleep in the rectory by now, and she'd be gone in just a few minutes. Besides, what was the harm in a little midnight song in such a beautiful place? Surely Father Delaney wouldn't object.

The decision made, Caroline stepped inside. The scent of wax and a faint hint of incense welcomed her. In the dim glow of votive candles and small side lamps, the pews stretched out before her—empty vessels waiting to be filled with the sound of her voice. She moved farther into the nave, her footsteps hushed against the age-worn tiles. The pulse of the outside world fell away. It was a different kind of stage than those she was used to—one not of smoky bars and rowdy patrons, but of reverence and echoes. It was as if the church had waited for this very instant, to be awakened by her presence and her music.

Caroline could barely contain the swell of emotions as she looked around at the high vaulted ceilings, begging for her blues to give them voice. This was it—the opportunity to leave her mark on Trentville in a way no one would ever know, except for herself and the divine ears of St. Michael's.

As she began, Caroline's tentative notes unfurled into the solemn stillness of St. Michael's, her voice a delicate intrusion in the sacred hush.

“I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees...”

She sang to the shadows, to the flickering candles, to the saints immortalized in stained glass. Her melody, tinged with the soulful essence of blues, carved through the silence, wrapping around the pillars and arches, as if seeking permission to inhabit this grand space. The resonance of her alto seemed to embrace the church's vastness, lending an ethereal quality to her performance. Each note climbed higher, striving

toward the distant ceiling, only to cascade back down in a gentle reverberation.

Abruptly, Caroline's song fractured as her ears caught an anomaly. A sound that mimicked her tune rippled back at her, weaving through the after-hum of her last note. It was as if the church itself had learned her song and decided to sing along. A shiver tiptoed down her spine, and she stood frozen before the altar. The echo was too perfect, too precise to be merely a quirk of acoustics.

Then she realized it was the bell-tower carillon that had answered her. The recognition sent an electric current of intrigue through her veins. She knew that the two dozen bronze bells hung high up on a platform, and their delicate melodies regularly rang out over Trentville. But the sound she had just heard hadn't been either church or classical music.

With a deep breath to steady her nerves, Caroline coaxed her voice back to life, emboldened by the mystery. She let the lyrics flow once more, pouring her wonder and lingering doubts into the song's plaintive rise and fall.

"I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above, 'Have mercy, save this poor girl, if you please.'"

And again, the carillon echoed her, each bell striking with intention, a phantom instrumentalist performing a duet with her.

Her heart raced as she considered the impossibility of it all. The carillon's bells were responding to her voice. The thrill of the unexplained phenomenon beckoned her curiosity, urging her to unravel this nocturnal enigma. Her skin prickled at the unexpected accompaniment, transforming the church's atmosphere from a sanctuary to a stage for the unknown.

Caroline held her breath as the last note hung in the air, and once more the carillon mirrored her melody with chilling accuracy. The resonance was uncanny; each ringing bell felt like a voice from another realm answering her call. Then, the initial enchantment of the moment dissolved into the unsettling realization that she was not alone in St. Michael's.

The allure of the mystery tugged at her resolve. Caroline considered leaving, letting the strange occurrence remain unexplained. But the same determination that had driven her to leave Trentville for Chicago now propelled her towards the source of the enigmatic music. Her footsteps echoed against the stone floor, breaking the eerie silence as she moved toward the tower staircase hidden in the recesses of the church.

She found the narrow passageway and laid her hand on the cool wood of the stair rail. As she moved upward, each step creaked loudly, protesting her ascent. The faint moonlight filtering through the windows painted ghostly patterns on the walls, transforming the familiar church into a place of secrets and whispers. She paused mid-climb, her heart pounding in her chest, wondering if this was the same curiosity that had always led her to seek out new stages and audiences—was it also leading her into danger? Shaking the thought away, Caroline pressed on, drawn by the need to discover who was sharing in her midnight serenade.

Caroline's breath came in short bursts, the rhythm matching the racing of her heart as she reached the final step. The bell tower room stretched out before her, an unexpected sanctuary bathed in the ethereal glow of moonlight. The carillon keyboard stood solitary in the center of the room. Cautiously, she moved closer.

She circled the instrument, feeling the urge to disturb the thick layer of dust adorning its keys – a silent testament to the passage of time. Caroline's curiosity deepened. She knew that the instrument was played every single day. So why did it appear to be untouched, as if no one had fingered its keys for years? And how could it have sounded so alive moments ago?

A cool draft brushed against her neck, stirring the fine hairs and sending a shiver down her spine. She glanced upwards, but the bells and strikers she could see hung motionless. A nagging suspicion crept into her mind – was the carillon's response earlier a message meant for her? Or was it simply a trick of the night, a playful whisper of Trentville before she turned her back on it for good?

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“Is anybody here?” Her voice barely rose above a whisper, yet it sounded foreign and intrusive in the silence. She waited, each second stretching taut like a string about to snap. There was no reply, only the eerie sense of being watched by unseen eyes. The mystery of the carillon’s earlier response lingered, unanswered, unsettling.

Then, with a suddenness that sent a jolt of alarm through her, the carillon came alive. Keys moved with purpose and precision, untouched by human hands. The Angelus melody filled the air, its notes clear and resonant against the stone walls. Caroline’s eyes widened in disbelief as she witnessed the impossible concert – the cobwebbed keys pressing down in a ghostly performance.

She could not fathom how this relic, which seemed abandoned for years, now pulsed with life. The tune, normally a call to prayer, rang out as an ominous herald in the dead of night. Frozen by the spectacle, Caroline’s skin prickled with dread. The music played on, indifferent to her shock, the melody echoing in the hollow space as if mocking her fear.

Instinct screamed at her to flee, to escape the madness of the moment. She spun on her heels, intent on racing back down the staircase. But as she turned, a presence loomed in the darkness behind her—a stifling closeness that made her skin crawl.

Before she could discern more than a slight motion, a cord whipped around her throat. Panic erupted as the rough texture bit into her skin, stealing her breath. Desperation clawed at her mind while her hands grappled futilely against the tightening grip. Caroline gasped for air, her vision blotching as she fought against the strength of her unseen assailant. In those frantic moments, the vibrant dreams of Chicago—the city that promised a new beginning—seemed to slip from her grasp.



like grains of sand.

Her struggle grew weaker, the world dimming at the edges as the Angelus played its haunting notes. The world began to tilt and blur as Caroline's desperate fight for air turned into feeble twitches of her fingers against the cord.

Her thoughts, once a torrent of dreams and ambitions, now trickled down to a single stream—a lament for the future that would never come to be. She envisioned the stages she would never step foot on, the applause she would never hear, the songs she would never sing. Chicago was a city of lights that promised to shine on her talents, but now, those lights were dimming.

Caroline's body slumped, the strength to resist ebbing away. The carillon played on, each note a piercing reminder of the life slipping through her grasp.

## CHAPTER ONE

Jenna's kept her gaze fixed on the flying sandpiper, which seemed to pull her along an invisible tether as she pursued it, airborne herself. The bird seemed to transmit a sense of urgency, an unspoken command urging her to keep pace. Beneath them, Whitmore Lake State Forest unfurled like a living tapestry, the winding road a charcoal ribbon against the rich green backdrop.

The sensation was intoxicating, but this time was different from some of her lucid dreams, where lucidity brought some degree of control. As it sometimes happened, although Jenna knew she was dreaming, she found that her consciousness could only observe. She was carried upon the whims of her avian guide.

The sandpiper darted ahead, cutting through the thickening air with purpose. Each flap of its wings seemed to punctuate the forest's whispering secrets. Jenna followed, breathless and silent, a passenger in her own mind.

She knew she had been here before, both in the thrall of a dream and in the waking world in her patrol car. The ground below mirrored the gravel road she had driven. The lake loomed ahead, its still waters a mirror reflecting an endless night sky. The sandpiper's wings beat with increased urgency, a frenetic tempo that echoed Jenna's pounding heart.

Her perception narrowed as the dream hurtled her down through the forest, the trees melding into a blur. As they neared the dock, the bird descended again, its form cutting through the dense air with grace and purpose. Jenna followed, and soon her dream self walked on the dock toward the weathered post at the far end. A familiar dread knotted in her stomach as the carved initials came into view: "P.G. 7/29/2010."

Her dream self stood there, at the edge of the dock, staring at the inscription as though it might yield secrets that Jenna had sought for two decades. Her fingers twitched, an instinctual desire to trace the carved initials "P.G.", but she refrained, knowing the futility of trying to make physical contact in this dreamscape. Instead, she absorbed every detail—the rugged indentations, the weathering around the edges, the date that seemed to taunt her with its significance.

Jenna's intuition, which straddled the bounds of the natural and supernatural, assured her that the carving was a signpost, a guidepost. It was a message from the past or a precursor of what was to come ...

Or perhaps it's both, she thought.

Whatever it was, it wasn't merely a figment of her dreaming imagination. It was undeniably real when Jenna had found it in waking life just yesterday. Could Piper have come here to leave this mark so long after her disappearance?

"Could you be out there, Piper?" Jenna whispered to herself, her voice a mere breath in the stillness. Eyes locked on the inscription, she took a step forward on the old

dock, her spectral form casting no shadow. She called into the void, her voice stronger now. “Piper, are you here?” The words sliced through the silence, skimming over the lake’s surface, seeking her missing twin sister, the other half of her soul.

The inquiry went unanswered. No response came from the darkened tree line or the reflective abyss of the water. Jenna listened intently, straining to hear even the slightest whisper, a rustle of leaves perhaps, that might signal a presence. But there was only the sound of her own breathing, ragged and heavy with anticipation.

She turned away from the haunting inscription, letting the image burn into her memory alongside so many others collected over years of searching. Each piece, each dream, each whisper brought her closer to the sister whose absence shaped her life. Although it seemed clear that the answer wouldn’t be found tonight, the quest was far from over.

Then a whisper sliced through the silence. “Look,” it said.

Jenna pivoted, her movements ethereal as if she were composed of nothing more substantial than the mist rising from the lake’s surface at dawn. Her pulse thrummed in her ears, a dissonant echo to the calm that enveloped the dreamscape. She had expected—or perhaps hoped—for the comforting presence of Piper, but instead, she was met with an anomaly: an image suspended in front of her—the photograph of a teenaged girl.

The picture was comprised of dots impressed upon what appeared to be yellowed paper, like a black-and-white newspaper photo. Moving closer now, Jenna scrutinized the girl’s face, seeking clues within the grainy texture, the girl in the image seemed unfamiliar, yet the eyes held her—a silent plea or perhaps an accusation radiating from their depths.

Jenna struggled to find something familiar in the girl’s face, but the dotted visage was

hard to make out in sufficient detail. Then, as she watched, the figure began to stir. A flicker, a subtle shift, and the stillness shattered. The lips of the image parted, a crease formed in the paper reality, hinting at words unspoken.

For a moment, Jenna forgot to breathe. The line between her spectral existence and the waking world blurred. Here in this liminal space, she was more than Genesius County's sheriff; she was a conduit for voices that whispered from beyond the veil. Her eyes remained locked on the figure, willing the apparition to divulge its secrets.

Then wakefulness seized her like in its unwelcome, vise-like grip.

Reluctant to surrender the thread of her dream, Jenna tossed beneath the sheets, her movements fueled by a desperate need to reconnect with the enigma that had visited her slumber. She replayed the scene over and over, dissecting every detail of the girl's face, the way her lips had begun to part ...

She sealed her eyelids, trying to go to sleep again. But dreams are elusive creatures; the more Jenna pursued this one, the more it receded, slipping through her mental grasp like sand. Her bed became an arena of futile struggle, each position less comfortable than the last, each thought spiraling into the next without conclusion or solace.

With a sigh heavy with resignation, Jenna admitted defeat to the morning. The digital clock on her nightstand glared at her with the early hour, its red numbers a testament to the time stolen by her restless chase. Her eyes, once immersed in the spectral realm, were forced open by the intrusion of morning light that spilled carelessly through her bedroom curtains.

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The room around her was steeped in the quiet of dawn, yet inside her mind, the image of the girl from the photograph persisted with clarity. It presented a striking disparity to the warmth of her bed, the familiarity of her surroundings in Trentville, where the supernatural often breached the veil of the mundane. Her breathing slowed, an attempt to calm the frustration that threatened to spill into the day ahead.

The mystery of the girl clung to her like the remnants of a cobweb, intangible yet irksome. The face in her dream, so close to speaking, now felt like a puzzle piece she couldn't place, hovering just beyond reach. With a sigh that carried the remnants of her dream, she rolled onto her side, attempting to recapture the fleeting threads of sleep.

She squeezed her eyes tighter, willing the vision to return, but the room's persistent reality held firm, refusing to relinquish its grip. As the first rays of dawn began to seep into her bedroom, Jenna's eyes fluttered open. Reluctantly, she acknowledged the arrival of morning. The room was bathed in a gentle glow as sunlight filtered through the curtains, outlining objects with a softness that contended bitterly with the stark reality her mind had just left behind.

With a resigned breath, Jenna swung her legs over the side of the bed, the cool touch of the wooden floor grounding her further in the unwelcome wakefulness. There was no going back to the dream now, only forward into the day that awaited.

She stood, the weight of unanswered questions bearing down on her shoulders. She drew a steadying breath, preparing to face whatever realities—mundane or mystical—the daylight hours might hold. Her routine was mechanical, a sequence of actions performed with little conscious thought as the echoes of her dream

reverberated in her mind. Shower water sluiced over her body, a cascading stream that failed to wash away the persistent feeling of having been so close, yet so far from the truth.

Jenna's body navigated the morning with a mind of its own. The shower's hot spray pelted her skin without truly being felt, the steam clouding around her like the mists of her persistent dream. The pulsating water should have been soothing, but it was just another sensation that failed to penetrate the fog of her thoughts.

She dressed in her uniform, each article of clothing a piece of armor against the day ahead, shielding her from the town's curiosity and concern. Jenna's fingers worked nimbly at the buttons, slipping into the familiar guise of Genesius County's sheriff. Her reflection in the mirror was perfunctory, the green of her eyes dimmed.

Standing at her kitchen counter, Jenna stirred her coffee, the spoon clinking against the ceramic in a rhythmic pattern. Normally the aroma would stir her senses, but today it went unnoticed, overshadowed by the implications of her dream.

Breakfast was a silent affair—the scrape of her knife spreading butter on toast, the soft clink of a spoon against ceramic as she scooped yogurt into a bowl. She ate because the day required it, not out of hunger. Each bite was automatic, tasteless, punctuated by the relentless replay of the dream: the sandpiper, the lake, the mysterious girl in the photograph.

She had thought that Piper must be the one who had visited the dock five years after vanishing and carved the initials P.G. there. But why did the pictured image portray someone else entirely? Was it possible that the message wasn't left by Piper at all?

If not Piper, then who? And why leave such a cryptic message in such a secluded place? The possibility that the girl in her dream was offering clues grew heavier in her thoughts. The connection between the dreams and her waking life had always been

strong, but this felt different, even more direct.

The implications of this revelation were profound. If P.G. was someone else, then what did it mean for Piper? For years, Jenna had clung to the belief that her twin was still alive, somewhere, waiting to be found. But this new development suggested some other story could be about to unfold.

The specter of a teenage girl with faded features haunted the edges of her consciousness. The girl's appearance posed a delicate riddle. If indeed this was a spirit, what message was she desperate to convey? Jenna's intuition, honed by years of navigating these ethereal encounters, suggested urgency—a plea or perhaps a warning.

Jenna's gift had often provided comfort to grieving souls seeking resolution. Yet now, it taunted her with ambiguity, teasing at the edges of her consciousness with more questions than answers. She knew she could not force the revelation; the dead spoke on their own terms. Resigned, Jenna acknowledged the ghost's presence as another piece in a puzzle, though perhaps not in the mystery of her sister's absence.

Glancing at the clock, Jenna was jolted back to reality, its persistent ticking a reminder of the world beyond her haunted reverie.

If she didn't leave now, she was going to be late.

She downed the remainder of her coffee in one gulp, the liquid cold and bitter. Grabbing her keys from the hook by the door, she stepped outside, leaving the confines of her home for the uncertainty that lay beyond. The warmth of a mid-July morning enveloped her immediately, a warm blanket that promised another sweltering summer day in Trentville, Missouri.

Today, like every day, her thoughts would turn again and again to Piper, wielding

both her badge and her unique insight as tools against the silence that had stolen her sister.

But that girl in the photograph—was she a messenger or a guide? Or had she reached out from some other story entirely? Jenna's rational mind grappled with the possibilities, the detective within her scrutinizing every angle.

With a resolute hand, she turned the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life, a familiar sound that marked the beginning of another day's journey. As Jenna eased her vehicle forward, she saw the familiar streets of Trentville coming alive with the rhythm of daily life. Shopkeepers unfurled awnings, and townsfolk exchanged greetings, their lives untouched by the specters that haunted Jenna's existence.

Ahead lay another day's journey. Jenna hoped it would hold a discovery of life—even though she knew that the spirits that visited her dreams could only come from the dead.

"Focus," Jenna muttered to herself. With a firm grip on the wheel, she steeled herself against the fear of what lay ahead. She understood that some stones, once turned, could not be unturned.

## CHAPTER TWO

The streets of Trentville were quiet as Jenna drove toward the Genesius County Sheriff's Office. Last night's dream, vivid and haunting, still clung to her consciousness, demanding attention. Her mind also replayed the physical events of the previous day—her visit to Whitmore Lake State Forest, where reality had mirrored her visions with unsettling accuracy.

She soon arrived at the old brick building where she served as the Genesius County Sheriff and slid her cruiser into her parking space. She strode into the building,



exchanging greetings with the cops on duty and making her way toward the two private offices at the back. The team's early-morning conversations over coffee were punctuated only by the soft hum of a distant copier and the distant murmur of dispatch radio chatter.

Before Jenna reached her own workplace, she saw that the door to her deputy's office stood ajar, light spilling into the dim hallway. She peeked in and saw that Jake was there, as she knew he would be. His broad-shouldered silhouette was framed by the glow of his computer screen, highlighting his sandy hair.

A former beat cop from Kansas City, Jake always said he'd moved to this small town for a change of scenery. Jenna knew that he'd faced more change and challenges here than he'd ever expected, and he was still coming to terms with her contacts with the spirit world, which she'd finally decided to describe to him. Jake never dismissed her dreams outright, despite their supernatural nature, which ranged far from the logic of law enforcement as he'd experienced it in those earlier days. He simply included her supernatural insights as potential information along with the evidence he gathered from his outstanding skills at more conventional investigations.

She also realized that he was often concerned about the effects those experiences had on her—a concern that she knew to be well-founded.

Her knuckles rapped against the wooden door. "Got a minute?"

He swiveled in his chair, his expression lighting up when he saw Jenna. "Morning, Sheriff," he greeted her. "Of course, come in. How did your visit to Whitmore Lake go yesterday?"

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Jenna took a step forward, crossing the threshold into the sanctuary of Jake's well-organized workspace. His office was a bit smaller than hers, his metal desk a landscape of case files and reports. Despite the clutter, there was a meticulousness to it all, as if every paper and pen was placed with intention.

"Yesterday was...well, strange," she began, choosing her words with care. She stepped inside and gently closed the door behind her, the soft click signifying a barrier between them and the rest of the world. Lowering herself into the chair across from Jake's desk, Jenna took a moment to pull the scattered pieces of her thoughts into alignment.

"I found something at the lake, Jake. Something that could change everything," she stated. "But it's also confusing."

"Go on," Jake urged when she paused, his pen poised above the notepad he'd instinctively reached for.

Jenna told him all about her visit to the dense woods of Whitmore Lake State Forest, the path unfolding before her just as it had in her dream. Her recounting was methodical, each word deliberate as she painted the scene for him - the way the early morning mist clung to the trees, the soft loam beneath her boots, and the silence that wrapped around her.

Her throat tightened as she spoke of the weathered dock, the letters and numerals etched into the wood like wrinkles on an old man's face. "And there, on the post...initials and a date were carved: 'P.G.7/29/2010'."

As she finished, Jenna watched Jake absorb the tale, his expression a mix of awe and deep-seated worry.

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the desk. His gaze never left her face, searching for the subtext behind her carefully chosen words. “P.G....you think the carving was left by Piper Graves?”

“That’s what I thought at first. But then...” She trailed off, her gaze drifting to the window where the early rays of sunlight made their way through the blinds. She described the dream—the return of the sandpiper, the ghostly photograph, and the girl who had seemed to want to speak just before Jenna awoke.

“That’s...intense, Jenna. What do you think it means?” Jake asked.

Frustration creased her brow as she ran a hand through her hair, stray chestnut strands refusing to be tamed. “I don’t know, Jake. But I can’t shake the feeling that this girl, whoever she is, is trying to tell me something important.”

Jake nodded slowly. “She appeared in your dream, so she’s ... not alive.”

He pivoted away from her, turning his attention to the computer, the screen a gateway to possibilities as boundless as the web it connected to.

“Let’s see if we can find out who she might be. You said the carving was dated July 29, 2010, right? And Whitmore Lake State Forest is in Braxton County.”

“Correct,” Jenna confirmed, feeling a now familiar relief that Jake was so accepting, so willing to work with such unsubstantial information from her night-time visions.

They huddled over Jake’s desktop, shoulders almost touching, and Jenna felt a familiar tingle of attraction toward her deputy—an attraction she often suspected he

might share with her. But the thought of opening up about this issue daunted her—and even scared her. Professionally, they were a great team together, and they were also great friends. How might a romantic entanglement affect both their professional relationship and their friendship?

Most of the time, she figured it would be best not to find out. But at other times ...

The room fell silent save for the soft clicking of Jake's keyboard. Jenna leaned forward, her emerald eyes fiercely scanning each line of text that scrolled past, looking for anything that could connect to the mysterious "P.G." from her dream. They combed through public records, missing person reports, and old news articles—anything that could shed light on the identity of the girl from Jenna's dreams.

Suddenly, Jake's cursor hovered over a link. "Look at this," he said, his tone sharpening with discovery. He clicked on a news article from the Clendon Post Gazette.

The headline read: "Local Clendon Teen Patricia Gaines Still Missing After Week-Long Search."

"Patricia Gaines," the name echoed in Jenna's head. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the grainy newsprint image. The girl in the photograph bore a haunting resemblance to the figure from her dream—the same hollowed cheeks, the same penetrating stare that reached across the boundary of life and death.

"It's her," Jenna murmured, the realization sinking in like the chill of the morning air. "The girl from my dream." She barely recognized her own voice, a mere echo in the quiet of Jake's office.

It was an astonishing development, but what did it mean? The P.G. in the newspaper

story and photo—it was Patricia Gaines, not Piper. But where did that leave her sister? Jenna felt the threads of hope unraveling, her certainty torn by doubt.

“She went missing on August 5, 2010,” she read aloud, her voice no more than a whisper. That meant that the date carved into the weathered dock post was not just a random etching—“July 29, 2010” was a timestamp close to a mystery she had unwittingly stumbled upon. She forced herself to look away from the photograph, to focus on the room, on the solidity of the desk, the familiar hum of the computer.

The story included an urgent appeal from Patricia’s parents, begging people to tell them anything they might know about what had happened to their daughter.

The room was silent except for the sound of movement and conversation in the rooms and hallways outside Jake’s office. Jenna’s mind raced with the possibilities of what the dream could mean, feeling an invisible thread tugging at her, urging her to act.

“Maybe,” she began, hesitantly breaking the silence, “I should reach out to Patricia’s parents.”

Jake’s eyes met hers, the depth of his concern evident. He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms as he searched for the right words. “What would you tell them, Jenna?” he asked softly. “That you had a dream about their daughter?”

Jenna knew he was right; dreams, no matter how vivid, were not evidence. They couldn’t bring Patricia back or provide tangible answers to the tormenting questions that must plague her family every waking moment. And, of course, she couldn’t begin to explain to them just how she’d come to think she knew their daughter might be dead. It would seem crazy—and worse, it would be cruel.

“You’re right,” she finally said, breaking the silence that had settled between them. Her voice was steady, betraying none of the turmoil that churned within

her. “But if Patricia’s spirit is reaching out to me, why? What is she trying to tell me?”

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Jake leaned back in his chair, considering her question. His gaze remained thoughtful as he replied, “If it really is Patricia’s spirit, she’ll likely appear in your dreams again. Maybe next time, she’ll be able to communicate more clearly. And maybe we will have something to act on.”

Jenna was moved and grateful for how he used the word “we”—meaning that he would support her, no matter what. There was a calmness to his words, the kind that came from years of facing dire and unpredictable situations on city streets before finding refuge in the rhythms of small-town policing.

Jenna nodded, pondering his response. If Patricia Gaines’ spirit was indeed reaching out, then Jenna owed it to her—and to herself—to persist until the truth was unearthed. And with luck, that truth would at least start to emerge in the form of another dream.

The shrill ring of the office phone sliced through the stillness, startling both of them. Jake swiftly reached for the receiver, his expression morphing from concern to mild amusement as he listened to the caller. It was a shift that told Jenna the gravity of their earlier conversation was about to be interrupted by the day-to-day eccentricities of the small town they lived and worked in.

He covered the mouthpiece and looked at Jenna. “Duty calls,” Jake explained, the levity in his tone a brief respite from the gravity of their investigation. “Mrs. Fitzgerald is complaining about the rooster.”

“Again?” Jenna allowed herself a small chuckle, appreciating the absurdity of small-town disputes.

His tone held a note of wry humor, a departure from the spectral world that had been whispering secrets in her sleep. “Right. And this time, Mrs. Fitzgerald is threatening to sue her neighbor about it.”

Jenna leaned back in her chair. She studied his face for a moment, wondering how someone so grounded in the tangible could also accept the ethereal realm that was part of her own reality.

“Alright, let’s go deal with that rooster,” she said, and realized that the laugh that followed felt good.

Jenna made a quick check of her next-door office but found nothing demanding her attention. She and Jake gathered their materials and crossed back through the main workspace, taking a moment to notify the team that they were off on another rooster investigation. Then they stepped through the heavy door of the Sheriff’s Office, out into the morning sun that brightened Trentville’s main street.

Yet, the image of Patricia Gaines still haunted Jenna—those eyes that held a silent plea. She shook off the image and said again, “Let’s go deal with that rooster,” as she slid behind the wheel with Jake getting into the passenger side. The engine hummed to life, a comforting familiarity amidst the unknowns. As they drove away from the Sheriff’s Office, Jenna’s thoughts lingered on the unsolved, the echo of her twin’s absence joining the chorus of voices that called to her.

The patrol car rolled forward, leaving behind the red brick building that housed more than its share of secrets. As they drove, the morning unfolded before them. Houses with picket fences lined the streets, their windows like sleepy eyes slowly opening to the day. Shopkeepers swept sidewalks, and early risers waved in friendly recognition of the sheriff’s vehicle.

Yet, even as Jenna navigated the streets, the tendrils of her previous night’s dream



curled inside her mind. Unseen, they wrapped around her consciousness, a reminder of the past that lingered close, whispering of the unsolved and beckoning her toward some story that lay just out of reach.

The image of Patricia Gaines lingered, imprinted on Jenna's mind like a photographic negative burned by too much light. Those eyes seemed to plead for understanding, for resolution.

Even as they drove to take care of a small-town drama, Jenna knew that her dream would insist on her attention again. And her dreams led her into cases that were often dangerous as well as dark.

Jenna glanced at Jake, his profile set in a mask of professionalism despite the mundane nature of their next task. His presence was a solid reminder of the real world in a small Missouri town like this, where threatening roosters were as much a part of her duty as tracking down leads on long-lost girls.

### CHAPTER THREE

Pete Martinez let out a satisfied breath, the final twist of his wrench echoing in the stillness of the parish hall kitchen. His hands, calloused from years of labor, bore the faint scent of metal and sawdust—a testament to the morning's work. He ran a rough palm across his brow, catching beads of sweat before they could sting his eyes.

As he replaced his tools into his worn leather bag, footsteps approached. Pete glanced up to see Betty Serbin, her presence as familiar in St. Michael's as the stained-glass windows that filtered sunlight into kaleidoscope patterns on the pews. Her silver hair caught the light, a halo of meticulous curls, and her smile softened the lines etched by seven decades.

"Oh, Pete, I'm so glad I caught you," she said.

“Good timing,” Pete said, offering a nod of recognition. “Just finished up here.”

“We’ve got a bit of a situation in the Sunday school room. One of the shelves has given up the ghost, I’m afraid.”

“Lead on, Mrs. Serbin.” Pete’s response was automatic, having long since embraced the role of all-around fixer. With his tool bag slung over his shoulder, he followed Betty Serbin through the corridors. Each step took them farther from the heart of the church, towards the rooms where young minds were shaped. The Sunday school room awaited, another problem he was sure he could take care of easily.

The Sunday school room was a vivid change from the austere corridors. Bright Bible story posters competed for attention against the proud display of children’s crayon masterpieces. Morning sunlight played through the tall windows, casting a kaleidoscope of light that seemed to bring life to the still air.

Pale yellow paint brought freshness to one wall, suggesting renewal and hope—a backdrop now marred by a view through an open closet door. He could see that its interior had been plunged into mild disarray.

“It’s this closet here,” she explained, pointing inside where a shelf lay defeated in the clutter. Pete could see new supplies scattered across the floor, the result of Betty’s interrupted efforts at organization.

“I was trying to put away some of the new materials when the whole shelf just came away from the wall,” Betty explained, her voice tinged with disappointment over the mishap.

Pete stepped closer to the closet, eyeing the damage. The wooden shelf, once a steadfast guardian of supplies, now rested awkwardly against the wall. He noted the anchor points where screws had given way—betrayed, perhaps, by age or simply the

burden of too much weight.

The culprit was obvious: a metal bracket, once the cornerstone of support for the wooden shelf, now dangled limply from the wall by one lonesome screw.

“Seen this kind of thing before,” Pete muttered. His hands were already envisioning the work ahead: clearing the area, assessing the integrity of the wall, installing a sturdier support system for the shelves. It was a simple enough task, routine for someone who had spent years tending to the various needs of St. Michael’s. He reached out, touching the rough surface where the bracket had torn through the drywall. Bits of plaster and dust crumbled to the floor as he traced the edges of the breach. The wall felt fragile under his touch, like the brittle pages of an ancient book that might turn to powder if handled too roughly.

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“Old age and gravity,” Pete muttered, half to himself, examining the damage.

He stood up, dusting his hands off on his jeans before giving the wall a gentle tap with his knuckle. The hollow thud resonated a little too loudly. Pete’s frown deepened as he rapped against the wall again, the sound fueling his concern. He knew these walls, knew every repair he’d done over the years, the quirks and creaks of the old building. It was like an old friend that sometimes whispered secrets. And there was something unsettling about the echo, a suggestion of empty space where there should be none. Maybe this wasn’t just about simply patching up a shelf.

“Probably nothing,” he reassured himself, though the assurance rang hollow in his own ears. “Why don’t you keep on with your decorating, Mrs. Serbin? I need to talk to Father Walsh about how we should handle this.” Betty’s nod was accompanied by her usual pluck. The church’s welfare was in good hands with volunteers like her.

He left the Sunday school room, tool bag slung over his shoulder, and made his way down the quiet corridor toward the rectory. It was this tranquil atmosphere of St. Michael’s that had first drawn him to Trentville, away from the clamor of city life. Nearly two decades ago, he’d arrived seeking peace in this small town nestled in the Ozark Plateau. He remembered his first glimpse of the church, its stone facade a testament to a bygone era, welcoming him just as the townsfolk had. When old Mr. Henderson, the church’s previous handyman, had retired, Pete had taken up the mantle with little hesitation. The role suited him; it was more than just maintenance—it was stewardship of a place steeped in history and faith.

Pete’s thoughts were interrupted as he reached the rectory door. Shaking off the nostalgia, he pressed the buzzer and waited for Father Walsh to usher him inside.

The rectory door opened with a soft creak, and Pete stepped into the cool, dimly lit hallway that smelled faintly of old books and polished wood. He navigated through the narrow passage, his boots muffled on the thick carpet, until he reached the study at the end.

Father Thomas Walsh sat hunched over a cluttered desk, surrounded by tomes of theology and sheets of sermon notes. Although he was only in his mid-forties, the priest's blond hair was thinning, and the round spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose gave him an air of scholarly diligence. His vestments were simple, a striking divergence from the grandeur of the stained-glass saints that watched over him from the window behind his desk.

"Ah, Pete," Father Walsh greeted with a smile that warmed the room. "What can I do for you?"

Pete hesitated for a moment, taking in the sight of the man who had become both a boss and a confidant. He then explained about the faulty shelf and the concerns it raised: the drywall's frailty, the hollow sound it made when tapped. Something wasn't quite right.

As Pete detailed his findings, Father Walsh's eyes narrowed slightly, and the warmth ebbed from his features. Concern etched deeper lines into the priest's forehead, and he leaned forward, elbows resting on the vast sprawl of papers that documented the spiritual guidance of his flock.

"I think we should remove the drywall entirely," Pete concluded. "It's not original to the building anyway. Judging by its condition, it was probably put up maybe fifty or sixty years ago, long after the church was built in 1859."

Father Walsh drummed on the oak surface of his aged desk, breaking the silence that had settled over the room like dust on an unused pew. Pete stood there, tool belt

sagging with the burden of his responsibilities.

“I understand your concerns, Pete,” Father Walsh finally said, his voice carrying the weariness of a man caught between duty and tradition. “But you know how some of the congregation can be. They’re very protective of the church’s history, even the more recent parts.” He sighed, a muted sound in the hush of the study. “I’ve only been here eight years, and I still get pushback when I suggest changes.”

Pete nodded, understanding more than most the delicate balance required in places like this, where every stone and beam was steeped in memory.

“Father Walsh,” Pete said, “it’s just the Sunday school room. We’re not talking about altering the nave or anything sacred. Besides, this isn’t about change for the sake of it. It’s about the integrity of this place—about safety.” He paused, considering his next words carefully. “The shape of that closet is odd, and it could be dangerous if the wall got knocked in completely.”

The priest rubbed at his temples without replying, so Pete plunged ahead again, “Look, it might seem insignificant, but what if there’s mold or rot? What if the next heavy rain brings the whole thing down on one of the kids? I think it’s a risk, Father.”

Father Walsh’s gaze lingered on the framed photograph of the original church altar hanging beside his desk. After a moment, his shoulders dropped—an almost imperceptible surrender to reality. “Okay, Pete,” he conceded. “Do what needs to be done. But please, keep it quiet if you can.”

Pete exhaled with relief. “Don’t worry. I should be able to get the whole thing done this afternoon before the room is even used again. Nobody’s likely to even notice the change.”

It seemed like an easy enough promise to make, and an easy enough promise to

keep. Pete understood better than anybody the need to tread lightly on the memories and history that lay within the church's walls. With a resolve bolstered by the priest's reluctant blessing, he turned to leave the study, his thoughts shifting to the impending task.

His boots echoed through the empty corridors of St. Michael's as he made his way to the maintenance room—a small chamber that smelled perpetually of sawdust and oil. The worn leather of his tool belt creaked as he removed it, placing the plumbing tools back on their designated hooks with a practiced hand. His gaze then swept over the array of implements before him, and he reached for the hammer and crowbar.

Father Walsh's words lingered in Pete's mind, a quiet admonition to handle the task with care. As he closed the door to the maintenance room behind him, he felt the weight of responsibility, not just for the preservation of the church's physical integrity, but also for the trust placed in him by a community that held every stone and stained glass window dear.

Upon re-entering the Sunday school room, Pete found Betty Serbin, much as he left her, a flutter of activity amid the crayon drawings and biblical scenes. She stood on a stepladder, stretching to align a new poster perfectly beside another that proclaimed, 'God Loves All His Children'. Her hands did not tremble, nor falter—the same hands that had likely tended this place and its people for more years than Pete had been alive.

"Mrs. Serbin," Pete called, his voice gentle so as not to startle her. "I'm going to need to do some work in the closet here. Might get a bit dusty. You okay to keep working, or would you rather come back later?"

Without missing a beat, Betty glanced down at him, her smile unwavering even as a strand of silver hair slipped free of its pins. "Oh, don't you worry about me, Pete? I've breathed in plenty of dust in my day. You just do what you need to do. I'll be so

grateful to have the repair done.”Her dismissal was kind, wrapped in the soft lilt of a voice that had sung hymns and comforted crying children.

Pete set the fallen shelf aside. The closet’s exposed innards seemed innocuous at first glance, but Pete knew better than to trust appearances, especially within the hidden corners of an old building like St. Michael’s. Taking a deep breath to steady himself for what might be revealed, he wedged the crowbar against the damaged drywall, his movements deliberate and controlled.

With a crack, the first piece of wall yielded to his efforts. Dust billowed from the breach, carrying with it the musty scent of secrets long concealed. As the debris settled, Pete leaned closer, peering into the newfound aperture. A glint there in the hollow snagged his attention—a hint of plastic that didn’t belong, an anachronism in the church’s ancient structure.

That shine of heavy plastic inside the old structure required understanding, and Pete obliged, chiseling away at more of the wall with renewed purpose. Each strike of the hammer echoed through the Sunday school room, a sharp counterpoint to Betty’s quiet work on the other side. He pried off another sizable chunk, enlarging the hole, the void behind the wall opening up like a dark maw.

Pete pulled a flashlight from his tool belt and peered into the darkness. What he saw next rooted him to the spot. His heart hammered in his chest, each pulse a drumbeat of dread as the implications of his find began to unfurl in his mind. He stood motionless, his gaze locked onto the discovery. His throat tightened, constricted by the sight of what lay before him.

“Mrs. Serbin,” Pete’s voice finally broke through the hush, urgent yet tempered by shock. “I think you’d better go get Father Walsh. Right away.”

## CHAPTER FOUR



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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

As Jenna maneuvered the patrol car through the outskirts of Trentville, her mind drifted back to the girl in her dream. The haunted face of Patricia Gaines lingered in Jenna's mind. What had that girl's spirit wanted to tell her?

But for now, there was a job to do—a town to serve and protect. She glanced at Jake, grateful for his unwavering support, and together they prepared to mediate yet another chapter in the ongoing saga of Mrs. Fitzgerald and her neighbor's troublesome rooster.

She turned a final corner, and the quaint houses of the town gave way to open fields dotted with grazing cattle and weathered barns. Out here, the pace of life slowed, and nature held sway.

"Mrs. Fitzgerald's place is just up ahead," Jake said from the passenger seat beside her.

She pulled the patrol car off the main road onto a gravel driveway leading to a modest farmhouse surrounded by a white picket fence. Jenna parked the car, and as they stepped out, the reality of their immediate concern brought her back to the present.

"Time to play peacemaker," Jake quipped, closing the door behind him.

At that moment the raucous crowing of a rooster filled the air, its sound discordant against the otherwise tranquil morning.

"It's a loud one, for sure," Jake commented. "I wouldn't want to live around this racket. On the other hand, Mr. Thompson has a right to keep his own livestock, I

guess.”

“Let’s hope these two neighbors are feeling cooperative today,” Jenna replied, allowing a small smile to form on her lips. It was these small-town disputes, these moments of levity, that provided a counterbalance to the heavier burdens she bore.

However, the scene before them didn’t look promising: it was a domestic battlefield marked by the vibrant blooms of Mrs. Fitzgerald’s petunias and marigolds. Mrs. Fitzgerald herself stood close to her garden, lips a thin line of indignation, eyes fixed on the man facing her.

Mr. Thompson, a figure carved from the very soil he worked, leaned against the weathered fence that marked his own property, arms folded as if they were roots dug deep into the earth. Some distance away, hens and chicks wandered about the farmer’s fenced yard, clucking and peeping contentedly. Just behind him strutted the rooster, chest puffed out, its Rhode Island Red feathers glistening like burnished copper in the sunlight. The bird seemed to wear an air of defiance, crowing again as though mocking the human contention it had sparked.

Mrs. Fitzgerald’s hands flew to her ears in a dramatic gesture. “That bird is a menace!” she declared, the pitch of her voice scaling upwards. “I told you, I’m taking this to court. I’m going to sue.”

Jenna knew well the theater of small-town disputes, where every actor played their part with conviction. The rooster’s insistent crowing was merely the soundtrack to this daily drama. She exchanged a glance with Jake, noting the mirrored expression of wry recognition. With the practiced ease of a mediator stepping onto familiar ground, she moved forward to address the discordant neighbors.

“Mrs. Fitzgerald,” Jenna said as she and Jake approached, “I can see you’re upset.”

The elderly woman's gaze snapped to Jenna, the silver waves of her hair almost shimmering with indignation. "Wouldn't you be, Sheriff Graves? Every morning, like clockwork! Before dawn. And at random times all day long."

Mr. Thompson stood his ground, his arms crossed on the fence. His chin showed a hint of stubble, a testament to the dawn's early work already done.

"It's a rooster, Margaret. That's what they do. Been that way since the dawn of time," he said. His voice was the rumble of the earth, deep and unyielding, much like the land where he tilled and toiled.

"Mr. Thompson," Jenna addressed the farmer with respect, knowing the value he placed on his rights and traditions, "your rooster certainly has a strong set of lungs on him."

"Always has," he replied, voice gruff but not unkind. "Nature's alarm clock, he is. These big reds aren't quiet, but the hens are good egg layers. That's a big part of my income right there."

"Mrs. Fitzgerald, I can appreciate how disruptive the noise has been," Jenna said to the irritated woman, her tone a careful blend of empathy and authority. "And Mr. Thompson, I understand the importance of tradition and the natural behavior of your poultry." She eyed the rooster, now pecking nonchalantly at the ground, blissfully unaware of its role in this human tension.

"Folks," she added, her voice authoritative, "I understand you both have valid concerns. Mrs. Fitzgerald, you have a right to peace and quiet. And Mr. Thompson, you have a right to keep farm animals on your property and to earn a living with them. But we need to find a compromise that works for everyone."

Seeing that both of them were listening, she took another breath and continued,

“Perhaps we can find a solution that respects both your sleeping schedule and Mr.Thompson’s farming practices,” Jenna suggested, looking from one set of narrowed eyes to the other.If only she could nudge them towards common ground.Her words were met with skeptical silence, a momentary ceasefire as each party weighed the possibility of peace.

“Let’s discuss some options that could alleviate the situation,” she suggested, watching for any sign of concession, any flicker of willingness to bend.Her words seemed to momentarily bridge the gap between the neighbors, their expressions softening ever so slightly.Jenna held their gazes, conveying with her steady gaze that she was there not just as an enforcer of the law, but as a mediator, a shepherd guiding her flock to common ground.

Jenna led them through potential remedies, Jake at her side offering his own insights.They considered sound-proofing measures for Mrs.Fitzgerald’s bedroom—a proposal that met with an initial nod of approval from Mr.Thompson.Mrs.Fitzgerald, however, scratched her chin, skeptical about the costliness of such measures and their effectiveness against the announcement of dawn from his coop.

“And I guess I wouldn’t even be able to keep a window open,” she added glumly.

“Or perhaps,” Jenna offered, shifting her direction as she saw both of the neighbors’ hesitation, “we could think about relocating your chicken coop farther away from Mrs.Fitzgerald’s property line.”

But then Mr.Thompson insisted that his chicken coop had been carefully constructed, and to build another one wouldn’t be a simple or inexpensive task.Even this close to town, he said, chickens had to be secured at night if they were going to survive.

“The chickens have to be kept safe from hungry raccoons,” Mrs.Fitzgerald admitted.

“Not just them,” Mr. Thompson muttered. “Skunks and coyotes and foxes. Opossums too. And black snakes will eat the eggs or baby chicks if they can get to them.” After a moment’s silence, he added, “But Margaret, I understand how you feel. I guess maybe there’s a solution to this problem.”

Jenna watched as Mr. Thompson’s weathered hands, rough from years of tending to his land, carefully sketched out the design of a small chicken house on the back of an old receipt. His brow was furrowed with concentration, but there was a softness in his eyes that betrayed his willingness to compromise for the sake of peace. It was a small box-like structure, insulated for sound, where he could put the rooster at night then let him out with the others at a later morning hour.

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“Why, that might just work,” Mrs.Fitzgerald said, almost smiling.

“Alright,” Mr.Thompson grumbled finally, “I’ll build the blasted thing.But it’s going to be small and no frills.”

“Thank you, Mr.Thompson,” Jenna said, her voice even and steady.She turned to look at Mrs.Fitzgerald, whose posture had relaxed slightly.“And you, Mrs.Fitzgerald, will you agree to keep this matter between neighbors?And no lawsuits, please.”

The elderly woman hesitated, her lips quivering in thought.Then, with a sigh that seemed to release all the tension of the morning, she nodded.“Yes, I suppose that’s fair.No lawyers needed if that rooster is out of my earshot at dawn.I think I can manage to put up with that noise during the day.”

The agreement hung in the air, fragile but intact.Jenna felt the knot in her stomach loosen; the simple joy of resolution, even in a dispute as trivial as this, was its own reward.

“Shake on it?”Jenna suggested, gesturing to the pair.

With reluctance, Mrs.Fitzgerald extended her hand towards Mr.Thompson, who took it in his own with surprising gentleness.Their handshake was brief, their faces marked with relief but still laced with irritation—not quite friends, but no longer adversaries.

“Good work,” Jake murmured, giving Jenna an approving nod.

“Let’s head back,” Jenna said, her mind already shifting gears from mediator back to

law enforcer. The early July heat was beginning to assert itself, hinting at the sweltering afternoon to come.

Jake fell in step beside her, a grin cracking his usually stoic demeanor. “Well, that’s one crisis averted,” Jake said, his voice carrying over the hum of cicadas in the nearby trees. “Though I have to say, I never thought I’d be negotiating the sleeping arrangements of a rooster.”

Jenna let out a genuine chuckle, feeling the absurdity of their situation.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you never expected a lot of things we have to deal with in Trentville—like escaped parrots and attics that are haunted by raccoons.”

She and Jake had, indeed, dealt with those very issues, and many others of a distinctly local color.

“It sure is stuff being a city cop never prepared me for,” Jake said with a chuckle.

“Just another day in the exciting life of small-town law enforcement,” Jenna added, her voice laced with a mix of sarcasm and fondness.

It was moments like these that reminded her of the unique charm—and challenge—of serving Trentville. She glanced sideways at Jake, noting the lightness in his eyes, so unlike the intensity they often held during their investigations.

They had just gotten back into the patrol car when the radio’s static burst cut through the silence, followed by a question, “Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins, do you copy?”

Sally’s voice, usually steady and detached, now carried an edge that made Jenna’s skin prickle. Jake’s eyes met hers, a silent exchange of concern passing between them as they braced for what would come next.

“Go ahead, Sally,” Jenna replied.

“We’ve got a situation at St.Michael’s Church,” Sally continued, the slight tremor in her voice betraying her usual composure. “Father Walsh just called in. They’ve...they’ve found a body.”

“In the church?” Jake asked in surprise.

“That’s what they said. Right there in the old church.”

“Do they have an ID?” Jenna asked.

“No,” Sally replied. “But they said it’s definitely a murder. I didn’t ask any more questions. Knew I had to get you.”

“Copy that, Sally,” Jenna said, her voice steady as she marshaled her thoughts into action. “We’re on our way. Alert the coroner and tell her to meet us there.”

She paused, her gaze flickering over to Jake, who sat rigid beside her, his own expression a mask of professional concern. “And Sally?” she added. “Keep this quiet for now. The last thing we need is the whole town showing up at the scene.”

“Understood, Sheriff. Be careful out there,” came the reply, the line crackling briefly before falling silent.

Jenna glanced at Jake, finding a shared surprise reflected in his eyes. The quiet sense of accomplishment from moments before evaporated, replaced by the grim realization that this day had taken a dark turn.

## CHAPTER FIVE



The musical tones of carillon bells flooded the air as Jenna pushed the car door open and stepped out in front of St. Michael's Catholic Church. The Angelus melody, familiar and usually comforting, now struck an eerie chord against the backdrop of a potential crime scene.

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“Father,” she called out, making her way towards the priest who was waiting with hands clasped, his expression taut with worry. Under the midday sun, Father Walsh’s thinning hair took on a halo-like glow. His face was etched with worry lines, and he wore scholarly round spectacles. His vestments draped over his lean frame, a modest reflection of the resplendent stained-glass saints behind him.

His anxious gaze revealed an unspoken concern, adding another layer to his normally composed demeanor. She noted the tense lines of his face, the way his eyes flicked towards the interior of the church, then back to her with urgency.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Sheriff Graves,” Father Walsh said, the formality of his words undercut by a tremor that betrayed his inner turmoil. “It’s...it’s quite unsettling.”

“Understood, Father.” Jenna nodded as Jake joined her side, his expression grim. “We’ll take care of this.”

As the ringing of the Angelus came to her end, Jenna found herself staring up at the ringing bell tower, a question forming on her lips. Anticipating her query, Father Walsh explained, “It’s automated, Sheriff. Has been for decades. Plays three times a day without fail.”

He paused, considering. “Perhaps I should have it silenced until...well, until this is resolved.”

Jenna regarded him for a moment, appreciating the priest’s foresight amid the chaos. “That might be best,” she agreed, thinking how the sound that once called the

faithful to prayer now heralded an investigation into death in this house of worship. She took a breath, preparing herself for what lay ahead, and nodded to Jake, signaling it was time to proceed.

“Father,” Jenna said. “We’re here. Just show us the way.”

With a silent gesture, Father Walsh turned on his heel, leading them into the heart of St. Michael’s. As they followed Father Walsh into the sanctuary, the hush was a startling change from the chaos that was unfolding outside, where crime scene tape and flashing lights were already staking their claim on holy ground.

They made their way toward the Sunday School room, where officers who had arrived before them were already busy cordoning off areas and speaking in hushed urgent tones. Seated outside the room was an elderly woman who Jenna recognized as Betty Serbin, a fixture in the church community. She looked shell-shocked, her normally rosy cheeks pale with fear.

Officer Maria Delgado, one of Jenna’s most empathetic officers, sat beside her, offering quiet words of comfort.

“Betty was here when it was found,” Father Walsh whispered to Jenna, his voice heavy with concern for his parishioner. “Poor woman has barely said a word since then.”

Jenna and her companions continued on into the room. As Jenna scanned the scene—that place of innocence now marred by unknown horrors—her gaze fell upon the familiar face of Pete Martinez. The handyman stood immobilized, his usual warmth extinguished by the grim discovery. His voice, when he acknowledged Jenna’s presence, was hollow.

“Sheriff,” Pete managed, his eyes pleading for a reality different from the one

unfolding. “I wish I was seeing you under better circumstances.”

“Understood, Pete.” Jenna responded. “Show me.”

Pete led Jenna and Jake into the Sunday School room, where the bright artwork and cheerful new paint now looked sadly out of place. He indicated the closet door that stood open, with a shelf propped against the wall outside near a clutter of supplies on the floor. His hand trembled as it hovered over the damaged drywall. “I was just trying to fix the brackets to hold up a shelf,” he murmured, his words barely carrying over the short distance between them. “There was more space behind the wall than I’d expect. Then I saw ...”

Jenna nodded, her expression unreadable as she took in the cavity he indicated—a space that held more than just empty air. Even from several feet away, she could see that something was there, inside the torn back wall of that closet. She felt a presence that spoke of secrets long buried.

“Never imagined I’d ever find...anything like this,” Pete finished, his voice trailing into the stillness of the room.

Jenna’s hand moved to rest briefly on his shoulder—a silent thanks for his resilience. She then turned her attention back to the closet. Stepping closer, she could see exactly what someone had hidden within that wall cavity. The body, curled fetal-like amidst the yellowed plastic and decaying linen, seemed to be clutching at some last vestige of comfort. As if even in death, the victim sought peace in the dark, narrow confines of the unplanned sepulcher.

“That’s ... unusual,” Jake muttered grimly.

The room felt colder to Jenna, the air thicker; it was as if time itself had slowed down around her. Who was this person? How did they come to rest here, unseen for who

knew how many years?She wondered if screams had echoed off these walls, now absorbed into the faded wallpaper and dusty floorboards.She could see that it was most likely a woman, judging from the body's shape and outline.More than that, she couldn't tell.

Jenna felt a familiar tug at the edge of her consciousness, her psychic intuition brushing against the veil between life and the afterlife.Yet, she knew that no spirit would reach out to her while she was awake; there were no answers to be found that way, not yet.This crime scene was a puzzle for her analytical mind, for her training, and her experience as Sheriff.

A murmur of voices and shuffle of footsteps announced the arrival of Dr.Melissa Stark and her forensic team.Clad head-to-toe in white hazmat suits, as usual, they resembled spectral figures from another world.

"Melissa," Jenna acknowledged, stepping aside to allow the coroner access.She briefed her quickly on the discovery, keeping her tone professional."It looks like it's been here a while."

"Let's get her out," Melissa replied, already assessing the situation with a practiced eye."We need to move her carefully."The body, once a person someone must have known, someone might have loved."

"Stand back," she told Jenna and Jake."You're not dressed for this."

The coroner's team went work with a meticulous calmness that Jenna always found reassuring.Soon the body, still shrouded in its grim cocoon of plastic and aged fabric, was gently extracted from the wall and laid onto the metallic surface of their gurney.The room around them had taken on the clinical sterility of an operating theatre rather than the vibrancy of a place of learning and faith.

Dr. Melissa Stark leaned over the form, her gloved hands probing deftly at the edges of the wrappings. Her expression was one of focused curiosity, a professional mask that did not betray the macabre nature of her work.

“Interesting,” Melissa muttered, drawing Jenna’s attention. She peered closer, following the coroner’s line of vision to the discoloration staining the tattered linen. “Based on the condition and the residue I’m seeing, I’d say the body was treated with quicklime.”

Jenna’s heart sank at the implication. “So, we’re looking at a body that’s been dissolved beyond recognition?” she asked, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her.

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The coroner straightened up, a small smile playing on her lips. Jenna recognized that expression as Melissa's way of acknowledging a challenge. "Actually, Sheriff, that's a common misconception," Melissa said, shaking her head slightly. "Quicklime doesn't dissolve bodies the way most people think it does."

She paused for a moment, reaching out to lightly tap the stained linen with a gloved finger. The material crumbled slightly under her touch, revealing more of the unsettling residue beneath.

"In reality," she continued, "quicklime—calcium oxide—is more often used to suppress odors and slow down the rate of decomposition. It can have a corrosive effect on organic matter, yes, but it's not as efficient at breaking down tissue as one might think."

Jenna nodded slowly, absorbing this new information. She watched as Melissa resumed her examination of the body with renewed focus.

"In this case," the coroner added after a moment, "the quicklime likely served to mask any smell of decay from becoming noticeable—which would explain how this poor soul remained hidden here for so long without detection."

Jenna processed their implications—a body hidden away within these hallowed walls—and felt a chill run through her despite the warmth of the room.

"How long?" Jake asked.

"I won't know more until we get back to my lab," Melissa concluded. "We'll need to

remove these wrappings carefully in a controlled environment.”Her voice was steady and professional as she delivered this news—an unflinching bearer of harsh facts in a scene that seemed surreal.

“But identification may still prove challenging,” Melissa warned without looking up from her work. “The lime has compromised some aspects of physical identification, and DNA extraction may be difficult due to potential degradation over time. Let’s see what else we can uncover back at the lab,” she added, gesturing to her team to prepare for transport.

The gurney rolled away, each squeak from its wheels a reminder of the morbid reality it conveyed from the building. Jenna lingered a moment longer, studying the closet that had become a crypt. The jagged opening in the drywall looked like a large wound, exposing a secret held far too long.

“Quicklime...” Jenna muttered under her breath, considering the implications. It was a substance often misunderstood, but it was clear that its use here was deliberate—the act of someone who wanted to hide a body. That meant it was most likely a murder.

She glanced once more at the empty cavity before turning to oversee the rest of the scene, her resolve hardening. Whoever had done this had not counted on a sheriff’s tenacity—or her uncanny ability to commune with the dead. Jenna would pursue justice with every resource at her disposal.

With Dr. Stark’s initial examination complete, Jenna knew the next phase awaited—an autopsy that would hopefully yield answers. There were so many more questions: How long had the victim been there? And were there others?

She turned to the others in the room: Jake, Pete Martinez, and Father Walsh, and two of Jenna’s officers. She escorted them past the distraught Sunday School teacher, still seated with Officer Delgado. She gathered them into a tight circle in a quiet spot in the



hallway and looked over their worried faces.

“Alright,” she began, her tone leaving no room for debate. “Our biggest concern right now is that this might not be an isolated incident. Until we know for certain, we have to treat the entire church as a potential crime scene. I’m sorry, Father, but we’ll need to close the church to the public until further notice.”

Father Walsh’s face grew ashen, his lips parting as if to protest, but he swallowed his words, nodding reluctantly. “I understand, Sheriff. Do what you must,” he managed, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I know this will be difficult for your congregation,” Jenna added, “but it’s necessary to preserve any potential evidence.”

Father Walsh nodded in understanding. “Whatever you need to do. I’ll make the necessary arrangements and inform the bishop.”

“And Father,” Jenna added, matching his grave tone, “we need to secure the area. No one goes in or out without our say-so. By that, I mean my deputy and myself.”

“Of course, Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins. Whatever you think is best,” Father Walsh replied, his voice betraying a hint of trepidation. Jenna saw his disquiet, the way his eyes lingered on the entrance to the sanctuary. There was an understanding between them, an unspoken acknowledgment of the sanctity this place held for many. But she also knew that her duty—to seek the truth, to protect the living—must prevail over all else.

She motioned to her two officers, instructing them to cordon off the perimeter with tape and to keep the curious townsfolk at bay. As they set to work, Jenna turned back to the task at hand, her mind already forming plans, compartmentalizing emotions, readying herself for whatever lay ahead. She knew the ramifications of those decisions

would soon spread like ripples through a community that called this place of worship home. She felt a pang of sympathy for the priest, for the parishioners, for the town of Trentville itself, but pushed it aside.

Jake stood there looking perplexed, and Jenna waited for him to voice the question on his mind. “How do we even begin to search ... ?” he began before his voice faded.

When everyone looked at him, he added, “Well, what if there are more bodies? And if there are, how are we going to find them?”

## CHAPTER SIX

Jake’s question froze everyone in the room for a moment. Then Jenna responded, “That’s a good question, Jake. I mean, we don’t have any particular reason to expect there were any more bodies hidden here, but we have to find out.”

When she heard a sharp intake of breath from Father Walsh, Jenna added, “And how can we even go about looking without doing unnecessary damage to the building?”

“Father Walsh,” Pete’s voice cut through the silence that followed, “do the original blueprints of St. Michael’s still exist?”

The priest nodded. “Yes, they’re kept in the rectory. I can show you.”

“Please,” the caretaker said, “I think I can help if I can get a look at them.”

The group followed Father Walsh out of the Sunday school room, their footsteps echoing solemnly through the hallways to the rectory. Father Walsh moved to an antique cabinet, his hands trembling slightly as he withdrew a large, rolled bundle of papers. He unfurled it carefully on his desk.

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Jenna watched as Pete selected the Sunday School room and aligned the edge of a ruler with the blueprint's faded lines. "See here," he said, pointing to the outline of a particular wall, "the depth doesn't match up—which makes sense, considering what we found there."

When Jenna leaned closer, she could see the discrepancy between the plans and reality. The wall they had broken to remove the body wasn't part of the original plan. That closet had once been two feet deeper.

"Father, do you know of any renovations that might have changed these dimensions?" Jenna asked.

"None that I was made aware of," replied Father Walsh, shaking his head. "But I never gave any thought to the depth of that closet. Or, for that matter, any other spaces like that."

"Then we check for other disparities," Jenna decided.

Together, the group pored over the blueprints, compiling a registry of potential caches. Jenna's hand was steady as she jotted down measurements with cool efficiency.

With the list complete, Jenna moved to the photocopier, its whirr and flash sounding oddly mundane. She produced duplicates, distributing them to each member of the team.

"Jake, take the south transept. Pete, you're with me. Officers, start from the parish hall

and work back towards us.”

With copies in hand, they split off in their different directions. Jenna and Pete headed towards the nave, then paused at the threshold, taking in the solemn beauty of the church. The pews stood in orderly rows, light coming through the tall stained glass windows painted the room in colorful hues.

The search began, and the quiet of the church was soon filled with the rhythmic tapping of their investigation. Pete started working his way along nooks and corners in one wall, and Jenna’s own taps soon joined the chorus. Her hands brushed over surfaces, feeling for anomalies, tapping to identify any areas that sounded hollower than they should be. As she worked, memories of recent terrors in Genesius County surged through her mind—the Sablewood Reservoir drownings, the ranchers’ murders.

They were acts of violence that had shattered the peace, yet some of them had long remained hidden. It was a bitter denial of the idyllic town she remembered—or thought she remembered—from her childhood, a town where neighbors greeted each other with smiles, and where local legends were shared at the diner over coffee. How many more secrets did the tranquil facade of Trentville conceal? And was her twin sister Piper’s disappearance just another of those mysteries?

As Jenna considered the mounting evidence, she recognized a chilling truth: This was not the idyllic little world of innocence she once believed it to be. Its charm and warmth were undercut by darkness that crept along its edges and had seemingly burst forth without warning.

Jenna wondered, was it always like this? If so, why was the darkness only coming to light now?

She and Pete separated to check nooks and corners and closets around the nave. With

the list clutched in her hands, Jenna opened a nondescript door to see a few hanging vestments. She measured the closet against the faded lines and annotations of the original design.

The dimensions did not match; the depth was off by a foot or more.

She tapped lightly, then harder, and a hollow sound confirmed her suspicions. The space before her held more than vestments—it was a potential crypt.

Jenna's thumbs moved with precision as she composed the text message, an urgent summons in digital form: "Found something. Come to the back closet nave ASAP." She sent it to Jake, Pete, Father Walsh, and the officers.

As she waited, Jenna's gaze remained fixed on the closet door. Was whoever had desecrated this holy ground still out there? How many more lives had been claimed? How long had this predator moved among them undetected? Jenna knew the answers would come at a cost—the innocence of Trentville was already fraying at the edges.

The response to her call was swift, concern on each face as they arrived. She gestured toward the closet. "The dimensions are wrong," she said, her voice devoid of inflection.

"Let's see what's behind it," Pete muttered with dread on his face. Father Walsh crossed himself, a silent prayer fluttering on his lips.

The false wall soon yielded to Pete's efforts, giving way with a reluctant creak. A draft of stale air rushed forth, the musty odor of decayed time assailing their nostrils. For a moment, no one spoke.

The sight that met their eyes was obscured, but visible enough to confirm their

fears—the yellowed plastic, the linen shroud, the way the corpse seemed so eerily preserved. Another victim was right there before them. Pete stood frozen, his features drawn into an expression of disbelief. As the church's caretaker, he had walked these floors countless times, unaware of the gruesome secrets they harbored. And now there seemed to be no end to them. Jenna knew that feeling all too well—the sense of betrayal when the familiar turned sinister.

Jenna dialed Dr. Melissa Stark's number, her eyes never leaving the grim parcel behind the wall.

“Another one,” she said, the words tasting like ash. “In the nave. It looks the same.”

Melissa assured her she was on the way back to the church.

Jake stood beside her, his sandy hair catching the dim light, his face solemn as he began recording the scene. They moved with practiced efficiency, an unspoken language between them in the quiet clicks of the camera shutter and the soft scratch of a pen on a notepad.

Father Walsh's retreat to the nearest pew pulled Jenna's attention away from her task. The priest's head was bowed, hands clasped as if in prayer, his vestments muted and dull against the polished wood of the church furniture. Jenna felt a pang of sympathy. The sanctity of his world had been violated, the very foundations of his faith shaken by the malevolence that lurked beneath the surface of their small town.

When Dr. Stark and her team arrived in their white hazmat suits, the atmosphere shifted. With a nod to Jenna and Jake, Melissa began her meticulous work, her movements sharp and deliberate. Her professional detachment sliced through the emotional fog that hung over the rest of them.

As Dr. Stark's team swarmed the area, Jenna stepped back, observing the replay of

science and investigation unfold. It was a grim scene, the forensics officers moving with purpose around the newly revealed body, tools in hand, voices low but authoritative.

“Let’s move on,” Jenna said quietly to her own team. “We need to keep searching,” she urged. The others nodded, somber determination on their faces as they split up to continue their grim task. The sound of tapping began anew, a morbid symphony that echoed through the cavernous church, as they sought to uncover the full extent of the horror hidden within its walls. There could be more secrets hiding within these walls, and they would unearth every last one.

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The forensics team worked around their leader with a quiet efficiency that belied the macabre nature of their task. They all focused on their various tasks until they heard the coroner's voice call out to them.

"It's definitely the same MO," Melissa announced, her voice cutting through the hush of the room. She pointed to the discolored patches on the fabric, "Look here, and here—the use of quicklime...it's identical. And it looks like another woman, but I think that this one might have been here a lot longer than the other."

Jenna's eyes absorbed every detail: the yellowed plastic, the linen shroud, the way the corpse seemed so eerily preserved. How many awful secrets were entombed within these walls, undisturbed until now?

As the forensics team carefully prepared to move the body, Jenna glanced at the somber faces of her team.

"We need to expand our search," she said, her voice low but firm, resonating against the high ceilings. "This is now officially a serial killer investigation. We need to check every wall, every floor, every ceiling in this building. No stone left unturned."

Jenna Graves surveyed her team, their faces reflecting the sober realization of what lay ahead. She met each of their gazes, seeing her own determination mirrored back at her.

"Let's get moving," she commanded softly, and they split up, spreading out into the sacred spaces with a new sense of purpose. Jenna heard the new taps begin against walls. Each knock was a question asked to the silent church, each potential hollow



response an answer they were afraid to hear.

The sound multiplied, the tapping becoming a steady rhythm that filled St. Michael's with its haunting beat. Jenna herself moved to a corner, listening intently. The noise of the investigation reverberated through the church, a chorus of inquiry.

Jenna headed to the nave, the quiet sanctuary now a crime scene. She drew on her gloves with methodical precision, her mind clear and focused. There was no room for hesitation; every moment mattered in the hunt for the truth. Her chestnut hair, usually neatly pinned back, had escaped its confines, reflecting the chaos that had unraveled around them. She tucked a stray lock behind her ear and approached the first wall with determination.

Her hand was steady as she began to tap again, listening for the hollow sound that would indicate another grim secret hidden within the church's walls. The sound was stark against the silence, each tap a question, each echo a possible answer. Jenna moved methodically along the wall, her eyes narrowing as she concentrated on the sounds, deciphering their meaning.

Jake started his search on the opposite side of the nave. His presence was reassuring, his commitment to the case evident in his unwavering focus. They worked in tandem, though apart, each driven by a shared resolve to uncover the dark truths that lay buried.

The officers, each versed in their duties, spread out through the other sections of the church, their hands echoing Jenna's movements. The tapping grew into a chorus, a grim soundtrack to the task at hand. Jenna felt a chill run down her spine, not from the cold stones but from the reality of what those sounds might reveal.

With each section of wall inspected, Jenna moved to the floors, her knees pressing against the hard surface as she examined each inch. There was no rush in her actions,

only thoroughness, a reflection of her dedication to seek justice for the forgotten souls who had been concealed in these sacred confines.

The search continued, the persistent tapping a haunting reminder of the gravity of their investigation. Jenna's intuition guided her, the same sense that had led her to so many breakthroughs before. It was a gift that came with its burdens, a connection to the unseen that often left her weary. But today, it fueled her, propelling her forward as they searched for the hidden horrors within the church's walls.

It was a solemn search that spoke of secrets yet to be uncovered, of lives cut short and stories unfinished. Jenna wondered how many confessions these walls had absorbed, how many prayers they had heard.

Now, these same walls bore witness to something far darker. How many terrible deaths were hidden here?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The sinking sun casting elongated shadows across St. Michael's Church as evening fell. The search of the church building had been methodical, each inch scoured with painstaking attention. After finding the second grotesque secret—another body, hidden away in a closet wall—the searchers had found nothing more.

Jenna had seen death before—too often—but this felt different; it was as though the very walls of the church were complicit in hiding the truth. The seeming absence of additional bodies did little to ease her mind. The church was old, its foundation laid by hands long turned to dust, and she knew that age could still obscure concealed places and mysteries to uncover.

Now she stood by the entrance to the church parish hall, a large room dedicated to community activities, and the only part of the church aside from the rectory that

Jenna and her team was convinced harbored no bodies. Her eyes traced each parishioner as they slipped through the doors for a hastily called meeting. Hushed voices carried fragments of fear and speculation about the news that had spread after the first body was discovered earlier that day. A wildfire of rumors had already unsettled the small town.

Murmurs among the crowd announced the arrival of Mayor Claire Simmons. Jenna could see that even that normally steely woman appeared muted.

“Sheriff Graves,” Claire said, her words lacking their typical sharpness.

As Jenna returned the greeting, she observed the softening lines around Claire’s eyes. She knew that her work solving the murder of Claire’s brother Clyde had changed their interactions. Now, instead of suspicion, Jenna saw in Claire something akin to camaraderie. Jenna wondered how long this goodwill would last.

When no more people were streaming in, Jenna left her stand at the door and moved to the front of the parish hall, where Father Walsh stood at a podium offering nods and soft words to his parishioners. Jake was standing nearby, calmly checking out the crowd, and Pete Martinez lingered to one side, the hollows under his eyes deep with what he had discovered.

Jenna felt the weight of every gaze when Father Walsh called on her, and she stepped up to the podium.

“Good evening,” she began, her voice stilling the sea of murmurings. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice. Earlier today we uncovered something deeply troubling within St. Michael’s. I believe most of you know that two hidden dead bodies have been discovered.” She paused, not to dramatize but to allow for absorption. “We can’t go into more details about this discovery now. But because of this, the church will remain closed to the public until further notice.”

“Excuse me, Sheriff Graves,” a voice called out, slicing through the hum of whispers that followed Jenna’s announcement. A woman in her sixties, with worry-lines cradling her mouth, stood up, her hand quivering slightly. “We need answers! Is it true what they’re saying?”

“I heard they found a whole cemetery under the floorboards!” an elderly gentleman proclaimed, his voice shaky with the thrill of scandal. Jenna’s heart sank. The fiction of the town’s imagination was quickly outpacing reality, and she knew the dangers that such stories could pose. She had seen fear turn neighbor against neighbor before, and it wasn’t something she wanted to witness again.

“My cousin said it was the work of a satanic cult!” Another parishioner chimed in, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and excitement. Jenna recognized the woman as the owner of the local bookshop, usually a merchant of romance novels and history texts, not wild conspiracy theories.

“Is it true that the bodies are hundreds of years old?” a teenager asked, his voice cracking under the weight of his own morbid curiosity. Jenna noted the boy’s pale face, the way his friends leaned in to hear her response.

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Jenna raised her hands, signaling for silence, and the room gradually gave way to a tense quiet.

“Please,” she began, her tone clear and authoritative, her eyes sweeping the room, “it’s essential that we stick to facts and not let unfounded rumors dictate our actions. What we’ve found is unusual, yes, but jumping to conclusions helps no one. Speculation can cause unnecessary panic, and that’s the last thing we need.”

Her gaze swept across the faces before her — each one marked with varying shades of worry. Jenna knew that grounding them in reality was crucial; anything less could send ripples of panic through Trentville and the whole county. “Rumors serve no purpose but to cloud our judgment,” she continued. “Rest assured, my team and I are examining every piece of evidence with meticulous care. We will get to the bottom of this together.”

She saw that the tension in the room didn’t lift so much as mutate into a collective, held breath — waiting for what came next. Jenna saw Claire Simmons watching her, mouthing the words, “Should I?” Jenna shook her head no. She didn’t think that a statement from the mayor would hold back the anxiety in that audience.

It was then that Colonel Chadwick Spelling of the Missouri State Highway Patrol stepped forward, his uniform crisp, the medals upon his chest glinting under the lights. His stride was confident, a man accustomed to facing unrest head-on.

“Folks,” he began, his baritone voice resonating in the now quiet room. Jenna watched the parishioners’ expressions shift from concern to something akin to reverence as they listened. There was a gravity to the well-known lawman, a reassuring solidity

that seemed to anchor the room.

“Your safety, your peace of mind, is paramount to us,” Spelling continued, his hands clasped behind his back. “But to ensure both, we need your full cooperation. The investigation at hand requires thoroughness, and for that, the church must remain undisturbed.”

He paused, letting his words sink in, then added, “Please grant us the patience and space necessary to do our work effectively. I assure you, we are doing everything within our power to expedite this process.”

His assurance seemed to act as a balm, smoothing the furrowed brows of the worried townsfolk. For now, the tide of concern had been stemmed. Then there came a question from the back, plaintive and edged with a community’s worry.

“How long will the church be off limits?”

“Can’t give an exact timeline,” Colonel Spelling replied. “But we don’t anticipate the search taking more than two or three days. We’ll do our best to work quickly and efficiently.”

Dissatisfaction rippled through the room again. Jenna could feel the anxiety swell; the church was more than a building—it was a cornerstone of Trentville’s spirit, now cordoned off as a crime scene. She prepared herself for the barrage of questions, for the new surge of communal fear that threatened to break loose.

Before the tide of murmurs could turn into a wave, Father Walsh approached the podium. His thinning hair and round spectacles framed a face marked by concern that seemed to age him beyond his years. Yet, when he spoke, a resonance filled the parish hall.

“Let us not forget,” Father Walsh began, his voice steady yet imbued with emotion, “the strength that lies within our faith. In times such as these, it is our unity, our coming together as a community, that will see us through. And you are not cut off from the church, just the main building itself for a short while. I will continue to meet with you individually or in groups right here in the parish hall.”

Heads bowed as Father Walsh concluded with a prayer, his words weaving a sense of calm through the room. Jenna watched as shoulders relaxed and breaths released, the tension dissipating just enough to stave off panic. Jenna acknowledged the role that Father Walsh played, not just as a clergyman but as a pillar of the Trentville community. His ability to soothe frayed nerves was nothing short of vital, especially now.

As the prayer ended, Jenna’s focus shifted back to the task at hand. Her mind was wired, running through lists of what needed to be done next. She glanced at the clock again—8:16 p.m. Time seemed to have slowed, each minute stretching out as if aware of the gravity of their situation.

As the meeting ended, the wooden floor of St. Michael’s parish hall groaned under the shuffle of feet as the townsfolk began their reluctant exodus. Jenna’s gaze swept over the dispersing crowd, and saw that the mayor was making her way out quietly, speaking calmly with each person who approached her.

Then she spotted Larry Clark threading his way toward them through the rows of folding chairs. Larry Clark, the town’s beloved piano tuner, was a man in his seventies, strong and robust but with a gentle demeanor. His silver hair and spectacled eyes lent him an air of wisdom and warmth. His gait was hesitant, his shoulders hunched in a way that spoke volumes about the unease gripping Trentville.

“Father,” Larry’s voice quivered slightly as he neared the small group at the front, “I know this might not be the best time, but the piano in the Sunday school room is long

overdue for tuning. Would it be possible for me to just pop in and take care of that?"

Jenna watched as Father Walsh's expression softened with sympathy, yet remained immovable. The creased lines on the priest's face deepened as he prepared to deliver unwelcome news. Jenna's heart went out to Larry, whose dedication to his craft was as much a part of the town's fabric as the church steeple piercing the evening sky.

"Unfortunately, Larry," Father Walsh began, pausing with a gentle inhale, "that won't be possible right now. We need to ensure the integrity of the investigation." His words were careful, measured, but the finality in them resonated.

Jenna's thoughts drifted momentarily to her childhood home, where Larry had been a familiar figure, meticulously tuning their family piano with a tuner's fork and soft hums. He'd been patient with her and Piper, always ready with a smile or a joke to ease their frustration at missed notes. Even then, Jenna had sensed a quiet sadness behind his laughter. When money had been tight for a client, Larry had often been the one to offer his services without expecting full payment.

As Larry nodded in understanding, resigned to the situation, Jenna felt an ache for the normalcy they all once took for granted. The simple pleasures and routines, like Larry's regular visits to tune pianos, disrupted by the sinister undercurrent that had taken hold of their lives. It was a stark reminder that the discovery at St. Michael's had changed everything, perhaps irrevocably.

"Thank you," Father Walsh added with genuine warmth, placing a hand on the piano tuner's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Larry," the priest said, "But I want to thank you for all the years of service you've given to our church. As soon as this is over, you'll be the first person we call."

Jenna watched the man's defeated retreat. It wasn't just the desecration of sacred ground that cut through the town's heart, she realized; it was also the fracturing of



routine, the daily threads that wove the fabric of their community—now torn asunder.

The last murmurs from the parishioners faded, leaving behind an uneasy hush. Jenna, Jake, Father Walsh, and Colonel Spelling convened near the podium. “Let’s touch base about tomorrow’s plan,” Jenna suggested. They needed to maintain focus, to keep moving forward.

“Agreed,” Spelling replied, his keen eyes meeting Jenna’s before scanning the now vacant hall.

Colonel Spelling’s silhouette still loomed tall. Jake stood beside her, the weariness in his posture mirroring her own. Their shared resolve was unspoken but palpable in the charged air.

“First light,” Colonel Spelling asserted, his tone carrying the unspoken urgency of their quest. “We’ll start with the sacristy and work our way out.”

“Dr. Stark should have information for us by then,” Jenna added. “Deputy Hawkins and I are scheduled to meet with her in the morning.”

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She glanced at Jake, noting the readiness in his eyes. He was more than a deputy now; he had become her anchor in a storm that threatened to engulf them both.

“Let’s keep this contained,” she continued, her voice clear and commanding despite her fatigue. “No leaks, no rumors. We handle this with precision.” Agreement was silently exchanged, a mutual understanding that they were not merely investigators but guardians of a small town’s trust.

The conference concluded with nods of assent, each member of the group carrying away a portion of the night’s burden. Jenna lingered for a moment, her gaze tracing the lines of pews, the stained-glass windows telling their stories, the altar where faith met fear.

The last of the murmured farewells echoed off the walls as Father Walsh’s retreating figure disappeared into the hallway leading to the rectory. The stoop to his gait spoke volumes, carrying the burden of a congregation in turmoil. Colonel Spelling’s exit was even more brisk, a sharp nod his only goodbye, the click of his heels against the floor fading into the night outside. Jenna watched both men leave, the heavy silence settling around her and Jake like dust.

She glanced at Jake, noting the way his gaze lingered on the door through which Father Walsh had vanished—a sign of his silent concern for the man who had become more than just a community leader in these trying times. Jenna was relieved that the meeting had ended peacefully. But in the emptied parish hall laid bare with its vacant chairs, she thought she could hear ghostly remnants of anxious whispers, warning of what they might discover in the church walls tomorrow.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Let’s head out,” Jenna said, her voice low even though the crowd had dispersed. She and Jake moved in unison, each step deliberate, carrying them away from the epicenter of today’s revelations toward the modest sanctuary of her patrol vehicle parked outside.

The empty parking lot was bathed in the amber glow of the streetlamp, the sharp contrasts of light and dark mirroring the duality of their situation—spots of clarity, and others of deep, unsettling nothingness.

“What a day, huh?” Jake commented, his voice tinged with exhaustion and disbelief.

Fumbling for her keys, Jenna replied, “And tomorrow’s likely to be just as ...” She paused, searching for the right word.

“Strange ... tragic ... intense,” Jake offered.

“All of those,” Jenna acknowledged, her tone betraying none of the fatigue she felt bone-deep. “In fact, intensity seems to be our baseline these days.”

She unlocked the car, the soft chirp incongruent with the weight of the day’s events. She slipped into the driver’s seat, and Jake settled into the passenger side, the solid thump of the closing doors punctuating the end of one workday and the approach of another.

Her eyes met Jake’s in the dim light, an unspoken understanding passing between them. Then Jenna put the car into gear, the smooth motion a counterpoint to the jagged edges of the day’s memories.

“Are we done for the night?” Jake asked.

“Yeah,” Jenna confirmed. “I’ll drop you off at home.”

She pulled out of the parking spot, the beams of her headlights cutting through the encroaching night, a path forward illuminated if not entirely clear.

Jenna navigated the cruiser through Trentville’s familiar streets. The town, once a backdrop to her childhood adventures, now felt altered by the day’s grim discoveries. Familiar storefronts and streetlamps seemed to hold their breath as if aware that darkness had crept into their center.

She wondered—had it really been just that morning that she and Jake had settled a dispute over a noisy rooster? That seemed so distant, and so normal, compared to the rest of their day.

The sheriff and her deputy rode in companionable silence, Jenna’s still mind turning over and over the puzzle pieces of the case. As turned into Jake’s street, she was aware that his silhouette tensed slightly.

She pulled the squad car to a stop in front of Jake’s small house, and they both just sat there quietly for a long moment. The quiet hum of the engine filled the silence between them, filled with thoughts that weighed on their minds. She turned to him, her emerald eyes reflecting the porch light, her expression solemn.

“Jake,” she began, her voice barely above a whisper as if afraid to break the fragile peace they found themselves in. “I just...I want you to know how much I appreciate your presence throughout this whole ordeal.”

Jake turned towards her, his sandy hair catching the faint glow from outside. He looked at her with those understanding eyes of his - patient, willing to listen.

“Always,” he replied simply, his voice steady and reassuring. It was a promise

wrapped up in a single word - an assurance that he would be there for her no matter what.

Jenna swallowed hard. She could feel herself teetering on the edge of something profound - something that went beyond their professional relationship and ventured into deeply personal territory.

“I don’t know how I could handle all this without ...” she started but faltered mid-sentence, suddenly shy of voicing out loud what had been silently brewing within her heart.

Jake seemed to understand, though; he always did. He leaned back against his seat and gave her one of his comforting smiles - not too wide or bright, but warm enough to put anyone at ease. “You won’t ever have to handle anything without me if you don’t want to,” he said quietly.

Then he cleared his throat and shifted the subject. “Do you think you’ll have any dreams tonight?” His voice was low, not wanting to encroach too much into the realm where Jenna’s most private battles were fought.

She glanced at him, the corners of her mouth turning up despite the gravity of the situation. “Your guess is as good as mine,” she replied. “If I do, I hope I can make sense of whatever we’re dealing with in that church.”

“Whatever happens, I’m here for you.” Again, his words were simple, yet they anchored her in these stormy seas of uncertainty. She appreciated the gesture, knowing full well the emotional toll that knowing about her lucid dream visions could exert even on him.

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“Thanks, Jake,” Jenna said, sincerity lacing her voice as he stepped out into the waning light of dusk. She watched him walk away, his figure gradually held for a moment in the light of his porch before disappearing inside.

The engine hummed softly as Jenna lingered in the quiet aftermath, allowing herself a moment of stillness. She had only recently admitted to herself the depth of her attraction to her deputy. Were the words he’d just spoken a confirmation that he felt the same? Or were they an indication of a strong partnership rather than an impending romance?

Jenna’s hand stilled on the steering wheel, her gaze lingering on the space where Jake had vanished into his house. Not willing to dwell on her own questions, she shook off the feeling and pulled away from the curb, the tires whispering across the asphalt. Taking one last glance at the quiet homes nestled under the sheltering arms of old oaks, she drove away.

Even so, Jake’s words echoed through her mind long after she had driven off into the night – a gentle reminder that even amidst chaos and uncertainty, she wasn’t alone.

For a moment, she was caught in an eddy of reflection, the day’s events replaying with relentless clarity: the sight of lifeless bodies juxtaposed against the rich wood interior of St. Michael’s; the restless murmur of Trentville’s parishioners as fear and confusion wove through their ranks; the specter of an unsolved mystery darkening every corner of her mind.

She closed her eyes briefly, feeling another familiar tug at her consciousness, the intangible thread that bound her to a sister unseen for two decades. Jenna’s dreams,

those vivid nocturnal visitations from the dead, had yet to yield any trace of Piper. She wondered if she was going to be able to sleep tonight with so many issues on her mind.

Then Jenna remembered that this day wasn't finished for her. She had another responsibility to attend to, one that Jake couldn't help with. There was one more stop she needed to make before she could even think of rest.

The cruiser's headlights illuminated the path ahead. This errand was not simply another item to check off her list; it was a pilgrimage of sorts, a nod to a past that refused to stay buried. The thought tugged at her resolve like a persistent child demanding attention.

Jenna reached for the bottle of water in the cup holder and took a long sip, trying to dislodge the tightness in her throat. The task wasn't part of her official duties, it was personal, an obligation forged by blood and memory. There could be no sleep yet, no dreams to guide her investigation. The night wasn't over.

## CHAPTER NINE

When Jenna parked outside of her childhood home and turned off the ignition, she just sat motionless in her car. The house that had once radiated with the laughter of a family was now subdued by years of sorrow and silence. Since her father had died and her sister had disappeared, her mother had lived there alone.

The porch light was on, and the clock on the dashboard read just past nine-thirty. Jenna told herself it wasn't too late for an unannounced visit. She stepped out of her cruiser and closed the door with a soft click.

As she approached the weathered front porch where she had played as a child, her eyes caught unexpected signs of revival in the small garden. The rose bushes, which

had once grown wild and untended, now stood neatly pruned. The lawn, though not the lush carpet it used to be, showed evidence of recent care. Jenna hoped it meant that her mother was finding her way back to life without the bottle.

She rapped against the door, a solid sound that seemed to echo back at her. The door swung open, and Margaret Graves's voice sliced through the stillness with an edge of disapproval. "Jenna, What brings you here at this hour?"

"I just thought I'd stop by," she replied, crossing the threshold. Inside, she inhaled deeply, letting the scent of lavender and something else she couldn't quite place fill her lungs. It was the smell of home, unchanged, as if holding onto a time before tragedy had struck.

"Is everything okay?" Jenna asked.

Mom's irritation gave way to weariness. "I'm fine," she said, though her rumpled housecoat and disheveled hair told a story of a day—or perhaps more than a day—spent battling demons alone.

Jenna trailed behind her mother to the kitchen. Mom's hands were swift but unsteady as she retrieved the tea kettle and filled it with water, setting it on the stove with a rattle that seemed too loud in the quiet house. When the kettle whistled its readiness, piercing the silence between them, Mom poured the boiling water into two mugs, the chamomile teabags bobbing like tiny life rafts in a turbulent sea.

As they took their seats at the table, the worn surface felt like neutral territory in an unspoken truce. Mom's gaze avoided Jenna's as she sipped her tea, her movements betraying a restlessness that clung to her like a second skin. Jenna observed her mother, noting the absence of flushed cheeks or the scent of alcohol. Yet her agitation was undeniable.



Two weeks earlier, Jenna had stood beside her mother at the kitchen sink, watching years of dependence and denial swirl down the drain with one bottle of amber liquid. Mom had actually asked Jenna to pour out her very last bottle of whiskey—and Jenna had felt touched to have that honor. It had been a monumental victory, hard-fought and fragile. Jenna remembered how her chest had swelled with pride, love, and trepidation. They had held each other, a pair of survivors in the wreckage of a family torn apart by loss and addiction.

Now, Jenna needed to believe that the strength they had found that day could endure. The sight of Mom now, hands clenched around her mug as if holding onto sobriety itself, tugged at her heartstrings. There was no trace of alcohol on her mother's breath, no slurring of words, just the raw edge of someone clinging desperately to a lifeline. But Jenna sensed that all was not well. And it wasn't impossible that Mom had been drinking earlier.

"Where have you been?" Mom's question sliced through the quiet, abrupt and sharp. "It feels like I haven't seen you in ages."

"Mom, it's only been three or four days. I've been working, you know that."

Mom's expression darkened. "Three or four days is too long when you live in the same town, Jenna. Would it kill you to stop by more often?"

Jenna posed the question that had been burning within her since she stepped into the house. "Mom, have you been drinking?"

Mom recoiled as if struck, her voice rising to match the heat in her flushed skin. "Is that why you're here?" she demanded. "To check up on me? To make sure I haven't fallen off the wagon? What is this, some sort of spot inspection?"

Jenna reached out across the table, her hand extending toward Mom's hand in a

gesture meant to bridge the sudden chasm that opened between them. But Mom withdrew, leaving Jenna's to hover in the air, grasping at nothing.

"I'm just concerned about you, Mom. I care about your wellbeing," Jenna said, retracting her hand slowly.

Mom's response came swiftly, laced with bitterness. "If you cared so much, you'd come around more often," she shot back. "I'm still sober, Jenna. If you don't believe me, feel free to turn the house upside down looking for booze. You don't even need a search warrant, sheriff lady."

The bitterness in her mother's tone sent a jolt of alarm through Jenna. She studied Mom's features, searching for the telltale signs she had come to know too well—the glassy stare, the slurred speech that betrayed a descent back into old habits. Yet, even in the anger and fatigue, there was no hint of intoxication. Her mother was irritable, yes, but not drunk.

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Then Mom's anger receded like a storm pulling back its fury, and Jenna saw hints of the woman who had once been the bedrock of their family.

"I'm sorry, honey," Mom's voice trembled. "It's just...life is so hard sometimes. Losing your father, and Piper..." Her voice fractured, "There are days I don't feel like I can go on."

Jenna rose and moved to her mother's side. She wrapped her arms around Mom's slender shoulders, feeling the quiver of suppressed sobs through the thin fabric of the housecoat.

"I know, Mom. I know it's hard," Jenna murmured. "But you're stronger than you think. Remember, Zeke from the liquor store gave you that list of AA meetings? Including the one he attends himself?"

Mom's body stiffened momentarily before relaxing, her breath hitching as she sought composure. "AA" was a term they'd danced around since Mom's last drink. "I know. But asking for help...it's not easy, Jenna," she confessed. "I always thought people who went to therapy were weak. I'm starting to know better, but AA? Those 12 steps...it seems overwhelming."

Jenna sensed the oscillation between hope and despair in her mother's tone, understanding all too well the daunting prospect of baring one's soul to strangers, of committing to a path whose end was uncertain. Then Jake's words replayed in her mind: "You won't ever have to handle anything without me ... I'm here for you." Sometimes, they all needed to borrow strength from someone they could trust.

“You don’t have to do it alone, Mom,” Jenna said. “I’ll be here to support you every step of the way. I can even drive you to the meetings if that would help.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” she murmured. “I’ll...I’ll really consider it.” It was not a promise, but in the dim kitchen light, it felt like the closest thing to a commitment that Jenna had heard from her mother in years.

The silence that settled between them was comfortable, filled with the shared decades and the complexities of their entwined lives. They each took slow sips of tea, its warmth fading but still soothing. The clock ticked away the seconds, marking time in a home where so much remained frozen in the past.

Then, with a slight tilt of her head that seemed to push aside the weight of earlier conversations, Mom looked up and asked, “How was your day, Jenna? Anything exciting happen in our sleepy little town?”

Jenna considered the details that might be better left untold. “Mom,” she finally said as casually as she could manage, “it’s been a tough day. I guess I’d rather not talk about it. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll hear all about it soon enough.”

Mom gave a good-natured chuckle that sounded refreshingly like her old self.

“Oh, I know that tone,” she said. “You’re trying not to share any news that might upset me. Well, I can handle it. It might do me good to hear about other people’s problems. Remind me I’m not the only one in the world having a hard time.”

Jenna exhaled slowly, seeing the expectation in her mother’s gaze. “There was an incident at St. Michael’s,” she began cautiously, choosing her words with care. “We found...some victims, two dead bodies. It looks like foul play. Right now, we’re trying to piece together what happened. The whole town is on edge.”

Mom's eyes widened, a spark of alertness igniting within them. "That's terrible," she whispered, her hand lifting to touch her throat as if to ward off the chill of the subject matter. "And your team, how are they handling it?" Mom asked, her maternal instinct momentarily overpowering her own woes.

"Everyone's pulling their weight," Jenna responded, pride flickering in her eyes. "We'll get to the bottom of it. We have to."

Mom was still waiting expectantly to hear more. "And exactly what did you find?" she asked calmly.

Jenna shared more details, skirting around the morbid specifics. Her mother's shock and dismay deepened as the tale unfolded. Jenna concluded, "It's shaken up the community—a place where everyone knows each other, you know? This kind of thing just doesn't happen here."

"What is this town coming to?" Mom whispered. Her gaze drifted past the kitchen window, seeking an answer to whatever had settled over their small community. "I feel like I don't even understand Trentville anymore."

Jenna nodded, her agreement silent but real. The town's metamorphosis from a sanctuary of predictability to a landscape riddled with unease mirrored the internal transformation she grappled with daily. The innocence of her childhood, where the most significant disturbance might be a neighbor's late-night row, now contrasted starkly with her reality as sheriff—a guardian against an encroaching chaos.

"I should get going, Mom," Jenna said. She pushed back her chair, gathering their empty mugs. The porcelain clinked softly, a domestic soundtrack to the day's harsher notes. "It's been a long day, and tomorrow's likely to be just as ... intense."

Mom rose, too, her movements slower. She walked Jenna to the door, reaching out to

wrap her arms around her daughter in a hug that conveyed more than mere gratitude. It was an embrace filled with the complexities of remorse and recognition.

“Thank you for coming, sweetheart. And...I’m sorry about earlier. I know you care.” The apology, though quiet, resonated with sincerity, bridging the gap that the day’s tensions had widened.

Jenna’s arms tightened around her mother, the embrace a silent exchange of forgiveness and unspoken promises. “I love you, Mom. I’ll try to stop by more often, I promise.” Pulling away reluctantly from the comfort of their closeness, Jenna stepped out into the night, letting the door close behind her.

The drive to her own home was quiet, the streets of Trentville empty. As she navigated the familiar turns, her mind kept replaying the day’s events. The grim discovery at St. Michael’s Church seemed to taint the air, leaving an invisible residue on the town. She thought of her mother, the fragility beneath her stubborn exterior, the fight for sobriety like an unseen battle being waged within the walls of the house Jenna had once called home. And then there was Piper, her absence a void that lingered even after all these years.

The engine’s hum was a steady companion, a background to the cascade of thoughts that refused to settle. As Jenna pulled into her driveway, she killed the ignition and sat for a moment, taking in the stillness of her own home. The realization that sleep would not come easy weighed heavily on her. A premonition prickled at her senses—a forewarning of the dreams that so often bridged the gap between her world and the one just beyond sight.

Exiting the car, Jenna made her way to the front door, each step deliberate, as if grounding herself against the pull of the ethereal realm that awaited her in slumber. Once inside, she moved through the motions of preparing for bed, though she knew rest would be elusive.

She remembered Jake asking, “Do you think you’ll have any dreams tonight?” Now, she felt sure that she would. The visions that visited her lucid dreams were both a gift and a burden, unpredictable in their arrival and opaque in their intent. She wondered if tonight she would see the victims from the church, or if some other lost soul would seek her out in the hazy world of dreams.

Slipping under the covers, Jenna closed her eyes, the darkness behind her lids soon to be filled with spectral images of those who had crossed over. As she waited for sleep to claim her, she embraced the uncertainty of what—or whom—this night would bring to her.

## CHAPTER TEN

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Stained-glass windows that once told stories of saints and miracles bled their colors into one another, pooling on the floor in luminous puddles. Wooden pews, usually aligned with precision, were twisted into gnarled shapes. The air around Jenna shimmered with an unearthly glow, casting the nave of St. Michael's Catholic Church in a strange light.

Jenna called out, "Is anyone ...?" But before she could finish the question, her voice echoed back in a chorus of dissonant tones. The sound bent and folded upon itself around her, filling the surreal architecture with a strange melody.

In that moment, Jenna became lucid. She knew she was dreaming and that she needed to pay close attention—any detail she saw here could be a clue to the puzzle she was working on in her waking life.

Turning away from the liquefied colors and ghostly echoes in the nave of the church, Jenna moved toward the Sunday School room. Her steps created ripples in the carpet as though she were walking on the surface of a still pond. She glanced down at her feet, watching the wavelets dissipate, leaving no trace of her passage.

In the realm of her dream, the usual simplicity of the Sunday School room took on a fantastical guise. The fresh yellow paint, the posters, the crayon drawings all blended together, as though they had been smeared by an artist's brush. When Jenna's hand touched the closet door, it swung open, revealing an ordinary shelf with books and art supplies haphazardly arranged. The wall behind it looked solid.

When Jenna knocked twice on that back wall, it peeled away like the curling of smoke, leaving only a void. From this nothingness, a young woman stepped out, as if



crossing from one world to another—her appearance solid one moment, translucent the next, confusion on her features.

Jenna tried to speak, to ask who this apparition was, but her own words transformed, leaving her mouth not as sound, but as delicate butterflies, their wings beating gently. Jenna watched them disappear, a silent acknowledgment that some questions were too complex for mere words.

She extended her hand to the wavering figure before her. The woman hesitated, then took a tentative step forward, following as Jenna led her toward the nave. As they walked through the church's twisting corridors - which stretched and snapped back like rubber bands - a sad tune began to fill the air from nowhere in particular. As they proceeded, to Jenna's surprise, the ghostly woman began to sing.

"I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees," the spirit's mournful alto revealed. Each verse that followed touched Jenna's consciousness. "Asked the Lord above 'Have mercy, save this poor girl, if you please'," echoed the refrain. Jenna listened to the notes dissipate, certain that the spectral song was a message cast across the divide between the dead and the living.

In the church nave, she and the singing woman now stood near another familiar closet. With a determined motion, Jenna rapped her knuckles against that wooden door. As she did so, the surface before her began to waver, and then, with the gentle sigh of a secret being unveiled, the barrier dissolved entirely.

A second woman stepped out, wearing a robe that shifted through shades of white and gold, as though undecided on which best represented her essence. Her expression showed the same confusion that marked the face of the singer.

Finding her voice, Jenna asked, "Can you tell me your name?" But when the robed woman spoke, her words fractured into a clamor of foreign tongues. Finally the spirit

managed one word: “Listen.”

Jenna paused. “Listen,” she repeated internally, grasping at the significance. Her lucid dreams had always been more than mere phantasms; they offered guidance through the cryptic language of the dead. She stood motionless, attuned to the silence around her. Then she heard the music of a harp playing somewhere unseen. Trying to follow the sound, she guided the two ghost women along with her through the church.

As they walked, the second woman—the one in the fluctuating hues of choir robes—lifted her voice to harmonize with the unseen harpist, adding words to the haunting melody. Her song melded seamlessly with the man’s strumming, converging in a chorus that spoke of loss and longing, of mysteries unraveling at the edges of consciousness. As their voices entwined, patterns spiraling around them in a dance as old as time.

“In shadows deep, the secrets keep,” she sang. “Through courage, truth we strive to reap.”

Jenna followed the harp sound, and the robed ghost kept singing: “In dreams they stir, in whispers speak. Guiding the lost, the brave, the meek.” The first ghost woman joined in softly. Although Jenna couldn’t grasp its meaning yet, she knew there was a message in those harmonies.

The church had become an impossible labyrinth: staircases led to dead ends, doors opened onto blank walls, windows revealed landscapes that morphed with each blink. And there he was—a figure playing the strings of an autoharp as he wandered aimlessly through this ever-shifting dreamscape. And he sang the hymn as well, his pure tenor voice resonating harmoniously with the woman’s soprano.

The church stretched and morphed around him, stone columns wavering like reeds in water. Jenna called out, her words urgent, but as they left her lips, they twisted into

spirals of smoke, dissipating without reaching his ears. As he played, the man navigated the shifting pews and aisles with an otherworldly grace, his fingers dancing across the strings in a rhythm both ancient and new. The music didn't just fill the space; it transformed it. Each note seemed to be an echo of a thousand untold stories.

The autoharp player kept moving. He peered into mirrors reflecting impossible angles of this dream-church; he opened books whose pages fluttered out, ascending toward the stained-glass windows; he paused before an ornate mirror hanging askew on the wall. Jenna's own reflection was absent, yet the man's image stared back from impossible angles, his expression one of profound loss.

"Maybe he's looking for himself," the first woman whispered. Her words shimmered, casting a pale glow that lingered before dissolving into the silence. The second woman, her choir robe a cascade of shifting hues, nodded, and for a moment, her figure turned translucent, the lines of her body blurring with the shifting air.

Jenna pondered the cryptic statement. Was this man seeking a piece of his soul lost in the afterlife, much as Jenna sought her missing half in the world of the living?

The mixed melody began to dissipate, the song winding down like the final turn of a key in a music box. As Jenna's surroundings began to melt away, she sensed the approach of dawn's reality. Still, she clung to the vestiges of the hymn. She understood that song from before, and the directive to listen. With a clarity born of necessity, she committed every detail to memory: the colors, the sensations, the plea to "listen."

Piercing the turmoil, Jenna's alarm snapped her out of the dissolving dreamscape. Gasping for breath as if she'd been submerged, she bolted upright in bed, her nightgown clinging to her skin. Her eyes opened to the stark reality of her bedroom, where morning light crept through the curtains, casting a gentle glow across the space she called her own. Her heartbeat slowed as she processed the remnants of the dream. She swallowed hard, the adrenaline of revelation still coursing through her

veins. The dream had been nothing less than a summons from the dead, a plea for her to uncover what had been concealed.

Jenna reached for her notepad, the pages bearing witness to the many late-night musings and revelations that had visited her before. Her pen hovered momentarily before she began to etch the details of her nocturnal encounter onto the paper. In the dim light, she scrawled down the fragments of the dream that clung to her memory—the harp's string notes, the labyrinthine passages of the church, the golden robe, the imperative to listen, and the words of the blues song, followed by the haunting hymn lyrics.

The words were more than mere poetry; they were signposts, each one a potential clue that might lead her to the answers she sought. Jenna understood well the power of her dreams, the way the departed could reach her through this ethereal channel, offering guidance. She trusted her intuition, honed through years of navigating the thin line between what was seen and unseen. And though the true identities of the spirits often remained cloaked in mystery, their messages resonated within her with clarity.

With the song lyrics and fragments of visions captured on paper, Jenna remained still for a moment longer, allowing her breathing to steady. Then she swung her legs over the side of the bed, grounding herself with the solid feel of the cold floor beneath her bare feet. She dressed methodically, donning the uniform that marked her as Genesius County's sheriff, and braced herself for the day ahead.

She remembered the words one spirit had spoken, "Maybe he's looking for himself." She knew that was true. The man with the autoharp, his wandering was not purposeless, but a solemn quest—a search for something lost, something essential...

His own body...that church." And replace with "Suddenly Jenna knew beyond certainty--somewhere within...undiscovered.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning sun cast a warm glow over Trentville, but Jenna still felt only the cool residue of her nocturnal vision as she rolled her car to a stop in front of Jake's modest bungalow. She tapped the horn, a signal that had become their routine, and Jake appeared at the door, travel mug in hand. He moved with a lazy confidence to the car and got into the passenger seat, bringing with him the rich aroma of dark roast coffee.

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“Morning,” Jake greeted her, his voice gravelly from sleep. Jenna managed a smile as she eased the car back into the flow of the street. After a moment, he added, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“You’re not far off,” she responded, turning her focus to the road ahead. She knew that Jake’s remark was not just curiosity; she heard in it the undercurrent of concern for her well-being—and also for the case at hand.

“Another dream?”

“Yes. It took place in St. Michael’s,” she began. “But it wasn’t the church as we know it—it was...different. Distorted by time, or perhaps by becoming the realm of the dead.”

“Go on,” he urged, frowning as he processed her words.

“There were two women—dead spirits, I assume. They seemed lost and confused, and there was such sorrow about them, an unspeakable loss.” Jenna felt the weight of their unseen gazes upon her, even now. “And a man—plucking at the strings of an autoharp. It was all so vivid, Jake.”

“Did they communicate anything? Any clues?”

“Only in song,” Jenna murmured, pulling up to a stoplight and pausing as if the red glow could halt the progression of her thoughts as easily as it stilled the car. “The women both sang. The first was a haunting blues melody I think I’ve heard somewhere before.

“Can you remember the song?” Jake prodded gently.

“Every note,” she assured him.

The light turned green, and Jenna eased the car forward. The song lingered in the back of her mind, an enigmatic whisper from beyond the veil. She stole a glance at Jake, who waited with an expectant stillness beside her.

Jenna cleared her throat, the car’s engine humming softly in the background as they coasted down the asphalt ribbon that cut through Trentville. Her voice rose, tentative at first, then steadier as she sang the bluesy lines from her dream:

“I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above, ‘Have mercy, save this poor girl, if you please.’”

Jenna glanced over at Jake, whose expression had shifted from concern to startled recognition.

“That’s ‘Cross Road Blues,’ by Robert Johnson, a very real old classic.” Jake’s voice held an edge of wonder as he acknowledged the song’s legacy.

A small spark of excitement flickered in Jenna’s eyes. “And then the second woman sang this hymn I’ve never heard. Her voice was different, lighter somehow, but it carried a message, a plea almost.”

She let the silence between them stretch for a moment, gathering her thoughts before she filled the car with another echo from her dream. Then she began to sing, her voice low and haunting:

“In shadows deep, the secrets keep,

Through courage, truth we strive to reap.

In dreams they stir, in whispers speak,

Guiding the lost, the brave, the meek.”

The final notes lingered in the air as Jenna’s voice faded into the hum of the engine.

Jake shook his head gently, breaking the momentary spell.

“That one’s new to me,” he admitted. Concern creased his forehead as he turned towards her. “Jenna, these dreams...they’re incredible, but I always worry about them. The toll they must be taking...”

Jenna’s response came on a sigh, shoulders drooping under the weight of a burden she had carried since Piper’s disappearance.

“I know, Jake.” Her grip on the steering wheel tightened slightly. “But they’ve been crucial in solving cases.” The songs, the women, even the man with the autoharp—she was sure they were all pieces of a puzzle that extended beyond the realm of the living. “What if these songs are clues that we need?”

He nodded slowly, considering her words. “It’s possible,” he conceded. “Music has a way of transcending time, of connecting stories across generations.”

“Exactly,” Jenna agreed, feeling the gears of her intuition mesh with the logic of police work.



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They continued their journey in an uneasy quiet, then Jenna said, “Thank you, for worrying about me. But it’s really not something I choose to do. And it’s not something I can just stop doing.” She glanced at him briefly, then back at the road.

“I get it,” Jake said, then added with a note of genuine concern, “I just...I care about you, Jenna. I don’t want to see you burn out.”

Jenna glimpsed Jake’s hand, suspended in the air, as if caught between his resolve and hesitation. The space between them hummed with tension, an invisible current that seemed to draw them closer despite themselves. He withdrew his hand, a silent retraction of uncharted emotions, but the moment lingered, electric and unresolved.

She slowed the patrol car to a halt. They had arrived at the imposing structure of the County Courthouse. It rose before them, its brick facade warmed by the sun’s embrace, standing proud against the passage of time. The clock tower loomed over the square, and Jenna felt the weight of history emanating from its walls. For Jenna, the courthouse was not only a symbol of law and order, but also a repository of answers waiting to be discovered.

Jenna led the way inside, her footsteps resounding in the empty hallway as she nodded at the receptionist on duty. As she and Jake descended into the basement, the air grew cooler with each step. They reached the bottom, where the corridor branched off to various departments hidden away from the public eye. Her nose twitched at the antiseptic scent that grew more potent with every step closer to the morgue. There was something about the smell that always seemed to linger on the skin, a reminder of the stark finality documented within those walls.

She slowed her pace as they approached the heavy steel door marked “Coroner’s Office” in black lettering. When they entered, Dr. Melissa Stark stood waiting, her lab coat less pristine than usual, evidence of the long hours spent unraveling the mysteries of the deceased.

“Jenna, Jake,” Stark said, her voice carrying the faintest trace of strain.

“Melissa,” Jenna acknowledged, and as they crossed the threshold, a chill brushed against her skin, raising goosebumps along her arms despite the room’s actual temperature being only marginally lower than the hallway’s. The autopsy room’s clinical atmosphere was underscored by the gleam of stainless steel tables and instruments meticulously arranged for the task at hand. Bright lights hung overhead, illuminating all the corners of the room, leaving nowhere for secrets to hide.

The coroner moved with practiced efficiency, preparing for the grim reveal that awaited beneath the sterile white sheets. Jenna’s resolve hardened; this was her territory, too—no matter how unsavory the road. Her gaze lingered on the two tables where the remains from St. Michael’s lay. She forced herself to approach, making each step with a sense of intrusion into a story that had ended before her time.

Melissa’s hand hovered momentarily over the first cadaver’s chest before she pulled back the thin, white sheet that had been covering its torso. Jenna observed as the coroner traced an invisible line down the sternum. “This one,” she announced, “I estimate was killed and hidden sometime around 1960, give or take a few years.”

Empty eye sockets met Jenna gaze, voids where once there had been life, expression, identity. She’d seen corpses before, but this one looked different—weirdly desiccated, but also weirdly intact. Jenna’s instinct to empathize, to reconstruct the person from the remnants before her, warred with the knowledge that these husks were mere echoes of individuals vanished from the world of the living.

Suppressing the shudder that threatened to ripple through her, Jenna focused on the facts, the evidence. She reminded herself that emotions were luxuries she couldn't afford in the autopsy room. Instead, she absorbed the scene impartially, meticulously, searching for the clues that would resurrect the past these souls had left behind.

"The body looks like it's mummified," Jake said.

"Pretty close to it," Melissa Stark said. "The quicklime accelerated the decomposition initially, but eventually preserved them in this state." Jenna gave a small nod, acknowledging the explanation. The coroner's eyes held a professional detachment, but Jenna saw the hint of a shared understanding—that beneath the science, there were stories here, people whose narratives had been brutally interrupted.

Melissa then moved to the second body with the same methodical grace. She pulled back another sheet to reveal the body, its ghostly pallor a stark contrast against the metallic sheen of the autopsy tables. The bodies themselves were a testament to time's cruelty—skin drawn tight over bone like leather left too long in the sun, the withered flesh speaking of decades spent in an unseen grave.

"This one is more recent. My preliminary estimate puts time of death around 1990."

Jenna felt Jake's gaze on her as they both registered the staggering time gap between the victims. She turned to meet his eyes, finding in them a mirror of her own surprise.

"Three decades apart?" Jake's question echoed the shared disbelief, seeking confirmation from Melissa, who simply nodded.

"It complicates things, doesn't it?" Jenna heard herself say. Her mind went spinning, her dream of a third spirit lurking at the edges of her consciousness—and with it the possibility, or even the likelihood, of another concealed body. But she couldn't speak of her nocturnal visitors right now. Instead, she forced her voice to be steady,

practical.

“Any chance of identifying them?” she asked.

The coroner sighed. “It’s going to be challenging,” she confessed, resignation in her tone.

Jenna leaned over the autopsy table, her gaze fixed on a small, distinct mark on the more recent cadaver’s left shoulder. It was a butterfly tattoo, faded by time and death, incongruous in its delicacy against the leathery pallor of the remains. Dr. Stark had shifted the body just so, revealing the inked wings nestled on what once was vibrant flesh.

“Could be a lead,” Jenna murmured to herself, studying the outlines. It was a simple design, but unique enough that it might be recognizable to someone who knew the victim. Tattoos were personal, sometimes a roadmap to an individual’s identity or past. She took out her phone and snapped a picture of the image.

“Thank you, Melissa,” Jenna said, “Get back to us if you come up with anything more.”

Jake gave a nod of appreciation to the coroner. Together, the sheriff and her deputy left the frigid embrace of the Coroner’s Office, ascending the stairs that led back to life and light. Leaving the courthouse, the sunlight felt like an intrusion, too bright after the somber dimness below. Jenna squinted slightly, but her focus was clear.

“We should talk to Frank Doyle,” she suggested. “He might be able to help us with some local history.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jake replied, his agreement punctuating their resolve. They were partners in this—investigators bound by duty and a shared determination to unravel

the mystery laid out before them.

Jenna clicked the key fob, and the car's lights blinked in response, cutting through the early morning haze that lingered over Trentville's streets. They walked side by side, their steps falling into a silent rhythm on the pavement. With a turn of the key, the cruiser's engine roared to life, breaking the silence that had settled between them. Jenna steered the car onto the road, her mind already reaching towards Frank Doyle's house, towards the insights he might offer.

The town passed by in a blur of storefronts and houses, each with its own story, its own secrets. Jenna wondered how many of those tales were intertwined with the ones they sought to uncover. Greenville, for all its charm and simplicity, was also a tapestry of lives and deaths, each thread woven tightly into the fabric of the community.

Jenna glanced at Jake, his profile outlined against the backdrop of the town they both swore to protect. She felt another surge of gratitude at his presence, not even trying to separate the personal from the professional in her feelings.

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“What do you make of the time gap between the deaths?” Jake’s voice pierced the quiet.

“I don’t know, Jake. It could mean we’re dealing with more than one killer. Or maybe...”

“Maybe what?” Jake prompted, his gaze steady on her.

“Maybe we’re looking at some sort of...legacy. A killer passing on their ‘work’ to another.” The words tasted like bile as they left her mouth, heavy with implications that twisted her stomach into knots.

Two bodies spanning three decades, and a third victim yet to be found—the thought circled in her mind like a carrion bird.

“And, you said there’s another?” he asked. “You think the man playing an autoharp ...”

“Yes. There’s at least one more body somewhere in that church. Whatever we’re dealing with, it’s not over. And given those skips in time ...”

Jake finished her thought for her. “There might be more victims to come.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Jake let his gaze linger on Jenna as she navigated the patrol car through Trentville’s dappled streets. The morning sun cast a warm glow on her chestnut hair. It was small,

unnoticed details that had only recently caught his attention—like the way strands of her hair turned golden in the sunlight.

She was more than his superior, more than the determined sheriff with a haunted past—she was complex, with unknowable depths and quiet strength that commanded respect without asking for it. And as the light shifted, highlighting the subtle curve of her lips lost in thought, Jake felt a now-familiar tightness in his chest, both admiration and something more tender.

The drive to Frank Doyle's house was a quiet one, punctuated only by the hum of the engine and the occasional crackle of the radio. When they pulled up to the curb, the timing was uncanny. Before Jenna could turn off the ignition, the front door opened, and there stood Frank, eyes alert and expectant.

Frank Doyle's tall frame stood as sturdy as an old oak. His face was a map of weathered lines and deep-set wrinkles, each one telling a story of hard-earned wisdom and years spent under the relentless Missouri sun. His short white hair was thick and unruly, matching the gruff exterior that hid an enormous heart. Despite his age, he held himself with a dignity that spoke volumes about the man he once was—a sheriff who'd seen it all, yet still had kindness gleaming in his gray eyes like soft moonlight on a quiet river.

"Morning, Frank," Jenna called out as she stepped from the car.

"Jenna, Jake," Frank replied, his voice rough like gravel.

As he stepped out of the cruiser, Jake's voice was low, "How does he always do that? Always seem to be expecting your visit, I mean?"

Jenna glanced back with a fleeting smile. "Frank's always had a knack for knowing when I'm coming to see him. It used to drive me crazy, but now I'm kind of used to

it.”

Frank greeted them, stepping aside to allow them entry. His eyes crinkled warmly at the corners, softening the hard lines etched by years of service. “Coffee’s fresh,” he announced, gesturing towards the kitchen.

The scent of strong, black coffee greeted Jake, leading him through the living room and into the old kitchen awash with morning light. He pulled out a chair for Jenna before taking his own seat across from Frank’s chair. Mugs of coffee made soft clinks as Frank set them down on the table, its worn surface bearing witness to countless such conversations.

Frank’s gaze met Jake’s briefly, an unspoken acknowledgment passing between them. The former sheriff may have been retired from active duty, but his instinct for police work was as keen as ever. Jake had seen that same look before—the one that said Frank had sensed their arrival long before they turned onto his street. Jake shook his head slightly, still puzzled by the older man’s timely intuition.

“I heard about the bodies at the church,” Frank said, his voice low as he sat down. “Nasty business.”

“It’s worse than you know, Frank,” Jenna told him.

Jake watched the play of emotions across Frank’s face as Jenna recounted details of the discoveries at St. Michael’s, the body in the Sunday School room closet and in another closet in the nave. She also spoke of the community’s reaction, the fear and suspicion that had rippled through the meeting in the parish hall.

“Any dreams about this, Jenna?” Frank leaned forward, elbows resting heavily on the table.



There was a brief hesitation, a flicker of reluctance in Jenna's emerald eyes before she gave a slight nod. Jake knew that look - it was the same one she wore whenever she let slip the veil that hung between her waking world and the realm of her dreams. At that moment, he felt like both protector and bystander, aware of the profound trust Jenna placed in him, yet still separated by the kind of experience he knew he'd never fully comprehend.

"Last night," Jenna's voice was steady, her gaze anchored to a spot on the table. "I dreamed about St. Michael's Church."

She spoke of the church's strange darkness, the whispering echoes that played tricks with sound, and the words that became butterflies or strange languages, book pages that fluttered up into the air. She described the ghostly figures with such vivid detail it was as though she had sketched them into existence right there in Frank's kitchen. The man with the autoharp came to life in her narrative, his spectral fingers plucking strings that vibrated with an otherworldly resonance.

As Jenna's account unfolded, Jake watched Frank closely. When she mentioned the autoharp player, a subtle shift crossed the former sheriff's features. Jake knew the telltale signs of a man trying to mask his reaction, and Frank was doing just that.

"The women both sang," Jenna said. "One of them sang a hymn ..."

"Can you sing it for me, Jenna?" Frank's voice was strained, almost as if the request cost him something.

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Jenna nodded, her chestnut hair shifting around her face. She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering the haunting melody from the recesses of her memory. Then she began to sing, her voice soft but clear, resonating through the stillness of the kitchen.

“In shadows deep, the secrets keep,

Through courage, truth we strive to reap.

In dreams they stir, in whispers speak,

Guiding the lost, the brave, the meek.”

Jenna’s voice captivated Jake in a way he hadn’t expected. Until their drive over here from the morgue, he’d never heard her sing before. Her voice, usually clipped and businesslike, was transformed in song - it flowed like a gentle brook, soft and soothing. Jake found himself caught in its current, the melody pulling at something deep within him. It was another layer of Jenna he hadn’t known existed, a hidden depth that made her all the more intriguing. His gaze lingered on her face as she sang, the morning light casting her in an almost ethereal glow. He watched as Frank’s hands tightened around his coffee mug, his knuckles whitening.

“Can’t say I’ve heard that one before,” Frank muttered, shaking his head slightly. His expression was a careful mask, but Jake saw lines of concern etched deeper into his weathered face.

“I hadn’t either,” Jake admitted.

“And the other?” Frank asked Jenna.

Jenna hesitated. “It was an old tune that Jake recognized.”

“‘Cross Road Blues’ by Robert Johnson,” Jake added. “A classic blues piece about desperation and crossroads.”

“Can you sing that one too?” Frank asked.

Jenna nodded and sang. Where the hymn had been ethereal, this song was earthy and raw:

“I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees

Asked the Lord above, ‘Have mercy, save this poor girl, if you please.’”

Frank nodded, his expression unreadable, but Jake caught the briefest glimmer of recognition in the older man’s eyes. That look – it was more than mere familiarity. It was an acknowledgment of a shared history with the lyrics or perhaps their implications.

The former sheriff’s face lost some color, and he took a long swig of his coffee, his hand trembling ever so slightly. Jake filed the observation away, an important piece of the puzzle they were slowly assembling.

“Any ideas why these songs, Jenna?” Frank asked, as if hoping to glean more from her response. “Why they’d be the ones to come to you in your dream?”

Jenna shook her head, her weariness evident. “Not sure, but there’s always a reason,”

she replied.

“I take it there’s more to this story,” Frank said.

Jenna nodded, “Jake and I just visited Melissa Stark at the morgue.”

Jake sat quietly, watching Jenna’s lips move, her voice steady as she recounted the stark atmosphere of the morgue. The chill of the coroner’s office seemed to have followed them into Frank’s cozy kitchen. When Jenna spoke of Dr. Stark’s findings: one body from around 1960, another from about 1990, Jake observed Frank closely; the former sheriff’s stoic face was a mask hiding an internal struggle.

“1960 was before my time as sheriff, but 1990...” Frank’s voice faded into the space between words, suggesting a narrative left unfinished. His eyes shifted away, focusing on a spot in the grain of the wooden table, as if it held the answers he couldn’t articulate.

The silence that settled was telling. Jake sensed the undercurrents of history and regret that lay beneath Frank’s half-spoken sentences. It was more than just the shock of the gruesome discovery; there was a personal connection, Jake felt sure of it. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, his own instincts urging him to dig deeper, to understand the significance of Frank’s hesitation.

Before Jake could voice his thoughts, Jenna’s hand flinched, a subtle tremor betraying her tension. She drew in a breath that seemed to pull the morning light into her, steeling herself.

“There’s something else, Frank,” she whispered, her voice low in the quiet room. “I think...I think there must be another body hidden somewhere in the church. The man with the autoharp from my dream.”

Frank's gaze lifted slowly from the table, meeting Jenna's earnest eyes. His jaw clenched, a visible sign of the inner turmoil he was wrestling with.

"So you say the date was around 1960 for one of the women?" Frank repeated, almost to himself, his voice barely above a whisper. There was a distant quality to his tone, as if he were reaching back through years, sifting through memories long filed away. A faint crease formed on his forehead, the mark of a man trying to piece together fragments of a past that refused to stay hidden.

Jenna nodded, her expression marked with the vulnerability that came from sharing one's deepest intuitions.. "But the man with the autoharp...I don't think he belongs to either time. Not exactly, not in the way we understand it."

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Frank exhaled, a slow release that seemed to deflate the tension in the room. His eyes, once steely gray, now softened with a certain sorrow. "I'm listening, Jenna," he said, his posture opening to her words. "Tell me everything you can remember."

Jenna recounted more of her dream, the vivid details spilling out with a clarity that made the hairs on Jake's arms stand on end. The spectral figures, the cryptic melodies, all of it painted a picture that was both haunting and eerily beautiful. As she spoke, Frank listened with a focus that bordered on reverence, his weathered features etched with the realization that this was no ordinary case. This was personal, and it cut to the core of who they were—protectors of a town that had secrets.

Jake observed as Frank Doyle's expression shifted, the furrows deepening on his brow with a concern that seemed to weigh down the very air around them. Frank's response came slow, deliberate. He nodded, the movement carrying the weight of years and unspoken understanding.

"Jenna, I've known you your whole life. I've seen firsthand how your dreams can reveal truths no one else can see. If you say there's another body, I believe you."

Jake felt a surge of complex emotions at their exchange. There was admiration for Jenna's unique gift—an ability that had more than once proven invaluable to their work. Gratitude swelled within him, too, for Frank's steadfast belief in Jenna; it was a support that had never wavered, even in the face of the inexplicable and the supernatural. Yet, amid these sentiments, Jake grappled with a twinge of alienation, acutely aware of his peripheral place in the bond shared by mentor and protégé.

"The problem is," Jenna continued, the frustration evident in her voice as she

wrapped her hand tighter around the steaming mug before her, “I can’t tell anyone else about this third body. Not without revealing my...ability.” She paused, her gaze flitting between Jake and Frank, the only two confidants privy to her secret. “You and Jake are the only ones I can talk to about this.”

Jake sat straighter, feeling the responsibility settle on his shoulders—a silent vow to protect Jenna and her extraordinary gift. In the confines of Frank’s modest kitchen, they formed an unlikely trio: the weary sheriff with her psychic abilities, the mentor whose belief defied logic, and he, himself—the deputy caught between professional duty and personal loyalty.

“The woman in the choir robe...I don’t think I know anything about her,” Frank said, his voice trailing into the silence. He hesitated, his eyes losing focus as he gazed past the walls of the kitchen, seeing something far beyond the sunlit room. With a visible effort, he swallowed hard, moisture pooling in the corners of his eyes—eyes that had witnessed decades of Trentville’s sorrows.

“But the others...” His voice cracked like dry leaves underfoot, betraying an inner turmoil that he fought to keep at bay. “I’m afraid I might know exactly who they were.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jenna leaned forward, elbows on Frank’s worn kitchen table, as the former Sheriff began to peel back another layer of Trentville’s past.

Frank’s voice was a low rumble: “You weren’t born yet, but this town used to come alive for a few days every summer. Every June, for three days straight, Trentville bustled in a way you wouldn’t believe. The Cat and Fiddle Folk Festival wasn’t just an event; it was the beating heart of this town. Craftsmen, musicians, and storytellers from all over the county would come to show off their work.”

A smile playing on his lips as he lost himself to the memory, then he continued. “There were antiques, quilting bees, and all sorts of old-timey stuff. Kids ran around with ribbons in their hair, and music...music was everywhere, and outdoor square dancing. I was a teenager back then, and it was by far the most exciting part of my year.”

Jenna could almost hear the echoes of laughter and song, the stomp of dancing feet. She’d heard all about the Cat and Fiddle Folk Festival. It had been held for decades until sometime in the 70s, and nothing had replaced it. The Trentville she knew was a place more silent than celebratory, holding its breath as if waiting for something—or someone—to return.

“There was one performer, though,” Frank said, “whose presence was as expected as the sunrise—Ezra Shore. He called himself a minstrel, and people came from miles around just to hear him play. Ezra had this way about him, made you feel like he was singing directly to you.” Frank’s hands mimicked playing an autoharp, and his gaze grew distant, as if he could see Ezra standing right there in front of them.

As Frank described Ezra Shore – the disheveled hair that defied gravity and convention, the patchwork garments that told stories of countless towns, and the autoharp that seemed an extension of his being – Jenna’s dream interwove with reality. She had no doubt that the man from her visions, a spectral presence strumming sorrowful chords, had once actually played in the streets of Trentville.

Frank paused, fixing his gaze on some distant point before continuing. “After ‘72, nobody saw him again. Just...gone, like smoke in the wind. But since that was the last year the festival was even held, nobody thought much of it,” he admitted. “Ezra was always rambling, never staying put for long. When he wasn’t traveling by bus, he was traveling by freight car as a railroad hobo—a real Woody Guthrie type of character. I don’t suppose he properly lived anywhere in particular, just in motel rooms wherever he went. Nobody was really surprised not to hear from him anymore.”



Jenna understood this logic; a transient soul rarely sends ripples through the water when they drift away. Yet, her dreams often carried fragments of truth, and her vision of Ezra in the church, those lingering notes of his music, suggested that he had left the land of the living many years ago.

“Chances are,” Frank muttered, reaching the same conclusion, “Ezra might’ve met his fate right here in town.”

As if feeling the need to shift away from that grim subject, Frank cleared his throat. His tone was notably softer when spoke again.

“And then there was Caroline Weber. She was a sight to behold, especially when she took the stage at the Centaur’s Den.” He smiled faintly, lost for a moment in memories only he could see. “By day, she’d serve you coffee with a smile at Hank’s Derby, but by night, she was the siren of song, captivating everyone who heard her.”

Jenna drew in every detail as Frank painted the image of Caroline: her transformation from the practical apron to the shimmer of stage lights, her voice weaving through smoky air and over clinking glasses.

“I’d go there most Friday nights,” he continued quietly, as if speaking to the ghosts of memory rather than his present company. “Caroline had this way of...she just drew you in, you know? Her voice could thaw the coldest heart.”

Frank squinted thoughtfully. He sighed, his expression clouding over.

“But then,” he said, “she left—or so they said. Her boyfriend, Zach Freeland, was frantic when she went missing. He plastered flyers on every lamppost and storefront window, even took to knocking on doors asking if anyone had seen Caroline. Most folks figured they’d had another tiff, you know? That Caroline had taken off to cool down. Actually, it was pretty well known that she planned to go to Chicago to pursue

a singing career.Folks figured that was where she went.And since she didn't have any living family here, nobody else gave her disappearance much thought."

"Except Zach," Jenna prompted softly."But was he ever suspected?"

"He was checked out, but his story seemed straight."Frank affirmed."He was convinced something terrible had happened to her.Tried to get the Sheriff to dig deeper, but..."

"When was this?"Jake asked.

"Around 1990, I believe.I was deputy sheriff then, younger than you are now.I tried to convince Sheriff Pulliam—we just called him Duke—to look deeper.Once or twice...half-heartedly."

Frank's next words came haltingly."I remember Duke dismissing Zach's concern...saying Caroline would turn up when she got tired of the big city lights."

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“Did you believe him?” Jenna asked, her voice low, not wanting to fracture the fragile moment.

Frank shook his head. “Not really. But I didn’t push hard enough. My doubts...they were just mumbles against Duke’s hard certainty. Maybe if I’d shouted...”

“And now you think she was one of the ... the ghosts that Jenna saw?” Jake asked hesitantly.

Frank nodded, his eyes glinting with a fond recollection that seemed to momentarily push back the specter of time.

“‘Crossroad Blues’ was her anthem,” he said. “She sang it with conviction, as if she’d lived every line of Robert Johnson’s plight.”

Frank glanced up, catching Jenna’s intense green stare. “You remind me a bit of her, Jenna. Determined. Passionate.”

“Thank you, Frank,” Jenna said. She closed her eyes, allowing the notes of a song she’d never heard anyone sing except in her dream to wash over her. In the echoes of her dream, Caroline’s rendition was both ethereal and heart-wrenchingly human—grief and longing spun into sound.

She knew all too well the frustration of hitting the impenetrable wall of official indifference—the same barrier she’d faced countless times in her own search for Piper. She could see in Frank’s eyes the echo of that battle, one he had fought and lost years ago. Anger simmered within her—a fierce indignation against the systemic

failures that had allowed Caroline's case to slip through the cracks of Trentville's memory.

Jenna stood, her chair scraping softly against the wooden floor. She approached the window, gazing out at the small-town streets basking under the mid-July sun. It could have been any other peaceful morning in Trentville. The question that demanded her attention was about how many more Carolines and Ezras and yet un-named singers had come and gone.

"Zach Freeland lives on a farm just outside of town, doesn't he?" she asked Frank.

"That's right."

"Maybe it's time we talked to him," Jake's voice cut through the contemplative quiet, practical as ever.

"Yes," Jenna agreed, her voice resolute. "He deserves to know someone's finally taking this seriously." She didn't know the man personally, only the image of him that had formed through the town-people's conversations and Frank's accounts—a man hardened by grief and the relentless grind of his work on the farm.

Jenna retrieved her keys from her pocket and prepared to leave. Jake stood up too and carried the empty coffee mugs to the sink. Then Frank rose from his chair with an unexpected resolve. "I'm coming with you," he declared, the gravel in his voice betraying no room for argument. Jenna exchanged a glance with Jake, both caught off guard by the insistence in Frank's tone.

"Frank, are you sure?" Jenna asked, her concern evident. "You don't have to do this." She respected his need to face the past, yet it pained her to think of the emotional cost such a meeting could exact on him. The last thing she wanted was for this visit to open old scars for her mentor, her friend.

“I do, Jenna,” Frank replied, his voice firm. “I owe it to Zach. To Caroline. And maybe...to myself. It’s time I faced Zach.”

They all left the house together. When they stepped outside, the sun shone brightly, casting a warm glow over the familiar streets and houses. Jenna couldn’t help but notice the bustling activity in the neighborhood. The sounds of children playing and lawnmowers humming were a reminder that life went on, indifferent to tragedies that had occurred in the town years ago, or even the recent discoveries of their bodies.

Frank got into the back seat of the patrol car, and Jake took the passenger side. Jenna settled into the driver’s seat and started the car without comment. As she drove, she considered Trentville, with its sleepy streets and familiar faces. The town—in fact, the whole county—held secrets that ran as deep as the roots of the ancient oaks lining the town square. A missing musician, the loss of the Cat and Fiddle Folk Festival, and the disappearance of a talented young singer were just parts of one story among many, each colored by joy and dimmed by sorrow.

She thought about Caroline Weber, whose bluesy voice now haunted her dreams, and Ezra Shore, the enigmatic minstrel who had vanished. How many others had come and gone through this town, leaving only faint memories in their wake? And who was that third spirit in her dream, the woman in a choir robe? How had her body come to be hidden in St. Michael’s Church? Jenna felt the pull of these untold tales, beckoning her to unravel the mysteries that lay dormant beneath Trentville’s veneer of tranquility.

She thought that this visit to Zach Freeland’s farm was but the first step on a path that promised revelations—and perhaps redemption—for those entangled in this area’s history.

Jenna focused on the road, her hands firmly on the wheel, as if the act of driving could anchor her amid the storm of emotions stirred up by the morning’s revelations.

and questions. The landscape shifted as they left the town behind, giving way to open fields where the golden light of late morning played across swaying grasses. In the distance, the rolling hills of the Ozark Plateau were visible, their green summits tinged with blue haze. The drive was a silent one, the tension in the car tangible, each person lost in their own thoughts.

She glanced over at Jake, his steady presence a silent source of strength. In the rearview mirror, she caught glimpses of Frank, his face a canvas of stoic determination underscored by an unmistakable trace of worry. Jenna knew this visit could very well reopen wounds that had never truly healed, yet she also understood that some scars needed to be exposed to find peace.

Catching her glance, Frank said. "It's been years since I've been out this way."

"Did you ever visit Zach at his farm?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "I probably should have. I didn't."

They drove on, the silence returning, each lost in their thoughts as Zach Freeland's farm drew nearer. Jenna felt an uneasy anticipation building, the sense that they were approaching not just a place, but a moment in time that could alter what they thought they knew about Trentville.

Then other images flashed through Jenna's mind: the wrapped and desiccated bodies they had removed from the church walls, the empty eye sockets she'd seen in the morgue. She also had to consider the possibility that Zach Freeland had actually committed the murders—that he was a killer who had discovered that crying wolf would cover his own actions.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jenna glanced over at Jake in his usual place beside her, as she drove along the country roads that led to Zach Freeland's farm. He seemed to be simply scanning the acreage they passed, where fences traced the contours of the land. Frank Doyle's reflection in the rearview mirror was quite different, a study in tension, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond those slightly rolling fields.

As they neared their destination, the buildings of Zach Freeland's farm came into sight. Faded red structures, relics of bygone prosperity, watched over fields where livestock grazed. The home itself sat hunched under the midday sun, its once proud facade surrendering to the relentless march of time, like so many parts of Genesius County.

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Pulling up to Freelanders' farmhouse, Jenna cut the engine. Her door creaked in protest as she stepped out into the July heat, which hung over the farm like a thick blanket. Frank eased himself out of the back seat, his movements slower, weighed down not just by age but by the gravity of their visit. Jenna observed him, recognizing the toll that time and perhaps also guilt could exact on a man.

"Is that him out there?" Jake asked, pointing to a figure out near the barn.

"That's him," Frank replied. "He's working in his pigpen."

They made their way in that direction. With each step closer to the pen, the sounds of the farm grew clearer—the grunts of pigs, the creak of weathered wood, and the soft murmur of leaves in the summer breeze. Jenna could see that the pigpen was actually a small square field with some grass and a low shelter in the center. Zach was standing in the middle of a muddy area that provided the pigs with a skin-cooling wallow. The two half-grown piglets rooting around in the grass gave the newcomers a glance and then ignored them.

Zach Freelanders' attention was consumed by a large sow before him, an obstinate creature that seemed determined to contest every push and pull he exerted. His graying hair stuck to his forehead, and his overalls, once a bright blue, were stained with the earthy tones of the farm. When he caught sight of Jenna and her companions, his body tensed, and his eyes, sharp and wary, met hers across the distance.

The air was ripe with the scent of manure and hay, a pungent reminder of the cycles of life and decay that played out daily on this land. It was a world apart from Jenna's usual beat, and she knew that it was even more alien to Jake. Frank knew the farmers



better than they did, but he was being silent right now. She stepped cautiously along the perimeter of the mud, her boots sinking slightly into the yielding earth.

“Mr. Freeland?” Jenna called out, her voice firm against the backdrop of rural sounds, her badge catching the light. “I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves. I was hoping we could talk to you.”

“What do you want with me?” was the unfriendly response.

“We’d like to ask you about Caroline Weber.”

Zach’s reaction was immediate and telling—muscles tensing, jaw tightening. With a heave that spoke of years wrestling more than just livestock, he turned away from them and stared at the distance for a long moment, then drew a deep sigh. Turning back toward them with a scowl on his face, he extracted himself from the muck.

Jenna watched as the old farmer’s eyes flicked toward Frank. There was history here, thick and unyielding as the mud that clung to Zach’s boots. She made a mental note of the silent exchange, aware that every detail might be a piece of the puzzle that had haunted Trentville for so long.

As Zach wiped his hands on the already stained fabric of his overalls, his voice carved through the air, each word reflecting disdain. “Ain’t nothing to talk about that I didn’t already tell Frank and that useless Sheriff Pulliam 35 years ago.”

Then he glared directly at Jenna, “You might as well come on up to the house, sheriff lady. I’ll deal with this sow later.”

They followed him to his farmhouse, a typical white two-story home that looked out over the land. On the front porch, Zach stopped and kicked off his muddy boots, slipping his feet into a cleaner pair of shoes he’d left there. With a glare at the feet of

the newcomers, he pointed to a boot-scraper and a mat next to the door.

Jenna and Jake and Frank all scraped their shoes cleaner, and then Zach opened his front door. Inside, the sparse furnishings were well-used, the wall adorned with photographs of generations past, sepia-toned smiles speaking of better times when the farm had been newer and occupied by a large family.

Zach led them to the living room, moving with the weary gait of a man burdened by more than age. He sat on the edge of an armchair that had seen its share of years, its fabric worn thin at the arms. His posture remained rigid, as if ready to spring into defense or denial. With no other comment, he gestured for the three intruders to sit down.

Jenna chose her position carefully, selecting a chair that allowed her to observe both Zach and Frank. She felt the unease that permeated the room and steeled herself, knowing she needed to tread carefully. The truth was a delicate thing, and although the information they sought had lain dormant for too many years, she was determined to coax out some answers.

“Mr. Freeland,” she began, her tone even and measured, “can you walk us through what happened before Caroline Weber went missing?”

Zach’s gaze shifted to the window. He seemed to be looking beyond the farm to a past he had revisited in his mind countless times. Finally he began to speak, the bitterness evident in his clipped words.

“She was fixated on moving to Chicago,” he said. “Caroline believed there was more for her out there—bright lights, big city.” His hands, rough and stained from farm work, clenched into fists. “I told her she had everything she needed right here. The Centaur’s Den where she sang ...she could’ve been the most shining star of Trentville. And the two of us—we could have raised a family right here on this farm.”

Jenna watched as Zach's eyes grew distant, lost in the memory of a dream that had splintered with time.

"Go on," she prompted softly, her own experience with loss lending her voice an empathetic tone.

Zach continued, a bit of animation in his tone now, as he conjured the image of Caroline's determination.

"She had this fire in her, you know?" He glanced at Jenna, as if seeking some sign of understanding. "The night before she planned to leave, she told me she'd be on the first bus out in the morning. Nothing I said would change her mind." His voice fractured, a fault line of pain breaking through his gruff exterior. "Never got to say goodbye properly. That was our last conversation."

A hush descended upon the room, thick with unspoken accusations and the dust of years gone by. Jenna's gaze remained fixed on Zach as she leaned forward, her posture mirroring the intensity of her inquiry.

"And you never heard from her again?"

He shook his head no.

"Do you know if anyone in town ever heard from her?" The simple question veiled the complexity of emotions churning beneath the surface.

Zach's response was immediate, his head shaking with a fervor that left no room for doubt. "Not a peep—or at least none that anyone ever told me about. And that wasn't like her at all." His voice was that of a man who had played the same moment over in his mind, searching for missed signals, unspoken words. "She had friends here, people she cared about."

His hardened gaze turned toward Frank, accusation sharp as a knife. “I knew something had happened to her, but those two lawmen,” he jabbed his thumb in Frank’s direction, “couldn’t be bothered to investigate properly.”

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The air seemed to thicken with tension, enough to suffocate the truth that had eluded them all these years. Frank's eyes darted between Jenna and Zach, a silent spectator to the exchange, his feelings of guilt manifesting in the slump of his shoulders and the creases deepening around his mouth. Jenna could almost hear the cogs turning in his mind, the memories of the case resurfacing with each revelation.

The former Sheriff's lips parted, ready to defend actions long past, yet Jenna cut him off with nothing more than a steady look. She understood Frank's remorse, his burden, but now was not the time for excuses or justifications. She needed to keep Zach Freeland talking. This man's answers could lead them to truths that had long been buried among Trentville's storehouse of secrets.

Focusing her attention on Zach, she drew from the details stored in her mind, conjured from Dr. Stark's autopsy findings. "Mr. Freeland, did Caroline have any distinguishing marks? A tattoo, perhaps?" It was a calculated probe, a necessary step nearer to closure.

Suspicion clouded Zach's eyes as they narrowed, a stark contrast to the open fields visible through the grimy windows. "Yeah, she had a tattoo. A butterfly on her left shoulder." His admission hung between them, pensive and heavy.

Jenna and Jake exchanged a knowing glance. They'd seen that very same tattoo on one of the corpses just this morning.

"Why did you want to know about that?" Zach growled.

The corners of Jenna's mouth drew tight as she steeled herself for the task at

hand. “Mr. Freeland,” she began, her voice low and even, “I’m sorry to tell you this, but we’ve found Caroline’s body. It was concealed in St. Michael’s Church.”

She watched as Zach’s rough exterior, hardened by years of labor and loss, seemed to crumble before them. Color bled from the farmer’s face, leaving behind a ghostly pallor that spoke volumes of the shock and heartache that gripped him. For a moment, time appeared to stand still, the faded wallpaper and family photographs becoming a backdrop to his silent agony.

In his corner of the room, Frank shifted, his discomfort rippling through the air. Jenna caught his eye, reading the layers of guilt that shrouded him like a second skin. The former Sheriff’s involvement in the original investigation—or lack thereof—was a burden he still carried, its weight palpable in the way he avoided Zach’s accusatory stare.

The stillness in that old living room shattered like glass when rage took hold, contorting Zach’s features into something fierce and raw. He surged to his feet with an energy that belied his age, the wooden floorboards creaking under the sudden shift.

“You!” he spat, pointing directly at Frank. “You knew all along, didn’t you? You and Pulliam, you knew what had happened, knew she was dead. You covered it up!”

The farmer’s accusations kept flying like daggers. “That’s why you didn’t investigate—because you already knew. And you didn’t want to look into the why or where of it.”

It seemed as though the whole room held its breath. Frank looked stunned.

“How could I have known ...?” Frank began.

“Because of what the carillon played that night,” Zach shouted, getting to his feet,

pointing at Frank. “Because of what those bells said.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“The bells ...?”

Frank’s words asked a question that Jenna was asking herself too. What could Zach mean by his accusation—that the then-sheriff and his deputy had heard the bells ring out a message about Caroline Weber’s death, and that they had ignored it?

Zach’s next words came slowly, each syllable laden with his long-time anger. “The church bells. They played the Angelus in the middle of the night. Never did that any other time.”

Jenna leaned forward, her elbows pressing into her knees, a gesture that anchored her to the present moment. “The carillon malfunctioned?” she asked, trying to understand.

Zach’s nod was vigorous, his eyes alight with an unwavering certainty. “That’s what they said. But it wasn’t just a malfunction. Because that wasn’t all —” he glared at Frank. “You know what else those bells played! Before it played the Angelus ... that other song.”

Frank’s voice, when he spoke, sounded exhausted. “Zach, we went over this long ago. They just sounded like random notes to everybody except you, and—”

“They weren’t random!” The roar that erupted from Zach sent a jolt through the room, his fist connecting with the arm of his chair with a thud that seemed to reverberate through the floorboards. “I knew that song better than anyone. Caroline sang it every night. That’s what the bells played, I’m telling you!”

“You’re saying that the carillon played a song that Caroline used to sing?” Jenna

asked. Her gaze didn't waver from Zach's face, her mind cataloging every flinch, every flash of emotion that crossed his features. There was something unsettling about the ferocity of his conviction, and she felt the weight of questions piling up, each demanding attention.

Zach nodded his head vigorously. "That's what I've been telling you. Before the Angelus, it sputtered out a few notes from 'Crossroad Blues' - Caroline's favorite song. I told them, but they didn't want to pay attention. And now you're telling me her body's been found in that same church."

Jenna was jolted by the name of the song she had heard in her dream. She observed Frank's reaction closely, searching for any sign of truth in the allegations being hurled across the room.

"Zach, I promise you," Frank said weakly. "Duke and I weren't covering anything up. We didn't know. We really didn't."

Zach let out a wordless growl of disbelief.

"Mr. Freeland, please," Jenna said. "We're here now to find out what happened to Caroline, and we need your help."

Zach's energy seemed to evaporate as suddenly as it had flared. His frame sank back into the armchair, shoulders hunched, the lines on his face deepening with defeat.



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“Do you have any idea who might have wanted to harm her?” Jenna asked.

“No idea at all,” he muttered, the word barely audible. “And I got nothing more to say about that than I did back in ‘89.”

“Was Caroline connected with St. Michael’s?” Jake asked. “Was she a member of that congregation?”

“No,” Zach said flatly. “She wasn’t a religious person, not in that way. Her music ... that was what meant most to her.”

“Zach, anything that happened that night, we need to know,” Jenna pressed, trying to bridge the chasm of years with her words.

He leaned forward, his voice edged with emotion. “All I know is that night was the last time anyone saw her.” Then he looked directly at Jenna, “And you’re sure it was her you found?”

Jenna thought of the bodies that were in the morgue now. The tattoo surely indicated that Caroline Weber was one of them. Jenna also knew that Caroline and her favorite song matched one of the women in her dream, but of course she couldn’t say anything about that.

“To be absolutely sure, we’d need something for a DNA match,” she told Zach. “Perhaps you have something ...?”

He groaned and closed his eyes. “You say it would help you know for sure?”

“It would be a great help,” she told him.

The weary farmer pushed himself up from his chair and shuffled into an adjoining room. After a few moments, he emerged with something pinched between his fingers. Strands of hair, thin and wispy, glinted in the dim light. His grim expression spoke volumes as he held the hair out to Jenna.

“Caroline’s?” she asked, pulling out an evidence bag.

“She gave it to me,” he said glumly.

“Thank you, Zach,” she said softly, trying to offer some semblance of comfort as she sealed the strands in the bag. But he merely shrugged in response.

“That’s it,” he replied abruptly, “I want you all out of my house. Now.”

Jenna understood the finality in his tone; they would get no more from this farmer today.

“Thank you, Mr. Freeland,” she acknowledged. “I’m sorry that our visit was so hard for you.”

She gestured to Jake and Frank, signaling it was time to depart. As they exited the farmhouse, she could feel the tension slowly unraveling from her shoulders. Outside, the mid-July sun beat down mercilessly, the heat a tangible force as they walked back to the patrol car.

Jenna slid behind the wheel, adjusting the rearview mirror to steal a glance at Frank. His face was ashen, a visual testament to the gravity of this day. Looking back at the farmhouse, she saw Zach standing at his door watching them leave.

“Do you think there’s any chance that Zach killed Caroline?” Jake asked.

Jenna fell silent for a moment. That question had been in the back of her mind during their whole conversation about him. But now ...

Frank spoke up, voicing exactly the same conclusion that Jenna had come to.

“There’s no way that man’s a murderer. He’s grieving, he’s angry, and I don’t blame him.”

There wasn’t a doubt in Jenna’s mind that Frank was right. Which left them no closer to catching the killer—or killers—than they’d been before.

The drive continued in silence for a few moments. Jenna kept her focus on the road, yet her thoughts churned with the pieces of a puzzle that refused to fit neatly together. The carillon playing at an odd time, perhaps sounding out the haunting notes of ‘Crossroad Blues’; the bodies found in the walls; the autoharp player who had appeared in her dream but not as a corpse—they were all fragments of a larger mystery she couldn’t get her mind around yet. If the carillon really had inexplicably played the notes of ‘Crossroad Blues’ the night before Caroline vanished, that could be no mere coincidence.

“Do you want me to call Melissa Stark?” Jake asked.

“Yes, please bring her up to date,” Jenna replied.

Jake dialed the familiar number for Dr. Melissa Stark and the line clicked into life after a few rings.

“Stark here,” came the coroner’s brisk voice.

“Melissa, it’s Jake Hawkins,” he responded, his tone steady and professional. “We’ve got some information suggesting that one of the bodies was that of a young woman who went missing back in 1989. Her name was Caroline Weber.”

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“Go ahead.”

“Zach Freeland confirmed that she had a tattoo of a butterfly on her left shoulder,” Jake relayed succinctly.

A pause on the other end of the line indicated that Melissa was making notes. “That sounds like a match,” she said.

“We’ve lock of Caroline’s hair for DNA testing,” Jake added. “We’ll have it delivered to you.”

“Good work, Jake,” Melissa responded appreciatively. “I’ll get my team ready to process it as soon as it gets here.”

Soon after Jake ended the call, they passed the faded signs for Trentville, the town’s boundaries marking the return to their usual reality.

“Where to next?” Jake asked Jenna.

“We’d better stop by the church and check in on Colonel Spelling and his team,” she said.

“Good idea,” he replied. “Maybe they’ve found something there by now.”

“Frank, how about you?” Jenna asked. “I can drive you home first.”

“No, Jenna, I don’t want to go home,” Frank replied from the back seat. “Now that I

know about Caroline...well, it's all I'll be able to think about. Just take me on into town with you. There must be some way I can help."

Jenna understood Frank's response. Trentville, with its veneer of small-town charm, held secrets that were gradually coming to light—and those cases dated back to Frank's early days as a lawman here. She appreciated his need to help finish those stories.

She too had a multitude of reasons to pursue the case harder than ever. It wasn't just that she was the Sheriff now; her determination was also rooted in what she had seen in that dream. The blight that had hung over this town would not win; she would see to that. Caroline's tragic fate, now confirmed by their meeting with Zach Freeland, was a wound upon the whole community's conscience.

And of course Caroline wasn't the only victim. The other body in the morgue remained unidentified, but Jenna was sure she had met that victim in her dream, when she'd been wearing a choir robe. There was also the question of what had become of the autoharp player who had charmed everybody so long ago. There was a reason those three spirits still haunted St. Michael's Church in her dream, and Jenna still had to track that question to its end.

She brought the squad car to a gentle stop outside St. Michael's and stepped out, surveying the scene. Jake followed suit, and they waited while Frank unfolded himself from the back seat with a grunt, the years slowing his movements.

The church loomed solemnly against the bright afternoon sky, its stone facade offering no hints of what might still be hidden within. They all ducked under the yellow police tape strung between them and old building.

As they entered the front doors of the church, Jenna paused mid-stride, listening to the faint strains of piano music that seeped out from the adjoining Parish Hall. The

melody that wound its way through the air was one that she had heard before, but never in waking reality.

She recognized the hymn, the one that had haunted her sleep—and somebody was playing that melody right here...right now.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stopping in her tracks in the entryway to St. Michael's, Jenna stood listening to the somber and familiar melody.

"Is that...?" Jake began, and Jenna nodded. Frank grunted softly, his face furrowing in concern.

"Yeah," she murmured. "It's the melody of the hymn that I sang for you. I've never heard it except in my dream."

Together, they turned toward the adjoining Parish Hall to find out who was playing the piano. As they approached the doorway, a woman's voice joined the piano, adding familiar words to the tune:

"In shadows deep, the secrets keep,

Through courage, truth we strive to reap ..."

Jake said softly, "And those are the words that you sang, too."

They stepped through the open door of the Parish Hall, where Jenna recognized the piano player as David Cavanaugh, the church organist. He and the singer, Sister Agnes Kendrick, were both long-time residents, well-known in town.

A muscular man in his 80s, David hunched over the piano, his agile fingers moving across the keys with an unsettling intensity that belied his age. Beside him stood Sister Agnes, a frail figure of about 80, her quavering soprano voice lending an ethereal quality to the hymn as it filled the room.

David played with a fervor, obviously familiar with the piece. Beside him, the Sister in her vestments added a calm dignity to their performance as she sang:

“In dreams they stir, in whispers speak,



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Guiding the lost, the brave, the meek.”

Jenna and her companions stood in the back of the Parish Hall, listening as the melody that had haunted her dreams filled the air. As the last verse faded into a delicate silence, Jenna turned her focus to David Cavanaugh. She had often found him a peculiar sort of fellow, though not in any threatening way. Right now, she thought he seemed to be playing not for an audience, but for something unseen, a presence only he could sense.

The nun and the organist repeated the hymn, then ended it. Sister Agnes, standing close to David Cavanaugh as he lifted his hands from the piano keys, let out a sigh that seemed laden with years of memories.

“Oh, how long it’s been since that hymn graced these walls!” she murmured. “What made you think to play it just now?”

David turned toward the elderly nun, his expression distant, as if he were recalling a memory.

“I’m not sure,” he said, his voice barely rising above the hush that had befallen the hall. “It’s as if it came to me like a whisper from the past.”

Jenna stepped forward.

“That’s a beautiful hymn,” she commented. “Where did it come from?”

For a moment, it appeared as though David might not answer. Then, with a slight nod

as though acknowledging the hymn's significance, he looked directly at Jenna.

"My father, George Cavanaugh, composed it many years ago," he revealed, his voice holding a pride that seemed almost reluctant.

"George Cavanaugh was our organist back in his day," Sister Agnes told them. "But he was also much more than that. He was a master engineer and inventor—the artist who crafted our carillon. Installed it himself in 1935."

A spark of interest ignited within Jenna. She noted the date silently, mentally cataloging it alongside the timeline of their investigation. If the carillon played any part in the enigma within this church's bones, George Cavanaugh had just become a significant figure.

"Was he from around here?" Jenna asked.

"Born and raised," Sister Agnes replied, her smile one of remembrance. "And he gave so much of himself to this church...to his music. And he was a wonderful teacher, too—piano and voice. I was fortunate enough to be one of his students. He was patient, kind. His love for music was infectious."

But as the words left her lips, they were chased by a cloud that crossed her face, dimming the warmth in her eyes.

"Yet, in his final years," Sister Agnes said, the lightness fading from her tone, "he changed completely. It was after the carillon was automated, and then...after Rachel..."

David Cavanaugh stiffed at the mention of the name Rachel. He stood up abruptly, the bench screeching on the wooden floor, breaking the spell.

“I...I have things to do at home,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper but laced with an urgency that belied his calm demeanor.

Jenna watched him closely, noting the slight tremor in his hands as he gathered sheets of music, stuffing them into a leather-bound folder.

“David, I’m sorry,” Sister Agnes said. “I shouldn’t have mentioned her.”

“Think nothing of it, Sister Agnes,” David said in a tight voice.

He didn’t say another word as he hurried past them, his footsteps quick and deliberate, leaving behind a bewilderment that settled heavily upon the room.

Jake and Frank exchanged a glance, their expressions mirroring Jenna’s own confusion.

Sister Agnes watched after David’s retreating figure, her face etched with concern. “Oh, dear,” she said, her voice tinged with regret. “I shouldn’t have mentioned Rachel. Poor David.”

Frank nodded sadly. “Rachel was David’s sister, wasn’t she?”

“That’s right.”

The nun’s eyes were distant, and Jenna sensed the layers of history that clung to St. Michael’s.

“Sister, please tell us everything you can,” Jenna replied, her tone gentle yet firm. “About both George Cavanaugh and Rachel. It might help us solve these murders.”

Sister Agnes nodded, the lines around her eyes deepening with the weight of years. She settled into a nearby chair and began to explain what had befallen the organist who had designed the carillon.

“George Cavanaugh was a remarkable man,” she began, her voice soft but clear. “But two tragedies haunted him late in life. Back in 1950, Kip Selves from the electronics shop took it upon himself to update our church carillon with an automated system.” Her slender hands lifted slightly, as if to hold back the years. “George was heartbroken.”

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Jenna nodded, understanding the gravity of such a change for a man devoted to his craft. The carillon, with its array of bells, had been George's creation, an extension of his very soul, and automation must have seemed an affront not just to his artistry but to his identity. The towering instrument he had installed now echoed with a mechanical precision devoid of human touch.

"Music was a living thing to him," Sister Agnes continued, "breathed into existence by the musician's passion. To see it reduced to gears and timers...it wounded him deeply."

As she dwelled on this first tragedy, Sister Agnes's face shifted. "But," she said, her voice now trembling, "it was ten years later when we all felt the earth shatter beneath us. Rachel—David's older sister—vanished without leaving a single trace behind."

Sister Agnes sighed deeply.

"George and David..." she whispered, the pain of the memory evident. "They were never the same. A part of them disappeared with Rachel that day. It changed this place, too, forever marked it with her absence. She was a wonderful singer, you see—a soprano. The heart and soul of the choir, you might even say. And that hymn of her father's—it was always her favorite. George died in 1965, I believe."

With an inward shiver, Jenna recalled the coroner's findings, the estimated date of death for the second skeletal remains discovered in the church—around 1960, the same year when Rachel disappeared. And she remembered the high, sweet voice of the choir-robed woman she saw in her dream. She saw the same realization dawn in her companions' eyes, the connection snapping into place with an almost audible

click.

Jenna leaned forward, her hands clasped together as Frank shifted the topic with a deliberate change in his timbre.

“Sister Agnes,” he began, his voice carrying the weight of years and authority, “could you tell us about the night in ‘89 when the carillon started playing on its own?”

The elderly nun’s eyes widened slightly, her gaze unfocused for a moment as if she were sifting through decades of memories.

“Odd that you should mention that,” she murmured. “I haven’t thought about that for years. Yes, that was quite an unsettling experience. I remember it vividly. It was well past midnight, and the whole town could hear the carillon. At first, it just sputtered out a few notes. But then it started playing the Angelus, all by itself.”

“Was there ever any mechanical explanation found?” Frank pressed, his gray eyes keen.

Sister Agnes shook her head, her white wimple shifting slightly with the movement. “No, nothing conclusive,” she replied. “A repairman from Kip’s shop examined it the next day but found no faults. It was as if the bells had a mind of their own that night. We simply couldn’t explain it.”

Jenna noted the unsettled flicker in Sister Agnes’s otherwise serene demeanor. The incident wasn’t just a technical anomaly; it had left its mark on the community’s collective psyche.

Then Sister Agnes stood, her movements slow but certain.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I must return to my duties,” she said, offering a solemn

nod toward each of them. “I’ll be right here in the church if you need me. Good day, Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins, Mr. Doyle. May God guide your investigation.”

As the nun exited the Parish Hall, Jenna turned to Jake and Frank. Their huddle was instinctive, shoulders almost touching as they convened in a tight circle, their voices a low rumble against the high ceilings of the hall.

“Rachel’s disappearance lines up with the timeline of the first victim,” Jenna stated. “It can’t be a coincidence.”

“If she is our Jane Doe,” Jake added, “it means we’re dealing with more than just cold cases. We’re unearthing a legacy of grief that’s been buried in this church for generations.”

“And David Cavanaugh is an important piece of the puzzle,” Frank added. “He’s tethered to this church, and he knows the carillon like the back of his hand. Who knows what else he might know?”

“Or might have done?” Jake added.

“His reaction today was ... off,” Jenna agreed. “There’s something about David that doesn’t sit right with me. It’s like he’s guarding a secret of some kind.”

The air between the three of them was electric, charged with the gravity of these new revelations.

“We need to look into David’s past,” Jake said firmly. “And his father, George. There’s more to their story, something we’re not seeing. The carillon, the hymns—they’re pieces of a puzzle. If we find out what those pieces mean, we might just see the whole picture.”

“Let’s keep digging,” Jenna agreed. “We owe it to the victims and to this town to uncover the truth.”

Frank’s face, weathered by years of service and concern, mirrored Jenna’s troubled expression.

“Jenna,” he cautioned, his voice a gravelly note of reason, “we’ve got to tread carefully. Suspicion is one thing, but we need concrete evidence before pointing fingers.”

His gray eyes implored her to temper her instincts with the methodical approach that had served them well in past investigations.

“Agreed,” she said. “Now let’s check in with Colonel Spelling.”

With a collective nod of agreement, they exited the Parish Hall into the main part of the church. Jenna’s steps echoed on the wooden floor, breaking the silence they left behind. The melody of the hymn lingered in the air, a haunting refrain that seemed to watch them depart, carrying with it the secrets of St. Michael’s Church.

She had a deep foreboding that evil hidden in St. Michael’s wasn’t ended—that something dark still lingered in this church. And, of course, there was still a third body to be found—a body that neither she nor her companions could tell anybody about. Was Spelling and his team going to find it on their own? If not, how would it ever come to light?



Jenna knew only one thing—that if they failed to solve this case, more lives might be at stake.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jenna stepped into St. Michael's sanctuary, followed by Jake and Frank. The afternoon sun slanting through tall stained glass windows spread dappled colors across the pews and the team of people working there.

Jenna spotted Officer Maria Delgado moving methodically along the pews, tracing the wood grain as if it might reveal something of importance. Jenna watched the meticulous examination, appreciating the thoroughness that made her one of Jenna's most trusted officers.

"Maria," Jenna called out. Maria straightened up from her crouch and turned towards the sound.

"Have you seen Colonel Spelling?" Jenna asked. Maria's posture shifted to attention, a sign of respect for Jenna's rank as much as for the urgency of her inquiry.

"Last I saw him, Sheriff, he was heading towards the sacristy," Maria responded, pointing toward the rear of the church. "Said something about checking the vestment closets."

Jenna reached into her pocket and pulled out the evidence bag with Caroline Weber's hair glinting under the solemn light. The lock of hair was their most tangible link to the woman who had vanished from Trentville, never to be seen again until her body

had been found in the closet near the back of the nave

“Whenever you can take a break from your work, I need you to do something for me.” Jenna instructed, “This has to go to Dr. Stark at the morgue. It should help firm up the identification of one of our victims.”

“Of course, Sheriff,” Maria responded, her tone equally serious. She tucked the bag securely into her own pocket. “I’ll go when I’m finished with these rows assigned to me. Anything else?”

“Keep your eyes open,” Jenna cautioned. “We’re still not sure what we’re dealing with here.”

Maria nodded, and turned to resume her painstaking work. Jenna watched her for a moment, appreciating the dedication she always displayed before signaling to Jake and Frank to follow her towards the sacristy. The hushed atmosphere of the church seemed to amplify their footsteps as they proceeded down the aisle.

They wound their way out of the huge main space of the church to a smaller room well behind the area where the pulpit stood—the sacristy where the priests prepared themselves for each service. The heavy wooden door stood open, revealing Colonel Chad Spelling inside, his figure imposing against the backdrop of delicate vestments and sacred artifacts. The sacristy was dim, a smaller stained glass window casting a sprinkle of colors that did little to pierce the shadows.

Spelling stood with his back to them and did not turn immediately, his focus absorbed by the contents of the wardrobe.

“Chad,” Frank’s voice cut through the stillness, causing Spelling to halt mid-search. The Colonel turned, and the surprise on his face quickly gave way to recognition and warmth.

“Frank! Didn’t expect to see you here, old friend.” Spelling’s smile was genuine as he stepped forward, grasping Frank’s hand with both of his own—a gesture that seemed to bridge the gap between their formal titles and their shared history.

“It’s good to have you on board. We could use your expertise,” Spelling added.

“Colonel Spelling,” Jenna said, stepping forward and drawing the men’s attention.

“Ah, Sheriff Graves and Deputy Hawkins,” he greeted as he released Frank’s hand and faced them. “What brings you to this side of the investigation?”

“We’re following up on every lead,” Jenna replied, her words clipped with the need for progress. She stood there, surrounded by symbols of faith and redemption, yet weighed down by the reality of the sin they sought to expose. “Have you found anything new?”

Spelling’s expression sobered. “Not another body, anyway,” he said. His gaze swept over the small room, as if to encompass the breadth of their efforts.

“What about the bell tower?” Jake asked.

Spelling directed his attention upward as if he could see through the ceiling to the tower above. “That’s actually the least likely hiding place,” he replied confidently. “It’s solid stone construction, no cavities or closets, no spaces where a body could be concealed. Just an open stair winding upward to the old keyboard where the bells used to be played.”

Jenna more than half-wished those stones could speak. They might be able to help with the investigation. Although she was certain that a third body—that of the autoharp player—must be hidden somewhere in the church, she couldn’t bring that up without something more than a dream to explain her conviction.

“However, we haven’t come up completely empty,” Spelling broke into her thoughts, drawing an evidence bag from his pocket with a flourish.”Inside was a gold ring, its luster long faded.“One of my men found this while examining the hiding place of the body you discovered in the closet of the Sunday School room.”Although his tone was matter-of-fact, Jenna detected a note of excitement under the professional veneer.This was a clue, tangible and potentially pivotal.

Jenna leaned closer as he held it up to the light.“Purdue University,” she observed, reading the inscription.“Class of 1970.”

“Any name or initials engraved inside?”she asked Spelling,

“No, it hasn’t been personalized.But I think that a ring like this, from that period of time, is likely to be rare enough around here that we’ll be able to track down who it belonged to.”

“Good work, Chad,” Frank said, patting Spelling’s shoulder.“You said it was inside the wall with the body?”

“That’s right,” Spelling stood straight as he reported, “We found it when we cleaned out the space.According to Dr.Stark’s estimate of that death, the ring was left in the wall before Father Walsh was ever appointed here.”

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Jenna peered at the ring closely. “Maybe the killer took it off to keep it from getting damaged while he was getting ready to put up the drywall, then forgot it when he sealed up the opening.”

“My guess exactly,” Spelling said. “And after he sealed it up, he didn’t want to tear it open again to get the ring back. I had one of my troopers ask Sister Agnes Kendrick if she knew of a Purdue graduate from her early days in the Parish, but she didn’t know of anyone. Of course, she admitted, she just might not remember.”

“Do you think the ring will have held prints?” Jenna asked.

“We’ve handled it carefully,” Spelling assured her. “But we won’t know about prints until we run it through the lab. I’m going to have one of my men take it there. I’m glad to have the chance to show it to you first.”

Jenna pulled out her phone and opened the evidence bag enough to snap pictures of the ring. She studied the photos for a moment, her mind already sifting through potential implications. “This could be a significant lead,” she mused aloud. “It might help us identify our killer or at least narrow down our suspect pool.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Spelling agreed, as unruffled as his uniform. “We’ll be running the ring’s details through our databases, see if we can find any connections to Trentville or the surrounding areas.”

The discovery felt to Jenna like a key, but what door might it open? It could have belonged to the killer they were looking for, but there were other possibilities. Might the ring have been left with the body to implicate someone else? Or even put there as

a message?

Frank asked with an undertone of concern. “What’s your next move, Chad?”

“Honestly, Frank, I’m starting to think we’ve hit a dead end here,” Spelling admitted, his voice low and tinged with exhaustion. “We’ve searched this place top to bottom. I’m starting to doubt that there are any more bodies in this building, which I guess is good news of a sort. I’m inclined to wrap up our efforts here tonight and not resume tomorrow.”

“Colonel,” Jenna objected, “I really think we should continue the search. I believe there’s more to be found here.” She met Spelling’s gaze, hoping her earnestness would communicate the urgency she felt without betraying the supernatural nature of her insights.

Spelling regarded her with a mixture of respect and sympathy, the lines in his face deepening. “I understand, Sheriff. But we have to be realistic. We’ve been using ground-penetrating radar, thermal imaging, and good old-fashioned elbow grease to search every nook and cranny of this place.”

With a wave of his hand, he indicated the entirety of the church beyond the sacristy door.

“We’ve checked the nave, the choir loft, the confessionals, several offices, even the crawl spaces under the floors. I have some people going through pew by pew just in case anything useful turns up there. We still have a storeroom and some utility spaces to search, and we’ll stay with it until we’ve covered them. But at some point, we have to accept that we’ve found all there is to find.”

Jenna started to protest. There had to be a way to steer this search toward the third body without revealing the source of her conviction. But Jake’s hand on her arm

halted her. He gave her a small, reassuring squeeze. "We should take a break," he suggested gently. "Get some food, clear our heads. We've been at this for too many hours."

She nodded reluctantly. Perhaps stepping away would grant her a new perspective. "You're right," she told Jake. "Frank, do you want to join us for a late lunch?"

Frank shook his head, his gaze lost somewhere in the middle distance. "I don't have much of an appetite, to be honest. If it's alright with you, Chad, I'd like to stay and help with the rest of the search."

"Of course, Frank. We'd be glad to have you," Spelling responded, his face brightening at the prospect of his old friend's assistance. As they prepared to leave St. Michael's behind, Spelling called after them. "Sheriff, before you go – any news on identifying our victims?"

Jenna paused, weighing the decision to share. "We believe the more recent victim might be Caroline Weber, a woman who disappeared from Trentville in 1989. She would be the one found in that closet with ring. We're still working on identifying the older victim," she disclosed.

"Good work. Keep me posted on any developments," Spelling replied.

"I will. And let us know if anything changes here," Jenna said, her tone final. Jake was right, they needed to regroup, reassess their strategy. She offered a brief nod to Spelling before leaving the sacristy.

As Jenna and Jake stepped out of the church building, she felt the late afternoon breeze whisper against her skin. Slipping into the driver's seat of her patrol car, she glanced one last time at the bell tower slicing into the dimming sky.

“Ezra Shore’s body is still in the church somewhere, Jake,” she said quietly, a statement of fact rather than a speculation. “I’m just sure of it.”

Jake nodded, his expression grave. “Of course I believe you. But we can’t exactly tell Spelling about your dream. We’ll have to find another way to convince him to keep searching. Or figure out how to find it ourselves.”

Jenna turned the key in the ignition, the hum of the engine breaking the heavy silence between them. The dashboard clock read 4:47 PM, the digits a grim reminder that daylight was slipping away just as swiftly as the chance to continue their search for answers. She felt Jake’s gaze on her, patient and expectant.

With a decisive motion, Jenna shifted the car into drive, and the car rolled smoothly out of the parking lot, past the weathered sign marking the entrance to St. Michael’s. Jenna kept her eyes on the road ahead, but her thoughts lingered on the church they left behind, its stone facade a mute guardian of secrets she was determined to unearth.

The ring, the carillon, David Cavanaugh’s strange behavior—each element was a fragment of some larger enigma. She pondered over the old gold ring, surely a possible link to a past that refused to stay buried. Could the ring lead them to the killer, or was it merely another dead end in a maze of false leads?

“Anything we missed might as well be invisible without the right pair of eyes,” Jenna admitted.

Her grip tightened around the steering wheel. Ideas churned in her mind, each as elusive as the wisp of a dream upon waking. She needed concrete evidence, something irrefutable that could sway even the most skeptical mind.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Jenna glanced around the Sunflower Café, its walls adorned with artwork and photographs capturing moments of Trentville's history. The café buzzed with the subdued energy of locals enjoying their afternoon respite, oblivious to the undercurrents swirling just beneath the surface of their quaint town. As she took in the sight of neighbors sharing gossip and teenagers laughing over milkshakes, she found it hard to reconcile the beauty of the town with the ugliness they were uncovering.

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Across from her, Jake took a disinterested bite of his sandwich, then set it down and lifted his coffee mug. Jenna reached for her own mug, cradling it in her hands. She gazed into the liquid, hoping for a flicker of insight, a whisper that might guide her to the answers they desperately needed. But the coffee remained still, offering no revelations.

“Focus,” she told herself. Even considering the input from her occasional lucid dreams, Jenna had always relied heavily on observation and intellect to solve cases, but this one was begging for supernatural insights to identify ghosts and their killers. However, Jenna’s gift was as unpredictable as it was extraordinary, and she could not summon the dead on demand.

Jake shifted in his seat, breaking the silence. “I’m worried about Frank. He seemed pretty shaken up earlier.”

“I can understand his feelings of guilt over Caroline Weber’s fate,” she sighed, absently tracing the rim of her coffee mug. “He wishes he’d pushed Sheriff Pulliam harder to investigate her disappearance.”

“But he was just a young deputy then,” Jake protested.

Jenna nodded, acknowledging the truth in Jake’s words, even as she understood that guilt was a beast not easily tamed by reason or time. Frank had seen too much, lost too much, to let go of the past so readily.

“Guilt isn’t always rational,” Jenna said. “Anyway, I’m sure helping Colonel Spelling in his team is the best thing he can do right now. It’s better than sitting at home

alone.”

Another quiet pause settled between them, filled only by the soft clink of utensils and the distant murmur of other diners. Then Jake’s voice cut through her introspection, “Any ideas?”

She looked up, meeting his eyes. He knew her well, understood the inner workings of her mind and the burden of her abilities. She was aware of the growing connection between them, a bond forged in the fires of shared purpose and unspoken understanding—and undeniable attraction. Yet she held herself back, her emotional barriers as much a part of her as her gift of communing with spirits. Until the ghosts of her past were laid to rest, she could not fully embrace the present.

“Nothing yet,” Jenna admitted, setting the mug down with a faint clink against the table. She took a deliberate bite of her sandwich, tasting nothing. As she chewed, she sifted through the swirling mass of facts and hypotheses. “Let’s try to profile our killer or killers,” she suggested, setting her food down and meeting Jake’s gaze. “What do we know for certain?”

“Both victims were singers,” he said, his voice taking on an edge of excitement amidst the weariness. “The killer – or killers – must be obsessed with singing voices.”

“Exactly,” Jenna murmured. “And we do have one thing to follow up on. If we find the owner of that Purdue class ring from 1970, we’re likely to have someone who’s involved in this death. That is, if the ring wasn’t left there as a distraction.”

“But how many killers are we dealing with here?” Jake asked. “These murders span three decades. We’ve been considering the possibility of some kind of ‘legacy’ theme – a younger murderer following in his predecessor’s footsteps.”

The thought sent a shiver through Jenna, despite the warmth of the café. Trentville,

with its sleepy streets and close-knit community, was not immune to the corruption of human nature. The idea of a legacy killer, of violence passed down like some twisted inheritance, unsettled Jenna more than she cared to admit.

“True,” she mused, casting her mind over the facts they had gathered. “But what about David Cavanaugh? Could he be the sole killer? He’s old enough to have committed all the murders, including his sister Rachel’s.”

Jake nodded slowly, “It’s possible,” he muttered, “but remember the date on that class ring – 1970. I suppose David could have graduated from Purdue around the age of 30, but it doesn’t seem likely.”

Without another word, Jenna stood up, her movements deliberate. She reached into her wallet and placed a few bills on the table, enough to cover the check and a modest tip. Her eyes met Jake’s, green depths reflecting determination. “We need to pay David Cavanaugh a visit,” she declared. Jake nodded, ready to follow her lead.

The drive to David’s house was brief. As Jenna navigated the familiar streets of Trentville, Jake remained silent beside her, his gaze fixed on the passing scenery, likely processing the implications of their next move.

Jenna pulled up in front of the bungalow, the quaintness of its exterior doing little to soften the chill of anticipation that crept up her spine. The well-manicured lawn and flowerbeds spoke of an owner who cared for appearances, yet Jenna knew all too well how deceiving appearances could be. She and Jake exited the vehicle, walked up to the front door, and rang the doorbell. David’s prompt response and genteel greeting caught her off guard.

“Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins,” he said, his voice betraying none of the nervousness or guilt Jenna had anticipated in a suspect. “What brings you here?”

“Mr.Cavanaugh,” she began, her voice steady despite the brief flicker of hesitation, “we have a few questions about the recent discoveries at St.Michael’s.”

“Of course,” David acquiesced with a nod, moving aside to grant them entry.

The detectives stepped into the living room, a space so fastidiously maintained it seemed more like a showpiece than a dwelling.Jenna observed the symmetrical arrangement of furniture and absence of stray items.The simplicity of the living space spoke volumes about the man who occupied it, as ordered and controlled as the notes on sheet music.

“Please, have a seat.”

As they settled onto a pristine floral-patterned sofa, Jenna and Jake scanned their surroundings.The living room was immaculate, every surface dusted and polished to a shine.

The mantelpiece held an array of family photographs, each meticulously aligned and dust-free.The faces smiling back at her from behind the glass were frozen in happier times, unaware of the cloud that now hung over the Cavanaugh name.Her attention shifted to an upright piano nestled in the corner of the room, its polished surface reflecting the fading light.On top, sheet music was stacked with precision, revealing a life steeped in melody and order.

David Cavanaugh had seated himself in an armchair facing them, his posture erect, his hands neatly folded in his lap.He cleared his throat softly before speaking, his voice carrying a note of sorrow that didn’t escape Jenna’s acute senses.

“I must apologize for my abrupt departure from the Parish Hall earlier,” David began, the edges of his words colored with regret.“Mention of my sister Rachel tends to upset me, even after all these years.”

Jenna offered a nod of understanding. She heard sincerity in his tone and recognized the shared experience of loss—unless his seeming sincerity was a ruse. It was a feeling she knew all too well—the void left by her own sister's absence.

“We understand, Mr. Cavanaugh,” she replied. “Loss is never easy to deal with.” She observed him closely, seeking any telltale sign that might betray his true feelings. But his face revealed nothing beyond what he had just told them.

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“Thank you, Sheriff Graves,” David replied. “It’s something one never truly gets over.”

“Of course, Mr. Cavanaugh,” she replied quietly, maintaining her composed exterior. “Let’s talk about the recent incidents at the church.”

“You’ve come to tell me that one of the bodies was Rachel’s, haven’t you?” David’s statement startled both Jenna and Jake with its directness.

“We haven’t determined that for certain yet,” Jake replied, his tone cautious, measured. David leaned forward, his eyes alight with a fervor. The intensity in his gaze seemed to pull at Jenna, beckoning her into the depths of his certainty.

“But I’m sure of it. One of those bodies is my sister. And what’s more, I know who killed her.”

“Mr. Cavanaugh, if you have information about these crimes, you need to tell us.” Jenna watched as a strange calm enveloped David, a stark contrast to the tempest of emotions she’d expected. He nodded, his demeanor composed, as though he had been waiting decades to unburden himself of this knowledge.

“It was Kip Selves,” David stated with the certainty of someone who has held onto a secret for far too long. “The man who automated the carillon.”

Jenna leaned forward slightly, her fingers intertwined to mask the slight tremble she felt at the gravity of the conversation. “What makes you think that?” she asked.

“Kip was...obsessed with Rachel,” David explained, strain evident in his voice as if the memories caused him physical discomfort. “Especially her voice. He would come to every church service, every choir practice, just to hear her sing. It wasn’t healthy.”

Jenna noted the pained look that crossed David’s features, the clench of his jaw, the subtle narrowing of his eyes. She filed away each detail meticulously, aware that each nuance could be a piece to the puzzle they were desperately trying to solve.

“Obsession can be a powerful motive,” Jenna remarked, sensing the depth of the old wound she had inadvertently prodded.

Before she could delve deeper into David’s assertion, Jake cut in, skepticism lacing his tone. “And you believe he killed the other victim as well?”

David responded with an emphatic nod, his expression unchanging as he faced Jake’s questioning gaze. “I’m certain of it.”

Jenna’s brow furrowed, her analytical mind dissecting the information laid out before them. She posed the question that had been nagging at her since David’s first declaration. “Mr. Cavanaugh, when did Kip Selves die?”

“1960,” came David’s prompt reply, his voice devoid of hesitation. “Just a few days after Rachel disappeared. He had a stroke at the age of forty.”

“Forty,” she repeated quietly. Forty was a young but not unheard-of age for a fatal stroke. But there was a serious flaw in David’s accusation.

“That doesn’t add up,” Jake protested, and Jenna nodded in agreement.

“Mr. Cavanaugh,” Jenna said firmly, “if Kip Selves died in 1960, he couldn’t possibly have killed the other victim. That murder happened many years later.” She watched



David closely, searching for any telltale signs of deception or evasion.

But David's expression held no trace of doubt, his certainty as unwavering as the structure of the church whose presence seemed to fall over this very conversation. He didn't falter, didn't waver. It was as if the timeline discrepancies that puzzled Jenna and Jake were inconsequential to him. He just sat smiling, not withdrawing a word he had spoken.

"David," she insisted gently, yet firmly, "logic dictates that what you're suggesting isn't possible. We need facts, evidence. Not just convictions."

The room remained still, the late afternoon light filtering through the curtains. Jenna's intuition, that unexplainable sense that guided her through many a case, buzzed at the back of her mind, alerting her to tread carefully.

David leaned forward in his armchair, the fervent gleam in his eyes brightening as if fueled by some inner fire. "Oh, but it was still Kip Selves," he stated, his confidence unsettling.

Jake's skepticism had not abated, and he leaned forward, mirroring David's posture. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he said. "How could Kip Selves have committed a murder decades after his death?"

David's next words were delivered with a chilling calm. "Because," he began, leaning closer, his voice barely above a whisper, "ever since his death, Kip Selves has been haunting St. Michael's Church. The last victim was killed by his ghost."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jenna observed David Cavanaugh closely, noting the way his eyes avoided direct contact. Was it the sign of a guilty conscience or the mark of a man grappling with

unseen demons?

The possibility of David leveraging local lore to distract them was not lost on her, nor was the chance that grief had frayed the edges of his reality. But she had another, more unsettling thought—what if there was truth of some kind in his supernatural story? Given her own experiences with the dead, how could she deny that dim possibility?

“Mr. Cavanaugh, why do you believe Kip Selves’ ghost is haunting St. Michael’s?” Jenna’s voice cut through the quiet. She leaned forward, her green eyes fixed on the elderly man before her.

David sat with his hands clasped tightly together as if in prayer or perhaps in an attempt to steady himself. His age-lined face held a seriousness that hinted at deep convictions rather than fanciful fabrications.

“I sense his presence there constantly,” David murmured, the words slipping out like tendrils of mist. “And I’ve seen him, Sheriff. More than once.”

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The way he spoke, with such quiet certainty, piqued Jenna's interest despite her skepticism. It was not the timbre of a man seeking attention or concocting lies. This was genuine belief. The sense of kinship she felt with David in that moment was unexpected, an acknowledgment that sometimes the search for facts led down paths not found on any map. But as a law officer, she couldn't afford the luxury of indulging in ghost stories. Not when there were real victims and a killer at large.

"You've seen him how, Mr. Cavanaugh?" she pressed gently, aware that she was treading on delicate ground.

David took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling with the effort of someone carrying a great burden. "Dim figures," he began, the words spilling out in a rush now, "glimpsed in the corner of my eye during late-night practice sessions."

He inhaled and exhaled sharply.

"And footsteps," he continued, "echoing in empty corridors when no one else is around." His hands unfolded and gestured helplessly, as if trying to grasp the intangible. "The feeling of being watched when I should be alone—it never leaves me, not even when I step outside the sanctuary."

Jenna knew that St. Michael's Catholic Church was an old building, filled with the echoes of its past—a perfect breeding ground for tales of hauntings, especially in a small town like Trentville, where legends and history intertwined seamlessly.

"Go on," she encouraged, her tone neutral. There was more here than simple superstition, she felt it—a clue perhaps, hidden beneath the layers of folklore and

fear.

“I believe Kip is being punished,” he said, eyes alight with fervor. “Punished for automating the carillon, for silencing the human touch that brought music to our town, and for killing my sister as an act of vengeance against those who love music. He’s not allowed permanent rest.”

She asked, “And you believe that although Kip died in 1960, he has returned to kill again?”

“I think he never left.” David leaned forward, eyes locked with hers. “He’s condemned to wander the church for as long as it stands. And it seems that even death itself has not stopped him from murdering at least one more time.”

Jake’s chair creaked as he shifted, his voice cutting through the mounting tension. “That’s quite a leap, Mr. Cavanaugh. Are you suggesting a ghost is responsible for these crimes?”

“Let’s stay focused on the tangible,” Jenna suggested firmly, her voice a rudder steering them back to reality. “We need to understand the connections between the victims and the church—ghost or no ghost.”

Jenna regarded the elderly man with a mixture of skepticism and curiosity. There was an earnestness to his belief that didn’t look like simple delusion, yet what he proposed defied all logic.

“Mr. Cavanaugh,” she said, “you’ve made some serious allegations about a presence at St. Michael’s Church. But why would Selves’ ghost kill again after all these years?”

David’s expression softened, sorrow etching deeper lines into his weathered face. “I don’t know,” he admitted, looking down at his hands before meeting her gaze once

more. "Perhaps his hunger for beautiful voices couldn't be sated with just one life. Or maybe...maybe he's trying to create a choir of the dead."

Silence settled in the room. David seemed to sense his guests' discomfort and leaned forward, his eyes intense behind the glint of fading sunlight on his spectacles.

"I realize this complicates your investigation, Sheriff," he said, his voice barely above a whisper now. "How does one bring a ghost to justice? Perhaps it would be better to speak with Father Walsh," David suggested, his gaze unwavering. "To request an exorcism. It's long overdue, in my opinion."

Jenna nodded slowly, not in agreement but in acknowledgment of his conviction.

"Thank you, Mr. Cavanaugh," Jenna said as she stood up, signaling the end of their meeting. "We'll take everything you've said under consideration."

Jenna extended a hand to him, her touch light but firm. "Mr. Cavanaugh, we appreciate your cooperation." Her voice held the practiced neutrality honed from years in law enforcement, though her mind churned with the sheer strangeness of David's tale.

Stepping out into the fading warmth of the day, Jenna and Jake moved towards their cruiser. Jake waited until they were seated inside the relative privacy of the car before he broke the silence, turning towards Jenna with furrowed brows.

"What do you make of that? Is he genuinely delusional, or is this some kind of elaborate misdirection?"

Jenna turned the ignition key, the engine's rumble a grounding contrast to the bizarre notions still echoing in her head. She fixed her gaze on the rearview mirror, seeing more than the dusty road behind them. "I'm not sure, Jake. But one thing's clear - we need to find out more about Kip Selves."

“Are you sure he even had anything to do with all this?” Jake said, his tone laced with skepticism. “David’s story could be a way to throw us off track. It might just be a distraction from his own guilt.”

“That’s true. But if there’s even a sliver of truth in anything he said ...”

Jenna paused for a moment, weighing her choices carefully.

“Then we investigate,” Jenna cut in, her decision swift. “We look into every angle, no matter how unlikely it seems.”

“Even ghosts?” Jake asked, the corner of his mouth twitching in a half-smile.

“Even ghosts,” Jenna affirmed, though her practical nature wrestled with the notion. “We need to revisit Kip Selves’ history.”

“Alright,” Jake conceded, glancing at Jenna with a new level of respect. “Where do we start?”

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“Old records, interviews with anyone who knew him, worked with him, argued with him, anything that sheds light on who Kip Selves really was,” Jenna said, her words clipped and focused. “And if we’re lucky, we’ll find our connection to the murders.”

They drove on, the brick facade of the Sheriff’s Office building coming into view. The truth lay somewhere within the tangled web of facts and folklore, and Jenna Graves was determined to uncover it.

Jenna maneuvered the cruiser into its familiar space beside the Sheriff’s Office, the bricks of the building flushed with the warm glow of the descending sun. The day had already stretched her mind in unimaginable directions, and now, as they strode through the doorway, Jenna anchored herself to the task at hand: mining the past for clarity.

In her office, the hum of outdated fluorescent lights filled the air, casting a sterile light over her desk. She logged onto her computer, drumming against the top of her desk as the Trentville Dispatch archives loaded. Jake leaned over her shoulder, watching the screen with an intensity that mirrored her own.

“Here we go,” Jenna muttered as she navigated through the digital records, her eyes scanning for any mention of Kip Selves.

The first article to catch her attention heralded the opening of Trentville’s inaugural electronics repair shop, operated by none other than Kip Selves. The piece described him as a visionary, a man who recognized the burgeoning need for such services as radios became a staple in the homes of Trentville’s citizens.

“Looks like Selves was quite the entrepreneur,” Jake observed, his tone a mix of admiration and skepticism.

“Seems so,” Jenna replied, her gaze still fixed on the screen. But her detective’s instincts prodded at her. It wasn’t just Selves’ business acumen that interested her, but how his story of progress might intertwine with grim tales lurking beneath the town’s surface.

As the dimness of evening began to creep into the corners of the room, Jenna felt the weight of the day’s revelations press upon her. Yet, a spark ignited within her—a flame fueled by curiosity and the unyielding drive to seek answers. With each click and scroll, the pieces of Kip Selves’ life during those decisive years came into sharper focus, revealing the blueprint of a man whose legacy endured far beyond his mortal days.

The room was quiet save for the soft clicking of the keys as she navigated the digital archives of the Trentville Dispatch. An image loaded on the screen suddenly gripped Jenna’s attention.

“Jake, look at this,” Jenna called out.

It was a black-and-white photograph accompanying a human interest story from decades past. A young boy stood beside Kip Selves, both of them surrounded by the innards of radios and other electronics. The caption identified the boy as Larry Clark, Selves’s protégé. Jenna’s pulse quickened as she recalled seeing Larry just last evening, a fixture of St. Michael’s Church, his silver hair now betraying the years that had passed since the photo was taken.

“Is that Larry from the church?” Jake peered over her shoulder, squinting at the screen.



“Yes,” Jenna confirmed, a chill coursing through her despite the warm July air outside. “He was Selves’ apprentice back then.”

“He looks young. No more than ten. It must have been exciting for him to be in the middle of all that new technology.”

Jenna thought of the man she’d watched tune the pianos at countless community events, whose gentle laughter had so often filled the rooms he entered.

“Larry has always been part of this town,” Jenna murmured. “I grew up watching him work. He’s...he’s kind.” Then she thought of her own years as deputy sheriff, learning from the man who was still her mentor. “But if the man he was apprenticed to ... if Kip Selves was in fact a killer...”

“You’re thinking that could have affected Larry?” Jake’s question was laden with doubt. “That he could have followed up with murders of his own? But then what about the effect Selves had on David Cavanaugh if he knew or suspected ... ?”

Jenna heard David Cavanaugh’s words about Selves again in her mind: “Dim figures ... glimpsed in the corner of my eye.” Was David deluded, his consciousness twisted by death and pain? Could that have turned him into a killer? Or had it merely left him prone to flights of superstitious dread?

At the moment, it seemed to Jenna that they two possible suspects for the murders of Ezra Shore and Caroline Weber—David Cavanaugh and Larry Clark.

“The ring should tell us,” she muttered, the clack of keys punctuating the somber silence in her office.

Finally an old Purdue University yearbook loaded on the screen, and Jenna found a series of group photos of the class of 1970. Rows of black and white portraits stared

back at them, young faces frozen in time. She scanned the page until her eyes settled on one group in particular. The caption underneath read: 'Electrical Engineering'.

"Jake," Jenna says, her voice barely above a whisper, "look at who attended Purdue University and graduated in 1970."

Jake gasped aloud at the face and the name that appeared amid the students.

"So it's him," Jake said.

"That's what we're going to find out," Jenna replied.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Jenna exhaled slowly, her breath stirring the loose strands of chestnut hair framing her face. The lines under her eyes betrayed her fatigue, but the determined glint within those vibrant greens remained undimmed. The face staring back at her from the yearbook was a man who was not only part of Trentville's community but also woven into her own childhood memories.

"That wouldn't have been my first guess," Jake commented.

Jenna looked again at the photo of the ring they had found in the cavity with Caroline Weber's remains—the heavy gold band, now dulled by time and tarnished by awful deeds, the Purdue University crest and the date. The connection was undeniable.

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She reached for the phone, hesitating above the keypad as though gathering strength. With a decisive press, she dialed Judge Marianne Purcell's number, the beeps echoing slightly in the quiet room.

The line crackled thrice before a response came through. "Judge Purcell," came the crisp, authoritative voice on the other end.

"Judge, it's Sheriff Graves." Jenna's words spilled out, each one laced with the urgency of their situation. "We've uncovered something critical in our investigation of the bodies that were found at St. Michael's Church."

Jenna continued, succinctly laying out the sequence of events that had led them to this moment. She recounted how the ring that had been found walled in with a murder victim matched the graduation year of Trentville's own piano tuner. "Larry Clark graduated from Purdue then, and no one else from that time has been linked to this town."

A pause stretched out on the other end of the line, punctuated only by the low hum of static. When Judge Purcell finally spoke, her voice was laced with disbelief. "Larry Clark? Our Larry Clark?" she echoed, as if trying to reconcile the man she knew with the image Jenna had painted. "The man who tunes my piano twice a year?"

"I'm afraid so, Your Honor," Jenna said. "Larry Clark has had unrestricted access to St. Michael's for decades. The man is practically part of the woodwork there. And he's likely the only person from his graduating class who settled here. This isn't just coincidence—it's a pattern."

Jenna paused, allowing the judge a moment to digest the information.

“Given his ties to the church and the unique identifier of the class ring,” Jenna concluded, “we believe we have sufficient grounds for both a search and arrest warrant for Mr.Clark.”

The line was quiet once more, and Jenna knew that behind that silence, the wheels of justice were beginning to turn.Jenna sat motionless, not even daring to glance at Jake as they awaited the judge’s decision.The silence stretched, taut as a wire, until finally, the judge’s voice broke through.

“I agree, Sheriff Graves,” said Judge Purcell, her tone decisive.“This evidence, while circumstantial, is compelling enough to warrant further investigation.I’ll have the warrants drawn up and faxed to your office within the next few minutes.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Jenna replied, her voice steady but laced with a relief that unfurled within her chest.She hung up the phone, its click resounding like a gavel in the quiet of her office.

She turned to Jake, whose expectant gaze met hers.“We’re a go.Let’s gather the team.”

Jake nodded, his expression solemn, understanding the gravity of their next steps.Without another word, Jenna reached for the intercom button.“Officers Barton, Tebbe, Reeves, Chen,” she called out, her voice echoing slightly through the speaker system.“Report to the briefing room immediately.Be ready to move.”

“What about Colonel Spelling?”Jake asked.“We should let him know about this development.”

“You’re right,” Jenna agreed, already dialing the Colonel’s number.

“Colonel Spelling, it’s Sheriff Graves,” Jenna said when he answered, her voice betrayed no hint of her fatigue. She relayed the connection they’d made, the slender thread tying Larry Clark, a man who had woven himself into the fabric of Trentville, to their case. She also said that they’d tentatively identified the earlier of the two bodies as Rachel Cavanaugh, who had disappeared in 1960.

On the other end of the line, the Colonel absorbed the information with the quiet focus typical of his military precision. “Good work, Sheriff,” he replied after a momentary pause that allowed for the gravity of the revelation to settle in the air between them. “Are your officers in need of assistance for the arrest?”

“I appreciate the offer, Colonel, but I think my team can handle it. We’ll keep you updated on any developments.”

As the line went dead, the fax machine stirred to life, churning out page after page. Jenna plucked the warrants from the tray, eyes scanning the legal jargon that Judge Purcell has authorized. Each word was a seal of approval, a permission slip to delve deeper into the underbelly of Trentville’s mystery.

She and Jake moved together out of her office and to the briefing room. The fluorescent lights cast an artificial glow on the faces of Officers Gary Barton, Rob Tebbe, Tom Reeves, and Sarah Chen. They sat with straight spines and focused expressions, ready for Jenna’s guidance and orders.

Jenna stood at the head of the table, her eyes methodically sweeping over the faces of her officers as she filled them in on the warrants and her intentions. It was also imperative to remind them of the delicacy required.

“Remember,” she told them, “Larry Clark has been a respected member of this community for decades. We need to handle this with sensitivity and professionalism.” She paused, ensuring she had their undivided attention. “Our goal is

to bring him in for questioning and conduct a thorough search of his property. We're not making any final assumptions about his guilt or innocence at this point."

The four officers exchanged quick, uncertain glances before focusing their attention on their sheriff again. Then their nods came almost in unison, a nonverbal pact sealed among them. They would proceed with caution, but also with an unyielding pursuit of justice.

Jenna watched them, her emerald eyes reflecting their shared determination, tempered by the knowledge that every step they took from here on out could alter the fabric of their small town. This investigation had curled and twisted like the back roads of Genesius County, leading them to a suspect intertwined with the community's identity.

"Prepare for a late night," she told them.

The officers acknowledged the order with curt nods, their professional masks firmly in place as they braced themselves for what was to come. Jenna watched them for a moment, appreciating their readiness, before gesturing towards the door.

"Let's move out," she instructed, leading the way into the hushed corridors of the Genesius County Sheriff's Building.

As they filed out, Jenna felt the weight of responsibility settle heavy on her shoulders. Her mind replayed memories of Larry's kind demeanor against the stark backdrop of the evidence they'd uncovered. It was a discordant melody that she still couldn't quite reconcile.

Larry Clark was more than a name on a list; he was a fixture in the lives of Trentville's residents, including her own. He'd been part of her childhood soundtrack, tuning the Graves family piano with a meticulous ear for harmony. With a last glance

at the now vacant seats of the briefing room, Jenna turned to leave, acutely aware of the paradox of her role—protector and disruptor, bound by duty to follow where the truth led, no matter how it might unravel the past.

Outside, the night air was thick with mid-July humidity, wrapping around Jenna like a warm, damp cloth. She breathed deeply, trying to calm the storm of thoughts swirling in her head. The moon hung low in the sky, casting an eerie glow over the streets of Trentville as Jenna and Jake made their way to her cruiser. Jenna slipped into the driver's seat, the familiar grip of the steering wheel grounding her. Beside her, Jake settled into the passenger seat, his presence a quiet reassurance.

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The four other officers piled into two other patrol cars, ready to follow. As the three vehicles ate up the miles to Larry Clark's house, Jenna felt the final barrier of doubt crumble within her. There was no turning back now. Jenna gripped the steering wheel. This was it—the precipice of revelation.

They drove in silence, the night enveloping them as they made their way down the winding road toward Larry Clark's house. The beams of their headlights cut through the dark, symbols of their intent to illuminate the hidden stories of Trentville. Jenna's mind churned with the implications of what they were about to do. Confronting Larry Clark meant uprooting the life of a man she had known since childhood, a man who had provided the soundtrack to many of Trentville's milestones with the melodies from well-tuned pianos.

As the distance closed between them and their destination, Jenna couldn't escape the sensation that they were about to cross an irreversible threshold. This arrest would reverberate through the very soul of the town.

As the lights of Larry Clark's house came into view, Jenna steeled herself. The two patrol cars rolled to a stop, and the team got out quietly. The night air was thick with the scent of summer, a reminder that life continued its relentless march even as they prepared to confront the unthinkable. Jenna glanced over the house that was their target. Everything seemed quiet, peaceful.

She gave her team specific instructions: "Jake and I will approach the front door. Rob, Tom, you'll cover the back. Sarah, I want you positioned outside the workshop; he spends most of his time there. If he runs, he won't get far."



With that, they moved forward to confront a killer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Larry Clark's house was a modest one-story structure with weathered siding and a shingled roof that had seen better days. A porch light was on above the front door.

"Looks like he's home," Jenna murmured, indicating Larry's silver sedan.

She looked at her team, noting the grim resolve on each face. "Let's go," she said softly.

They spread out according to her instructions: two headed around the house to cover the back entrance, and another moved toward the workshop that was off to one side. Officer Tebbe fell into place behind Jenna and Jake.

At the front door, Jenna pressed the bell, the chime echoing hollowly inside the house. She leaned closer to the doorframe.

"This is Sheriff Graves with the Genesius County Sheriff's Department," she called out, her voice clear and authoritative. Silence greeted them, no shuffle of feet or murmur of a voice from within.

"Mr. Clark, open up. We need to talk to you," Jenna tried again after a moment's pause, tension tightening her shoulders. Still, no response came. She exchanged a glance with Jake, seeing her own frustration mirrored in his eyes.

"Something doesn't feel right," she murmured to him, her intuition twitching like a live wire beneath her skin.

"Agreed," Jake said quietly, his hand instinctively resting on the service pistol at his

hip.

“Let’s prepare to breach,” Jenna announced. She texted the other members of the team: “No response, we’re going in now, stay alert.”

“Officer Tebbe,” Jenna commanded, “use your lock pick. We’re going in quietly.”

Rob Tebbe, a lanky officer with nimble fingers well-suited for delicate tasks, nodded and approached the door. With practiced ease, he knelt and worked the kit, his movements precise and fluid.

Finally, with a soft click, the door yielded. Jenna stepped across the threshold first, her senses heightened, every nerve attuned to the environment. Only silence met them.

“We’re going to do a search,” Jenna told her team. “But be on guard.”

They dispersed into separate quarters of the house, meticulously rummaging through closets, cautiously sliding open drawers, every nook and cranny examined under the penetrating glow of their flashlights.

It wasn’t long before Jenna heard the distinctive voice of Officer Tebbe from a nearby room.

“Sheriff, you better see this,” he called out, an edge of uncertainty in his tone.

She moved swiftly, Jake close behind, until they reached the cramped space that Tebbe had claimed. On the wall opposite them hung four picture frames, regimented in their alignment, and each bordered by a black cloth drape. Three frames were filled with photographs, faces captured in still life, their eyes seemingly following Jenna as she approached. The fourth frame, conspicuously void of content, loomed like a silent accusation.

Jenna's breath caught as her gaze fixed on the faces within the frames. They were not strangers; they were the very people that had haunted her dream—Rachel Cavanaugh, Ezra Shore, and Caroline Weber. She'd never met them alive, yet there they were, looking back at her again from beyond the grave.

"Jake," she whispered.

"Your dream," he murmured softly so that only she would hear, the realization dawning on him as well. Jenna nodded, unable to tear her eyes away from the chilling display.

"We know of three who went missing," she said to Jake. "And two of those were found in the church walls. I believe that the third is there too. But the fourth frame ..."

They both understood the implications all too well—the empty frame wasn't just odd, it was an omen. The vacant space amid the portraits of the deceased signaled an intention, a promise yet to be fulfilled. The draped black fabric, mimicking funereal customs, was reserved for a future victim—an anticipatory tombstone, waiting for the face of the next soul unfortunate enough to cross paths with the homeowner.

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“Clark expects to commit another murder,” Jake said. “This is a confession in waiting.”

Jenna nodded. There was no denying the conclusion that Larry Clark, the unassuming piano tuner with the gentle smile, was indeed the one orchestrating this macabre symphony of death.

“Document everything, photograph everything,” Jenna instructed Officer Tebbe, her voice betraying none of the dread that tightened around her heart.

She walked through the house to the back door and asked the other members of her team, “Anything? Seen anyone?”

When they all said no, she told them, “Check inside and behind the workshop and then join us in the house.”

Jenna pulled out her phone, dialing Spelling’s number. The line buzzed briefly before he picked up.

“Spelling, it’s Graves,” she said, her voice steady despite the chilling realization still fresh in her mind.

“What is it?” His voice echoed back, gruff and authoritative over the line.

“We found something at Larry Clark’s place,” Jenna started, her gaze drifting back to the hauntingly empty picture frame draped in black. “Photographs of Cavanaugh and Weber are hanging on his wall. Each one is framed and draped in funeral black. And

there's more."

There was a pause on the other end of the line as Spelling processed this information and waited for Jenna to speak further.

"And?" he prompted after a moment.

"There's a third one," she hesitated, unable to explain how she knew who it was. "I think it might be a man Frank told me about—an autoharp player who disappeared back in the early 70s."

"So you still think there was another victim?" Spelling asked, his voice betraying a hint of skepticism. "Another body in the church?"

"Affirmative," Jenna said, her gaze fixed on the empty frame. "Three portraits, two bodies. An empty picture frame awaiting a fourth victim. It's a pattern."

The silence stretched between them as Spelling digested this new piece of information. Finally, he responded with a resigned sigh, "Alright Graves...we'll keep searching."

"And there's an empty frame," Jenna continued, swallowing hard against the lump forming in her throat. "It's also draped in black. That suggests Clark expects to commit yet another murder. I'll have Officer Tebbe send you the photos."

"Copy that," Spelling answered, his tone now edged with urgency. "Any notion as to his whereabouts?"

"No, but his car is still here."

"Good. On foot, he won't get far. Not without being seen. I'll call in some more of my

men to go looking for him.I'll set up a base of operations at the church.We'll keep searching here for the body, and around town for Larry."

"Agreed," Jenna said, and ended the call.

"Spelling will have the highway patrol canvassing the town," Jenna explained to her team."We have the advantage.He's out there, exposed, while we have numbers and resources."

"Let's make them count," Jake added.

"The Colonel is setting up at St.Michael's," Jenna informed them crisply."It's our base now.We'll coordinate the search from there."

The officers nodded, their postures straightening.They knew the gravity of the situation without a word more.

"Keep looking," she instructed the team, her voice cutting through the silence like a knife."Keep combing through the house.Every drawer, every crevice—anything that could link Clark to the victims, or suggest where he might have gone.Or who he might be after next."

Tebbe acknowledged with a terse, "On it, Sheriff."

The rest moved to resume their meticulous search, their hands donning gloves once again, their eyes sharp for the subtlest clue.

With a last look at the officers, Jenna turned towards the door, Jake falling into step with her.The humid night air hit her face as she stepped onto the porch, the darkness of the small town pressing in around them.Her senses were heightened, attuned to the whispers of Trentville, as if the very atmosphere could betray Clark's whereabouts.

“Let’s get back to the office,” Jenna said to Jake, her voice low but carrying easily in the stillness. “We can pull in a couple more officers for the search. He can’t have gotten far.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

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The killer stood motionless, his spectacled eyes peering from the thicket across the street from his home. He pressed his back against the rough bark of an ancient oak, its gnarled branches casting a web of shadows on the ground. His breathing was shallow and controlled as he observed the officers moving through the rooms where he had lived for many years.

From his concealed vantage point, Larry Clark watched Sheriff Graves and her deputy as they departed, leaving behind a quartet of officers. His eyes narrowed, a predatory focus in his gaze.

He knew precisely what they had found in his home—a sacred space violated now by prying eyes, with four picture frames hung on a wall. Three were occupied by the portraits of those whose voices he still heard resonating through the chambers of St. Michael's Church. And then there was the fourth frame, its vacancy an open invitation to fate. The revelation clenched at his heart with a cold hand—the realization that his role as the orchestrator of the carillon's hidden symphony was nearing its final cadence.

Larry's mind raced back to yesterday, when whispers of the gruesome discoveries in St. Michel's had begun to unsettle Trentville—two bodies unearthed, their resting places within the church walls no longer a secret kept by stones and silence. The realization had struck him like a tolling bell; the law was already striking at the heart of his life's work.

At the previous night's parish meeting, he had gauged the investigation's progress. The sheriff, Jenna Graves, with those eyes that seemed to pierce through lies and facades, had been there, mingling with the concerned townsfolk. Larry had



approached her, feigning the same worry that troubled his neighbors, searching her gaze for any flicker of suspicion. But it wasn't there—not yet.

He'd analyzed the subtle tilt of her head, the way her eyes scanned the crowd—nothing betrayed a direct link to him. For the moment, he was just another face in the sea of parishioners seeking comfort in shared grief. He'd walked away from the conversation with a sense of relief, clinging to the hope that maybe he could remain obscured a while longer.

But now, as he watched those silhouettes through the dimly lit windows of his house, Larry knew that his borrowed time was evaporating. And he could guess what fatal piece of evidence had betrayed him once and for all. It was that class ring he'd foolishly left behind when he'd walled up Caroline Weber in the closet in the Sunday School room. He should have removed it somehow, even if it meant ripping up the drywall, retrieving the ring, and sealing up the enclosure all over again. But now it was too late. His heart slowed to a heavy, methodical thud—a metronome counting down the final moments of his freedom.

He closed his eyes, lost in memory, back to a time when innocence had not yet been consumed by compulsion. He was ten, wide-eyed and eager as he became Kip Selves' apprentice. It was under Kip's tutelage that he first learned the delicate art of tuning pianos, but more sinister lessons as well.

Kip had a theory, one that fascinated young Larry—that the carillon, with its majestic chime, could be revitalized and enhanced with the essence of purity and beauty if the right voices were sealed within the church walls. This belief, whispered in the dusty confines of the repair shop, became a doctrine for Larry, a sacred truth. Kip spoke of it with such conviction that Larry, in his youthful naivety, never questioned the moral precipice they skirted.

The memory of Rachel Cavanaugh crept into Larry's thoughts. She was the first; her

voice had been an angelic lure, leading Kip to fixate on her with an unholy passion. Larry remembered standing unseen, watching Kip's hands move with grim purpose as he wrapped them around Rachel's slender neck. Her eyes, filled with terror, haunted Larry even now.

He had been the dutiful assistant, handing Kip the strips of drywall and joint compound as they worked to conceal Rachel's body in the closet at the back of the nave. The work was methodical, each piece measured and cut with precision—a perverse mimicry of the meticulous care Larry took when tuning the keys of a piano.

As they had plastered over the final seam, sealing Rachel away, Larry had felt the first stirring of what would become his life's obsession. With each layer of spackle, each smoothing stroke of the putty knife, he had been anointed into Kip's legacy.

The deed done, the conspirators had stood in the silence of the church, the weight of their actions settling around them like dust. In the years that followed, as Larry grew from apprentice to master, the vibrant song of the carillon bells served as a constant reminder of the pact he had entered.

The first time he had heard the carillon after Rachel Cavanaugh's death, he recognized a difference in its chimes. They seemed richer, fuller, as if her soprano voice had indeed joined the bells. It had been a sound of pure, resonant beauty, a symphony that validated their sinister deed. Beside him, Kip had nodded in silent approval, their shared secret binding them closer than any spoken word could.

That initial rush, the thrill of their dire sacrament, it was intoxicating. However, within days, that heady triumph had been quashed by Kip's sudden collapse—a stroke that robbed him of speech and movement, leaving him confined to a sterile hospital bed.

Larry remembered sitting beside Kip in the pallid room that smelled of antiseptic and stale air. The man who had been both mentor and co-conspirator could only

communicate through strangled gasps and the desperate flitting of his eyes. But even in his diminished state, Kip had conveyed one final command: find more voices for the carillon. Keep the sound beautiful.

The duty had fallen upon Larry, who straddled the cusp of adulthood with an old man's burden. Twice since then, he had obeyed—Ezra Shore and Caroline Weber had followed Rachel into silence, their unique timbres absorbed by the carillon. Both times, Larry had selected carefully, listened intently, and acted ruthlessly. With each act, he fortified the chorus that sang from the tower, a macabre ensemble known only to him.

A year prior to Caroline's visit, he had hidden a microphone within the nave's intricate woodwork to capture the voices that wandered unwittingly into his domain. She'd entered the church one quiet midnight, her voice rising in a spontaneous rehearsal, unaware that Larry just happened to be haunting the tower on that very night.

With her sultry alto and dreams of blues stardom, her voice had been nothing short of a revelation. The microphone had transmitted every note, every nuance of her performance to Larry high in the tower. He had responded, coaxing the bells to mimic her melody. It was a call she could not ignore.

When curiosity brought her to the spiral staircase that led to him, Larry had been ready. He remembered her ascent, each step resonating like the ticking of destiny's clock. The look of wonder in her eyes when she realized the bells had echoed her song—a look that transformed into horror as he made his move. In the struggle that followed, her voice was extinguished but immortalized as he had desired.

The task completed, he'd secreted her away, adding her to the church's hidden choir along with Ezra, the wandering minstrel he'd ensnared years earlier. In the aftermath, Larry would ascend to the bell tower, listening as the carillon sang with new

depth.He'd heard Ezra's folk strains and Caroline's blues notes weaving into the bronze chorus, enriching the resonance that spilled over Trentville.

For years, he had curated the chorus of the bells, each victim's voice a note in the grand arrangement that only he could hear.But now, as the inevitability of capture loomed over him, a profound sadness washed through Larry's being.Not for the lives he had taken, nor for the punishment that awaited him, but for the music that would cease to evolve under his guardianship.He had kept the promise made to a dying man, but what would become of the carillon's song without him?Who would understand the delicate balance between life and sound as he did?

Yet, a spark of resolve flickered within Larry's spectacled eyes.There was one last task to complete, an act that would ensure his legacy endured beyond the reach of handcuffs and prison bars.His confidence swelled as he considered the third body, still secreted away where prying eyes had yet to intrude.

Larry's anticipation grew.Tonight, he mused, the spirits enshrined within St.Michael's walls would awaken to play their part in the eternal concert.While the town slept unaware, the dead would serenade Trentville once more in a way that even Larry had never before imagined.He, the conductor of the deceased, prepared to cue the opening chord of a spectral recital.

He clutched the old key in his pocket—the one that unlocked a forgotten door—and a faint smile played across his lips.Larry fingered the key in his pocket.The door it unlocked hadn't been opened by anyone for many years now, not even by him.It led into a long-neglected little corridor that connected with the tower.

He hoped his key still worked.With luck and stealth, he ought to be able to enter the tower without anybody noticing.

“Tonight,” he thought, “the dead will make their own music.”And with that cryptic

promise, the old piano tuner slipped away from the oak tree and into the embrace of the night.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

“Larry Clark,” Jenna muttered as she drove her patrol car through the night streets of Trentville. “We know it’s him, but he’s become a ghost.”

“But we’ll get him.” Jake replied. “We have to.”

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Jenna and Jake had joined the town-wide search for Larry hours ago, but so far, neither they nor anybody else on the team had found any sign of him.

“I want to go check in with Colonel Spelling at the church before he wraps up his work there,” Jenna said.

Before Jake could reply, his cellphone buzzed, and he looked at the screen.

“A couple of our guys just texted and said they’d join the search,” Jake said. “But they’re rookies. I should fill them in and get them started. Why don’t you drop me off at my house so I can take my own car? We can join up later.”

It felt odd to Jenna that they wouldn’t be working together for a while, but she did what he asked. She pulled her cruiser up to Jake’s house, the headlights briefly illuminating the familiar facade. The two sat for a moment in the quiet of the car, reluctant to part ways. Then Jake touched her hand once and got out and walked toward his car.

“Stay safe,” Jenna whispered to no one as she drove off, although the plea seemed futile in this game of cat and mouse with a killer.

As Jenna pulled her car up in front of the church, Colonel Spelling’s team could be seen through the open doors, their silhouettes weary from the search that had yielded nothing but despair. Jenna parked and approached just as Spelling gave the order to pack up for the night.

“Colonel,” Jenna called out, her voice cutting through the night’s stillness.

Spelling turned, his face marked with fatigue. “Jenna, I didn’t expect to see you back here tonight.”

“Couldn’t shake the feeling that we’re missing something,” Jenna admitted. “Frank—is he still here?”

“Left about fifteen minutes ago. He’d done all he could for the day. One of my guys drove him home. We still haven’t found anything else here, and I’m going to shut it down for the night. We need to get out on the street and help with the search. Besides,” Spelling added with a dry chuckle, “the dead aren’t going anywhere.”

The remark would have been macabre under any other circumstances, but here, it was a grim acknowledgment of reality. Jenna’s lips tightened into a thin line, recognizing the truth in his words.

“Quite unlike our suspect, who must know lots of places to hide,” Spelling continued, the humor gone from his voice. “Larry Clark’s still out there, and I need to get my whole team out on the street.

“Jake’s getting a couple more of our officers started.”

Spelling looked at her more closely. “You should get some rest, Jenna. We need you sharp. Maybe you should turn in for tonight.”

“Thanks, maybe I will,” Jenna said, although she knew perfectly well she was going to do nothing of the kind.

Spelling led his team out, leaving the sheriff alone in the cavernous space of the nave. As the heavy doors closed behind them, Jenna found herself enveloped in silence, a startling change after the earlier bustle of activity.

The sense of solitude was profound, and for reasons she couldn't fully articulate, Jenna felt a reluctance to leave. It was as if the church itself, with its secrets and somber history, held her tethered to the spot. She couldn't shake the thoughts of David Cavanaugh's claims from her head. He believed the church was haunted by the specter of Kip Selves, an idea she had dismissed as an old man's fancy.

Here with only the silent saints for company, it was almost too easy to imagine a wraith drifting through the arches, a lingering soul caught in the web of its own tragedy. The very air seemed charged with whispers of the past, and Jenna felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air. She knew such thoughts were irrational; superstitions had no place in her line of work. Yet, in the palpable silence of the church, logic seemed to fray around the edges, like the worn pages of an old hymnal.

Continuing her solitary walk, Jenna let the memories of Caroline Weber float into her consciousness. She remembered the vivid dream where Caroline's voice had filled the silence with a deep, soulful blues song. It was strange to think of Caroline, whose life had been cut short so violently, filling the same space Jenna occupied now with music and dreams of stardom.

The urge to sing the blues melody that had haunted her dream rose unbidden within her. The words felt like a key to something locked away, something vital about the darkness that enshrouded the church. With a glance over her shoulder, ensuring she was indeed alone, Jenna hesitantly began to hum the tune, allowing the notes to fill the void.

Her voice, though not trained like Caroline's, carried a raw emotion that resonated off the stones, wrapping around her in an almost tangible embrace. It was an act of remembrance, a tribute to the lost souls who had once filled this space with their own hopes and songs.

With a measured breath, Jenna let the first line of the blues song escape her lips, "I



went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.”

Her voice was a tentative whisper, barely more than a hush against the backdrop of shadows. The words lingered for a moment before an echo returned to her—not from the stone walls, but from above.

She frowned slightly and repeated the line, clearer this time, “I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.” Again, the echo came, a perfect mimicry of her intonation. Jenna’s heart skipped as realization dawned: the carillon bells were echoing the song. It couldn’t be—her rational mind rebelled against the possibility. Yet she couldn’t deny what her ears told her. The metallic resonance of bells reverberated through the church, mimicking her own voice.

Jenna swallowed hard, her pulse quickening. This was no ghost story; there had to be a logical explanation. She summoned Caroline Weber’s rich alto to her mind and began the next line of the haunting melody, “Asked the Lord above ‘Have mercy, save this poor girl, if you please.’” As if summoned by her entreaty, the carillon answered once more, its notes spilling into the night with eerie precision.

The memory of Zach Freeland’s insistence that the carillon had played phrases from Caroline’s favorite blues song on the night of her disappearance sent a shiver down Jenna’s spine. The coincidence was uncanny, almost too much so. Jenna knew the power of dreams and the dead, they had guided her before, but this was reality, tangible and present. The connection between the song and the carillon couldn’t be mere happenstance.

She reached for her phone to call Jake, but she couldn’t bring herself to interrupt whatever was happening. As sheriff, it was her duty to unravel the mysteries that plagued Trentville, and this supernatural occurrence—or clever trick—would not deter her. She needed to find the source of this enigma, to confront whatever or whoever was manipulating the sounds of the carillon. With her weapon in hand, Jenna

steeled herself for the ascent into the bell tower, where the answers—and perhaps the murderer—awaited.

Jenna's hand trembled slightly as she reached for the narrow, creaking stairway that wound its way up into the bell tower. The fleeting thought that it was Kip Selves's specter haunting the carillon sent an involuntary shudder through her. Ghosts weren't something she usually gave credence to, at least not in her waking life. But alone in the church at night, with the ghostly echo of a song connecting the present to a sinister past, even Jenna's rational mind faltered.

"Focus," Jenna whispered to herself, shaking off the irrational fear. "You're the sheriff, not some scared kid." She gripped her service weapon, reassured by its cool metal against her skin. With one last look at the sanctuary below, Jenna started her ascent, the wooden stairs protesting under her determined steps.

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The climb seemed to stretch on, each step echoing in the tight space like a drumbeat in the silence of the night. As Jenna ascended, the carillon began to chime once more, this time resonating with the solemn notes of the Angelus—that call to prayer that was meant only to be played by day. Jenna couldn't suppress a deep shiver of dread and apprehension. It was as if the dead were calling again—this time while she was awake.

It had been years since she first accepted her unusual connection to the other side, and yet she knew better than to dismiss these signs out of hand. They had led her to breakthroughs in cases before. Whoever—or whatever—awaited her in the bell tower, Jenna was resolved to face it head-on, armed with both her weapon and her wits. The melody wrapped around her, a siren's call luring her onward, upward, into the heart of mystery that Trentville concealed behind its small-town facade.

The persistent buzz of her phone was a distant concern for Jenna as she stepped into the carillon room, her attention held by the haunting melody that filled the air. Moonlight filtered through the narrow windows, casting an eerie glow on a figure seated at the keyboard. His back to her, he loomed like a specter in the dimness, unresponsive to her presence.

“Identify yourself,” Jenna's command cut through the music's cadence, authoritative and sharp. There was no movement, no sign that her words had reached him. Frustration knotted in her gut; this silence was an affront, a challenge to her resolve. She advanced, every step measured, weapon drawn but held low, not yet aimed.

Then she saw that his hands weren't even on the keys, which danced away untouched

by human fingers. The keys moved with purpose, plucking out the chiming notes of the Angelus. The very air seemed to thrum with otherworldly energy, but Jenna pushed aside the creeping fear. She would not be swayed by superstition or trickery.

Her foot caught against something soft and yielding, nearly sending her sprawling. Recovering, she looked down to find plastic and linen wadded up at her feet, the same materials used to enshroud the bodies discovered within these hallowed walls. The sight was a visceral punch, dragging her back to the grim reality of her investigation. These remnants were a macabre breadcrumb trail, and she knew they bore significance—a clue or perhaps a trap.

Steadying her nerves, Jenna focused on the task at hand: confronting the figure who defied explanation. It was time to reveal the face of the person who sat so still, strangely joined with the shadows and the endless tolling of the bells.

She stepped cautiously to the side of the seated figure, her service weapon held at the ready. The dim moonlight filtering through the bell tower's windows did little to prepare her for the ghastly sight that awaited her.

Instead of a living, breathing suspect, she found herself staring down at the time-ravaged remains of a corpse.

The desiccated body was dressed in remnants of clothing that might once have been familiar to the townsfolk of Trentville. Its skin, drawn tight over brittle bones, gave the impression of antiquity—a relic hidden away in the hushed confines of St. Michael's. A shiver of realization ran down Jenna's spine. This was no recent death; this was a macabre monument to a crime long past. It was the body they hadn't been able to find, none other but Ezra Shore.

Her thoughts halted abruptly as someone grabbed her from behind, and a cord bit into the flesh of her neck. The cord tightened, strangling air and sound alike, as Jenna

clawed desperately at the garrote locked around her throat. Then, chillingly clear against the strain of her gasping breaths, came a voice both known and feared.

“I never knew you had such a lovely voice, sheriff,” Larry Clark rasped into her ear, his words laced with a perverse admiration. “You’ll work wonders for the bells, just like the others did.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Jake gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white in the dim glow of the dashboard lights. He had left the two recruits he was working with as soon as he heard the haunting phrases from “Crossroad Blues” resonating from the carillon’s chimes. With each note, the urgency to reach St. Michael’s Catholic Church only intensified.

His eyes were fixed on the road ahead, but his thoughts lingered on the strange occurrence. Why would anyone play blues on a church carillon at this hour? The familiarity of the tune and its unsettling presence in the dead of night did not sit well with him. He knew that Jenna must feel exactly the same way.

As the church’s bell tower came into view in the distance, Jake reached for his cell phone. He dialed Jenna’s number, needing to share his concern, to hear her voice. But as he brought the phone to his ear, the familiar sound of the Angelus chime cascaded down from the tower, layering over the ringtone. It was a call to prayer, a reminder of devotion, but now it felt like a forewarning.

“Come on, Jenna,” he muttered, the call redirecting to voicemail. The abrupt silence on the other end was louder than any chime could ever be. He ended the call, a frown etching deeper lines into his forehead. The combination of the late-night blues and the unanswered phone gnawed at him, an instinctual alarm that he couldn’t ignore. Jenna was more than just the sheriff or his partner; she had become the compass by which he navigated the complexities of Genesius County.

With every passing second, as the distance to St.Michael's shortened, Jake's resolve hardened.

His thumb pressed down on the speed dial for the police station, and without waiting for the greeting, he barked orders into the receiver.

"This is Deputy Hawkins. Something's wrong at St.Michael's. Get units over there now."

The dispatcher acknowledged her voice a mix of confusion and efficiency, saying she'd send some of the officers who had just come in from the search for Larry Clark. Jake cut the connection before she could ask questions.

As he rounded another corner, the pale silhouette of St.Michael's bell tower loomed ahead. It was then his phone rang.

"Jake, it's Frank," the former sheriff's voice came through, rough with concern. "Did you hear the carillon? It played just now."

"I heard it," Jake confirmed, his eyes never leaving the road. "I'm on my way to the church as we speak. Something's not right, Frank."

"Damn straight," Frank replied. "I tried reaching Jenna earlier, no luck."

"Same here," Jake admitted, though he'd already moved past worry into action.

"Should I call the station?" Frank asked.

"Already done," Jake assured him. "I've called it in. Backup should be on their way."

"Alright then," Frank muttered. "Keep me posted, Jake."

“Will do,” Jake replied before ending the call. He tossed the phone onto the passenger seat where it landed with a soft thud against the leather.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

The glow from the dashboard illuminated his determined expression, casting angular shadows that seemed to echo the turmoil within. Every second that ticked by felt like a lifetime, each mile an eternity as he charged towards St. Michael's Catholic Church. As a faint police sirens' cry rose in the distance behind him, Jake hoped that time hadn't already run out.

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Jenna had recognized Larry Clark's voice the very second the cord constricted around her throat. There was no mistaking it for anybody else. And now, still gripping her from behind, the elderly man revealed a sinister strength that belied his gentle appearance. He pushed her face-first against a wall, causing her weapon to fly from her grip and clatter across the floor. Her breath came in shallow gasps, and her vision was blurring.

Just as she felt her body falter, teetering on the edge of consciousness, Jenna glimpsed three figures against the black canvas of her closing eyes. They radiated and glowed as they extended helping hands toward her. Caroline Weber's voice sounded a haunting melody designed to tether her to the living world, and Ezra Shore's transparent fingers played the tune of life on an autoharp. Then Rachel Cavanaugh joined in the music, her choir robe aglow, the fabric billowing as if in a wind.

Jenna's mind, teetering on the brink of oblivion, could feel their collective will. These spirits of the dead urged her to fight, to survive. They radiated ethereal energy, and she drew on their strength. She also heard distant wail of police sirens, their pitch rising above the din of their skirmish—but too far away to offer any relief.



Her body coiled, and she thrust her boot heel backward with all the force her fading consciousness could muster. It found its mark against Larry's shin. His grunt punctuated the silence, a sound of surprise and pain that momentarily slackened his deadly grip.

For that fleeting second, air rushed into Jenna's lungs, sweet and cool, staving off the darkness that threatened to claim her. Then the cord tightened again. Now, desperation lent her a feral edge as she fought for survival. She twisted her body, her shoulders wrenching free from the cord's vicious bite.

Larry, his face contorted in anger, recovered quickly. He lunged at her like a beast, hands outstretched with malicious intent. They collided with the carillon keyboard, the impact sending a jarring clang of the bells echoing through the structure.

They stumbled together, a chaotic dance of survival, before crashing into the figure at the keyboard. As they grappled, the figure at the keyboard gave way with a dry, brittle thud, and Ezra Shore's body crumbled from its perch. The stench of decay filled the bell tower, an odious blend.

The scattered pieces of plastic and linen that littered the floor ensnared Jenna and Larry's feet in a grim tangle. Larry's curses sliced through the fetid air, his frustration palpable as he tried to kick away the ghastly bindings. His attention momentarily diverted, Jenna's survival instincts roared to life. She gathered the remnants of her strength, her mind clear.

They collided with the player's bench for the carillon. The wooden structure capitulated under the force, collapsing with a resounding crack that sent echoes cascading through the stone confines of the bell tower. The top of the bench flew open, gaping with secrets as both adversaries grappled for the upper hand.

As she forced herself upright amidst the chaos broken wood and scattered linen

wrapping, Jenna gaze landed on the inner compartment of the carillon bench, now exposed. The realization struck her with the force of a physical blow; the bench had been a makeshift tomb, hiding the corpse of Ezra Shore all this time.

In a flash of determination, Jenna ducked beneath Larry's outstretched arm, her movements honed by years of training and the raw instinct to survive.

With a guttural yell, he lunged. His hands, veined and trembling with age and fear, reached for her like the talons of some primal predator. Jenna's weariness evaporated in the face of imminent danger, replaced by a sudden clarity. Every lesson she had learned converged into this moment.

She sidestepped, narrowly evading Larry's grasp, her own hands coming up defensively. Her lungs burned, every inhale and exhale a vibrant affirmation of life's tenacity, to her refusal to be snuffed out by a man she had once respected. She could not—would not—succumb.

But triumph was short-lived as her foot snagged on a loose floorboard, the old wood betraying her at the crucial moment. She stumbled forward, her balance precarious as Larry capitalized on her misstep.

His shoulder slammed into her midsection, the force expelling the air from her lungs and propelling them both toward the staircase. Jenna's world became a blur of flailing limbs and unrestrained fury as they tumbled downward. Each step was a brutal punctuation mark in their descent, their bodies trading blows with the unforgiving stone. At last, they came to rest on the landing, Jenna stretched out face-down, her mind struggling to break through the haze of pain and disorientation.

Larry was quicker to recover, his resolve undiminished. Before Jenna could rally her senses, he was upon her again. His knee pressed heavily on her back, pinning her to the cold floor as the cord once more found its way around her throat. Tightening its

grip, the cord began to strangle the light from Jenna's vision, her lungs screaming for the air that would not come. Her fingers scratched weakly at the implacable loop, her strength ebbing away with each desperate heartbeat.

The brink of unconsciousness loomed near for what must be a final time, a threatening void ready to swallow her whole. Yet, in that dire moment, the tower door burst open with a force that reverberated through the very stones. Jake stood framed in the doorway, his gun drawn and his fear etched plainly across his features. "Freeze!" he bellowed, his command echoing within the confines of the tower.

Larry hesitated, the infinitesimal loosening of his grip providing Jenna with a glimmer of hope. Summoning the dregs of her willpower, she drove her elbow into his ribs with all the force she could muster. Larry grunted, his hold faltering, and in that fleeting opportunity, Jake acted.

He crossed the space between them in long strides, his movements decisive and unyielding. The gun's butt connected with Larry's temple, a definitive strike that sent the piano tuner crashing to the floor. The sound was a dull thud, lost amidst the clamor of the bells above. Larry's body went slack, the cord slipping away as he fell to the ground, dazed into helplessness.

In that instant, a team of uniformed officers stormed into the bell tower. Jake, his voice ringing with authority, barked out orders for them to secure Larry in cuffs and formally place him under arrest.

Jenna's knees buckled, and she crumpled to the cold stone floor, lungs seizing the air greedily. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, each one a battle won against the darkness that had threatened to engulf her. As her surroundings came back into focus, she could feel the steady beat of her heart pounding in her ears—a reminder that she was still very much alive. Then she collapsed, her breaths ragged sobs of relief.

Jake was at her side in an instant, his touch gentle as he assessed her for injuries. “I’ve got you, Jenna,” he murmured, his voice thick with relief. “You’re safe now.”

Jenna’s mind turned to the figures from Trentville’s past—Caroline, Ezra, and Rachel. Their spectral forms had been her unlikely saviors, their presence igniting a defiance that had refused to be extinguished. She felt a kinship with them, guardians of a place they couldn’t leave behind.

“Jenna?” Jake’s voice cut through her reverie. “Can you stand?”

With his help, she found her footing, every muscle protesting the movement. They stood together amid the remnants of the struggle, the broken bench and the silent bells above witnesses to the end of a murderous era.

In the quiet aftermath of chaos, their gazes locked. Jenna’s eyes, though darkened by the trauma of the night, were alive with gratitude. And beyond that, there was an acknowledgment of the bond that had grown between them, a connection that ran deeper than their badges, deeper than the mysteries they sought to unravel in Trentville.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Jenna sat on the edge of the hospital bed, her movements deliberate as she slipped her feet into well-worn boots. The bruises marring her skin were hidden beneath the nondescript clothes she’d changed into—clothes that didn’t reek of last night’s adrenaline and fear.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 3:35 am*

“Larry Clark’s spilling everything,” Jake told her, his voice carrying the clipped tone of official business. “He’s owning up to all of it—the murders and everything.” Jenna’s hands paused in their motion, her gaze lifting to meet his. “Obsession is a mild term for what drove him,” he continued, “but he’s not fighting the charges.”

Jenna nodded, absorbing the update. The man she’d known as a congenial piano tuner seemed worlds apart from the one who had attacked her—from the murderer he now confessed himself to be.

“Mayor Simmons is over the moon about the case cracking wide open,” Jake segued, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “She’s called for a press meeting this afternoon to sing our praises.”

A sigh escaped Jenna as she stood, testing the tenderness of her sprains. “The last thing I need is a media circus,” she muttered almost to herself, dragging her fingers through her chestnut hair.

Jake’s expression softened then, the lines around his eyes creasing with understanding as they headed on out of the room. “Hey, don’t worry about it,” he said with an ease that belied the gravity of their recent case. “I’ve already told Mayor Simmons you’re sitting this one out. I’ll field the questions and bask in all that glory on your behalf.”

Jenna nodded, a small but genuine smile tugging at her lips. Relief washed over her, and a sense of gratitude for Jake’s understanding. He had become adept at reading her, knowing when she needed space from the limelight that so often tried to ensnare them

after a successful investigation.

“Thanks, Jake,” she said, her voice steadier than before as they exited the hospital. “That means a lot. Now let’s get out of here.”

As Jake drove her home, a comfortable silence settled between them. Jenna watched the familiar streets of Trentville pass by, each landmark a part of the life she had built here. The weathered sign of Hank’s Derby winked in the sunlight, and Jenna could almost smell the fried food that seemed to permanently linger in the air around the diner.

Pulling into Jenna’s driveway, Jake cut the engine, plunging the car into a hush punctuated only by the ticking of cooling metal. They sat there for a moment, neither wanting to break the stillness that enveloped them.

“Get some rest,” Jake finally said, his voice low and warm. “You’ve earned it.”

“Will do,” Jenna replied, her hand on the door handle. She paused, turning to look at him. In that brief exchange, an unspoken promise passed between them—a promise of continued partnership and mutual support ... and more.

With a soft click, Jenna opened the car door and stepped out. She turned back to offer Jake one last appreciative nod before heading up the path to her front door.

Her house, usually a haven, now seemed too quiet, too empty as she stepped inside. She glanced at the clock on the wall; its hands were nearing noon. Jenna bypassed the clutter of her living room, heading straight for the bedroom, where the bed beckoned with its promise of rest. She peeled off her boots, easing herself onto the mattress with care to avoid jostling her tender bruises. The curtains filtered out the harshest rays of sunlight, bathing the room in a soothing twilight.

As sleep claimed her, Jenna’s breathing slowed, deepened. The world beyond her

eyelids faded, replaced by the nebulous realm of dreams. Quickly, her mind sharpened within the dreamscape. She became lucid, aware of the dream and the surreality surrounding it.

The air around Jenna shimmered, and Patricia Gaines emerged from the ether—the spirit who had the same initials as her sister. At first, her form was unstable, flickering like an old film reel, but then the image steadied. Patricia stood before Jenna—no longer a grainy specter, but as vivid as a dream could allow her to be.

Patricia's eyes locked onto Jenna's, and though no words passed between them, communication was implicit in the gaze that bridged their separate planes of existence. Jenna knew this visitation bore significance, a silent urging from beyond the veil she dared not ignore. But what message did Patricia bring? What piece of the puzzle of her disappearance—and possibly Piper's—was Jenna yet to find?

She followed the spectral form of Patricia Gaines through the dense underbrush of her dreamscape, a forest that mimicked the tangled wilds of Whispering Pines. The ground beneath her feet felt firm yet somehow insubstantial, as if treading upon a memory rather than earth. The trees that loomed over them were gnarled, their boughs whispering secrets in a language only the dead could comprehend.

Patricia's pace was steady, unfaltering, and Jenna matched it step for step, her lucid mind aware of the dream's texture, but captive to its unfolding narrative. They arrived at a long-abandoned well, a relic of stone and decay, its mouth opened like a silent scream to the sky. A chain weathered by countless storms dangled into the void below, swaying with an invisible breeze.

“Here,” Patricia said, her voice clear despite the ghostly distortion of her form. She reached for the crank, her intention resolute, but the rusted iron passed through her fingers as if they were nothing more than morning mist. A look of frustration crossed her hollowed cheeks, and she turned to Jenna, eyes piercing. “You must do it.”

Jenna extended her hand towards the crank—a gesture within the dream—and abruptly the world snapped back into the harsh light of reality. Jenna's eyes snapped open, her heart racing as the dream fragmented, leaving her grasping at fading impressions. Her bedroom ceiling greeted her, and her lungs drew in a sharp breath as she sat up. The image of the well clung to her thoughts.

With the clarity that often accompanied the abrupt end of a lucid dream, Jenna now realized that she'd seen that well in waking life, and she knew where she wanted to go. She needed answers, and something deep within her stirred the relentless drive that had defined so much of her life. She got out of bed, then put her boots back on, and made her way to her car.

Jenna's hands gripped the steering wheel as she navigated the familiar turns leading to Whispering Pines Forest. The morning sun filtered through the dense canopy of trees, casting dappled shadows across her path. Her heart drummed a staccato rhythm against her ribs, mirroring the urgency that had propelled her out of bed and into action. The forest greeted her with its usual chorus of birdsong and rustling leaves, but today, it was merely background noise to the task at hand.

Parking her car at the edge of a clearing, she stepped out and scanned the tree line, locating the narrow trail Patricia's spectral form had led her down in the dream. Jenna moved with purpose, her stride long and determined. Each step seemed to echo with the whispers of the forest, urging her on.

The forest was eerily quiet, its breeze and birdsong muted, as though the pines themselves were holding their breath. The path to the well was overgrown, nature reclaiming what humanity had abandoned. As she advanced, branches brushed against her, but she paid them no mind.

When the stone structure she had seen in her dream finally came into view, its presence felt like a challenge. The ancient stones were covered in moss and lichen, a testament to its abandonment. The roof that had once protected the opening had



collapsed, but there was still a hand crank and a chain.

Jenna approached the edge, peering down into the darkness below. It gave off cool, damp air, like the breath of the earth itself. With a steadying exhale, she reached for the rusted crank. Gritting her teeth against the pain from her bruises, Jenna grappled with the crank. Rust flaked off under her touch, the mechanism groaning in protest.

She set her jaw, muscles in her arms tensing with exertion as she applied more force. The metallic screech pierced the silence of the forest, a sound so grating it seemed to resonate with the pain of past years—the loss of Piper, the torment of unanswered questions.

Sweat beaded on Jenna's forehead, her short chestnut hair clinging to her skin as she worked the crank. Inch by inch, it began to give, squealing in defeat with every turn. But below, in the depths of the well, the bucket remained ensnared in the mud, an unwelcome anchor in the silt of forgotten things. Jenna leaned her weight into the effort, ignoring the pull of strained muscles and the ache of bruises from her recent confrontation.

Then, with a sudden give, the bucket broke free, sending a jolt through the chain and up into Jenna's shoulders. She stumbled back a step, then regained her footing, pulling with renewed vigor. The bucket rose, heavy and reluctant, until at last it emerged from the darkness of the well, dripping with thick, dark mud.

Jenna knelt beside the well, peering down at the bucket now resting on the mossy stone edge. The mud was a sludge that clung to her as she plunged her hands into it. She sifted through the cold, wet earth, seeking something, anything, that might be hidden beneath. Her movements were methodical, controlled, each motion an echo of her unyielding determination to uncover what had been concealed by time.

A sharp pain suddenly lanced through her finger, and Jenna hissed, recoiling. She pulled her hand back, shaking off clods of mud to reveal a small puncture wound

oozing a few beads of blood. With narrowed eyes, she reached back into the bucket, this time with deliberate care, until her fingertips brushed against a solid object. Tracing its edges, she grasped the item and drew it forth from its muddy tomb.

It was a brooch, ornate and aged, its metalwork fine but tarnished, its rounded opal face nestled into the weathered metal with thoughtful precision. The pin at the back had been her assailant, a silent guardian of the relic's long burial. Jenna held the piece up to the light filtering through the trees, her mind racing as she searched her memory for any connection to the artifact in her hand.

The forest around her remained breathlessly still while Jenna processed the new clue. The whisper of leaves seemed to murmur Piper's name, teasing her senses with the ghostly presence of her twin. Could this brooch be a message, a breadcrumb left along the trail to finding Piper, or to understanding Patricia Gaines's fate?

No immediate answers sprang forth. In the quiet woods, Jenna felt unresolved mysteries around her. She pocketed the brooch carefully, acknowledging the ache of uncertainty that came with the discovery. This was not an end to her search; it was merely another step towards an unknown destination.