



Her Last Confession (Rachel Gift #17)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: HER LAST CONFESSION (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller) is book #17 in a long-anticipated new series by #1 bestseller and USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose bestseller *Once Gone* (a free download) has received over 7,000 five star ratings and reviews.

FBI Agent Rachel Gift, 33, unparalleled for her ability to enter the minds of serial killers, is a rising star in the Behavioral Crimes Unit—until a routine doctor visit reveals she has but a few months left to live.

Not wishing to burden others with her pain, Rachel decides, agonizing as it is, not to tell anyone—not even her boss, her partner, her husband, or her seven-year-old daughter. She wants to go down fighting, and to take as many serial killers with her as she can, but she can feel herself slipping.

While investigating the murders, a hospice worker recognizes the tired look in Rachel's eye. She can't hide her condition anymore and she knows it.

It is time to confess her truth—but not before she catches her last killer.

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Sandra Mitchell squinted through her wire-rimmed glasses at the GPS display. The blue line snaked deeper into the darkness of the Washington forests, far from Richmond's familiar glow twenty miles behind her. Her sensible Honda's headlights carved twin paths through the darkness, illuminating a tunnel of towering evergreens that pressed in from both sides.

10:20 PM. What am I doing out here?

She tucked a strand of mousy brown hair behind her ear, a nervous habit she'd never managed to break. At forty-two, she was too old to be chasing mysterious text messages into the wilderness. The whole thing felt wrong. But the text had come from Alana, and she had never been the cryptic type before—just a casual work friend who occasionally joined her for lunch. But the message had been urgent: Need to see you tonight. Important. Follow these coordinates.

The pavement had given way to gravel twenty minutes ago. Each pothole sent judders through the steering wheel. Sandra's knuckles whitened as she gripped it tighter, her accountant's mind cataloging all the ways this could go wrong. Serial killers. Bears. Axe murderers. More bears.

The gravel narrowed to a logging road, really just two rough tracks through the undergrowth. No more gravel, just dirt. Tree branches scraped against her car's sides, sounding like fingernails. She checked her phone again—still no service. The coordinates pointed just ahead, where the road appeared to dead-end in a wall of darkness.

Her headlights swept across the clearing as she pulled in. Tall grass swayed in the

breeze, creating shifting shadows that set her nerves on edge. To her right, a mass of fallen logs created a jumble of black spaces where anything could hide. The air felt thick with the musty smell of decay, which she could smell even through her closed windows.

Sandra's fingers trembled as she grabbed her phone and typed out a message back to Alana: What the hell is wrong with you? Where have you sent me?

The message wouldn't send. Of course, it wouldn't. The service out here was down to one bar that flickered in and out of existence at the top of her phone screen.

She reached for the gear shift, ready to reverse out of this nightmare, when something caught her eye. Just off the road, half-hidden in the grass, sat an object that had no business being there. It was sleek and white, its curved surfaces reflecting her headlights like something out of a sci-fi movie. About seven feet long and four feet high, it resembled a massive seed pod or cocoon. A thin seam ran along its length, suggesting it could open.

She hated that her first thought was a stupid one. Spaceship. Some sort of weird UFO...

But then she understood what she was seeing, and that somehow made it worse. Her breath caught in her throat. She recognized it immediately—an EndLight pod.

She'd seen the ads, read the controversies. Who would leave one of those million-dollar devices out here in the middle of nowhere? This had to be some kind of sick joke. But why would Alana joke about that?

What a bitch. She needed new friends.

Still, the fact that one of those pods was out here, in the idle of nowhere, was just

weird enough to get her to open her door. She stepped out into the night, instantly feeling the presence of the tall, towering trees all around her. She stepped closer to the dead-end, toward the tall grass where the pod sat.

Her mind pulled up images she'd seen of the pods. This did indeed look like the EndLight pods—what some were calling, rather crudely, “suicide machines.” The pod's off-white body rested on four articulated legs that kept it slightly elevated above the damp ground. A seamless clamshell lid topped the device, currently sealed but clearly designed to open along nearly invisible seams.

But there was something a bit different about this one. The shape, maybe? The way the bottom of this one was squared off rather than rounded off, almost like an egg in the pictures she'd seen? And there were supposed to be LED lights along the bottom...but those seemed to be missing.

She stepped into the grass, closer to the machine that was draped in the glow of her headlights.

Then, as her hand reached out to touch the side of the pod, movement flashed in her peripheral vision. A dark figure emerged from the trees, moving with purposeful speed. Sandra's hand flew up in surprise and shock as if to ward off the figure, but it was too late. Whoever it was, they were on her, grabbing her arm with iron strength. She screamed as she was dragged forward, her glasses flying off into the grass.

"No! Please!" Her voice sounded thin and desperate in the vast darkness. The figure said nothing, dragging her toward the waiting pod. He slammed an elbow into the small of her back to take the fight out of her. It worked. Her back spasmed and her legs gave out. It was also hard to breathe.

Sandra did her best to kick and thrash, but her attacker was too strong. He was dragging her to the pod, and just as she noticed this, the pod's seam split with a

hydraulic hiss.

Her scream echoed through the trees, swallowed by the indifferent forest. No one could hear her. No one would find her. Not out here, not in time.

The last thing she saw was the star-filled sky above before she was shoved into the pod. And when the cover came down, the semi-translucent window on the top showed her those same stars, only skewed and distorted. She screamed again, but the sound of it was trapped inside the pod with her.

It was the last thing she ever heard.

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Rachel studied the Monopoly board with exaggerated intensity. She let out a very long, drawn out Hmmm . Across the table, Paige waited and watched, shaking her head. Behind her, morning sunlight streamed through the kitchen windows, casting warm squares on the aged wood surface between them.

"Mom, it's just Boardwalk. Either buy it or don't."

"Says the girl who already owns Park Place," Rachel argued. Rachel ran her fingers through her dark hair, pretending to agonize over the decision. In truth, she was savoring every second. Getting Paige to do anything that didn't involve a phone screen these days felt like a minor miracle. When Paige had even suggested they sit down and play a board game on a Saturday morning , Rachel had wondered what, exactly, was wrong with her daughter.

She'd missed this side of Paige and was thankful whenever it decided to resurface.

From the living room came the steady click of laptop keys. Jack hadn't moved from his spot on the couch since he'd plopped down there at 8:30 with his coffee and a bagel, his face illuminated by the screen's blue glow. Even on weekends, his new role at the bureau meant endless reports and administrative duties...and added hours of working from home on the weekends.

Rachel placed her pink five-hundred-dollar bill on the table. She wasn't going to let the added stresses of Jack's work get to her. "Sold!" she proclaimed.

"Finally!" Paige rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Now I can bankrupt you on both properties."

"We'll see about that." Rachel gathered the dice, catching a glimpse of her reflection in the window. Even after two years, she sometimes didn't recognize herself—she was somehow back to normal even though the last two years had seemed to have made her age nearly five years. She was catching the occasional gray hair and more often than not, she got far too tired far too quickly.

But she was here, alive, playing board games with her daughter on a Saturday morning. That was something she'd once thought impossible.

"Jack," she called out. "Are you sure you don't want to join us? There's still time to jump in. This game can be a bit of a drag with just two players."

"Hey!" Paige yelled.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Rachel said with a wink.

Jack made a noncommittal sound, fingers never pausing on the keyboard. "Maybe later. This report needs to be finished by Monday."

It was always "maybe later" these days. Rachel understood the pressures of his new position—she'd seen how the promotion had changed their lives, trading field work for administrative responsibilities. Still, she missed the days when they'd worked cases together, when they'd been partners in every sense of the word. They were now, too, as husband and wife...right down to their finances. Which is one of the reasons Rachel wasn't complaining about the position. Not out loud, anyway.

Paige shook the dice in her cupped hands. "Your loss, Jack. I'm totally crushing Mom right now."

"Don't get cocky," Rachel warned, watching as her daughter's roll landed her on one of Rachel's properties. "That'll be two hundred dollars, young lady."

"Highway robbery," Paige grumbled, but she was smiling as she counted out the play money.

There were times when Rachel wondered if Paige might need more therapy. She'd seen a therapist for eight months after everything had settled down—after Grandma Tate's funeral and after the cancer had finally been beaten. But these days, now in middle school and with a whole new group of friends, Paige seemed almost bi-polar at times. Moody and in a foul mood one day and the perfect little angel the next—like today.

Rachel's phone buzzed from the end of the table. She leaned over and looked at it, seeing SCARLETT on the caller display. Scarlett, one of her favorite hospice patients...who had also just happened to receive amazing news a few weeks ago. News that her cancer was in remission and that the experimental treatments she'd been trying out had worked.

Rachel was excited to hear from her. Scarlett had moved out of hospice and back to her house earlier in the week. But Rachel hesitated before answering, watching Paige's expression shift ever so slightly.

"Do you mind, kiddo?" she asked. "It's Scarlett."

"Oh! Sure." Paige and Jack had heard all about Scarlett from the stories she'd often bring home from the hospice center.

Rachel grabbed the phone and answered it on the third ring. "Hey, Scar. How's it going?"

"Rachel!" The voice on the other end was breathless with excitement. "I'm officially moved in...sort of."

“Sort of?”

“Well, these unpacked boxes staring me in the face might disagree.”

“And how are you feeling?”

“Oh, I feel great! Really wonderful. And now that I am mostly moved in, I was wondering if you’d come over. I’ll be honest...it’s been a while since it’s just been...well, just me.”

Rachel glanced at the Monopoly board, then at Paige, who was already reaching for her own phone. To her credit, she still had her play money in her hand, too. “Of course,” Rachel said. “Text me your address.”

“I will. And thanks, Rachel. You’ve been such a blessing through all of this. So it only made sense that you’d be the first person I invited over.”

“It was my pleasure. I’ll see you soon.”

Rachel hung up and turned to Paige with a guilty look on her face. “Paige, honey, I’m so sorry, but—”

“It’s fine, Mom.” Paige was already deep in a text conversation, thumbs flying across the screen. “We can finish later. I mean, I heard. It’s really awesome that she’s in her own house now. So, she’s like... cured right? Like you?”

Rachel smiled. “Seems that way.”

“Then yeah. Go hang out with her. She’s your friend.”

The speed with which her daughter disengaged stung, but Rachel tried not to show it.

Besides, even in that disengagement, her heart was showing. She was, after all, insisting that her mother continue to connect with her once-sick friend. She remembered being twelve, how the world seemed to exist primarily in the space between friends and jokes. Still, she missed the little girl who used to beg for "just one more" board game or bedtime story, the little girl who didn't have a phone permanently attached to her hand.

Rachel stood, gathering her keys and bag. She crossed to the living room and approached the couch, where she leaned down to kiss Jack's cheek. "Scarlett asked me to come over," she said. "I won't be long, though. Just long enough to see the place, say hi...just be polite, you know?"

He mumbled something that might have been "bye" without looking up from his laptop. Two years into their marriage, and sometimes she still felt like she was competing with his inbox for attention.

At the door, Rachel paused. Through the archway, she could see her family—Jack lost in his work, Paige absorbed in her phone, the abandoned Monopoly board between them. A familiar ache bloomed in her chest. This wasn't how she'd imagined their Saturday morning ending. And she was becoming more and more aware that there would be precious few of this sort of Saturday mornings in her future. Paige was going to grow out of it before she knew it.

But then she remembered the dark days of her own cancer battle, when she'd thought she'd never see another family moment, perfect or imperfect. The memory of hospital rooms, of researching treatments and specialists—it all rushed back in a wave that made her grip the doorknob tighter.

She had this. She had them. However distracted or distant they might sometimes be, they were here. And after everything they'd been through, that was no small thing.

The morning sun caught the silver band on her left hand as she reached for her car keys. Her wedding ring to Jack—different from the one Peter had given her, but no less meaningful. A symbol of second chances, of life continuing even after you think it's over.

Rachel stepped out into the crisp morning air, letting the door click shut behind her. She had a miracle to celebrate with Scarlett, and maybe later, if she was lucky, there'd be time to finish that game of Monopoly. Though something told her that by the time she got home, the board would be packed away, the moment lost to the steady march of weekend routines and digital distractions.

Still, she'd keep trying. Keep showing up. Keep believing in the power of small moments and second chances. After all, she was living proof that sometimes the things you think you've lost can find their way back to you—different, perhaps, but no less precious for the change.

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Rachel pulled up to Scarlett's modest ranch house just as the digital clock on her car dashboard crept past noon: 12:01. The neighborhood wasn't exactly pristine—just a few blocks separated it from what most locals considered the rough part of Richmond's downtown area—but the small front yard was well-kept, with fresh mulch around a young maple tree. The tree's leaves had just started to fall away to the ground, the stripped branches looking frail against the autumn sky.

She killed the engine and sat for a moment, gathering her thoughts. These visits were never easy, even now that she was on the other side of her own battle. Sometimes, especially now that she was on the other side. The weight of survival carried its own kind of burden, one she was still learning to shoulder even after all this time. Oddly enough, it was hard to make the transition from oh shit, I'm going to die to a sense that a gulf of years was suddenly stretched out ahead of you.

She made her way up the steps to the small porch. The screen door creaked opened before Rachel could even knock. Scarlett stood in the doorway, wearing loose-fitting clothes that hung on her still-recovering frame. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, but she managed a wan smile. Her hair was growing back, a soft fuzz that caught the dim light from inside. Just a bit over fifty, the poor dear looked closer to sixty. But Rachel knew that would all change in the next few months.

"I was watching for you through the window," Scarlett said, stepping aside. "Come in. I've been counting the minutes, if I'm honest. These days get long."

The living room was dim and stuffy, heavy curtains drawn against the midday sun. A news anchor mouthed silent headlines on the TV mounted to the wall, set to mute. Rachel noticed a thin layer of dust on the coffee table, something the Scarlett she'd

known in hospice would never have tolerated. A half-drunk cup of tea sat on a coaster, long gone cold.

"How are you enjoying being back home?" Rachel asked, lowering herself onto the couch. The cushions still held the impression of someone who'd been sitting there for hours. An afghan was bunched at one end, suggesting Scarlett spent more time here than in her bedroom.

Scarlett's laugh was hollow. "That's the question, isn't it?" She wrapped her arms around herself, perching on the edge of an armchair. "I should be grateful. I am grateful. But..." She trailed off, her gaze drifting to the silent TV screen.

"But you're having trouble adjusting to being alive?" Rachel finished softly, recognizing the lost look in Scarlett's eyes. She'd seen it in her own mirror more times than she cared to count. "Or maybe not to being alive but to knowing death is now in the rearview?"

"God, that sounds terrible when you say it out loud." Scarlett's voice cracked. "I had accepted it, you know? I'd made peace with dying. I'd said my goodbyes, made my arrangements, started wondering if you just all of a sudden know how to play the harp when you get your little cloud, you know?" She twisted her hands in her lap. "And now..." She gestured vaguely at the room around her. "Now I have to figure out how to live again, and I'm not sure I remember how. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and forget that I'm not dying anymore. It takes me minutes to remember that I have a future to plan for."

Rachel leaned forward, her heart aching with recognition. "I understand more than you might think." The memories rose unbidden—the sterile hospital rooms, the pitying looks, the way her daughter's face had crumpled every time she'd had to leave the hospital without her mother.

"Do you?" There was no challenge in Scarlett's voice, only desperate hope. Her fingers clutched at the arms of her chair, knuckles white. "If I recall parts of your story, you were also working while fighting your cancer."

"I did for a while. But near the end of it, when it got really bad...there were two times when I thought it was over." Rachel's hand unconsciously went to her temple, where the tumor had once pressed against her skull. "The second time was the worst. I'd fought so hard, for so long, and I was tired. There was a moment—just a moment—when I wanted to stop fighting. When the pain and the fear and the exhaustion seemed like too much to bear."

"What changed?" Scarlett asked. "What helped you beat it?"

"Paige." Rachel's voice softened, and she blinked against sudden moisture in her eyes. "My daughter. I thought about her face, about all the moments I'd miss. Her graduation. Her wedding. The way she would still crawl into my bed sometimes when there was a thunderstorm, even though she was far too old for that." She took a steadying breath. "It wasn't easy, but I pulled myself out of that hole. One day at a time. Sometimes one hour at a time."

Scarlett was quiet for a long moment, absorbing this. The silence was broken only by the soft tick of a clock on the mantel. "I've been trying to find... purpose, I guess. Something to focus on besides just existing. The doctors keep telling me to take it slow, but slow feels too much like waiting to die. Again."

"Oh?" Rachel straightened, encouraged by this hint of forward momentum. "And have you found anything yet?"

A hint of genuine animation crossed Scarlett's face, bringing color to her pale cheeks. "I started growing roses. Would you like to see them?" There was an eagerness in her voice that hadn't been there before, a spark of the woman Rachel had known in

hospice—the one who'd organized game nights for her fellow patients even when she could barely sit up. “I mean, I just but the bulbs in the ground and this is a dumb time of year to start planting them, but they’re there...and they should be ready for spring.”

"I'd love to."

Scarlett got to her feet, and Rachel followed her through the house to the back door, noting with professional satisfaction how much steadier her gait was compared to their last meeting in hospice. The improvement was remarkable—just a few weeks ago, Scarlett had needed assistance just to sit up in bed. Now, she moved with only the slightest hesitation, her steps growing more confident as they approached the back door.

The backyard was small but well-tended, with a neat flowerbed running along the fence. At the far end, several rose bushes had been recently planted, their stems still thin and tentative. The soil around them was freshly turned, and Rachel could see gardening tools laid out with careful precision on a nearby bench.

"They're not much to look at yet," Scarlett admitted, but there was pride in her voice as she gestured to the tiny green shoots. "But the nursery said they should bloom by late spring. I chose varieties that are supposed to be hardy—the kind that can survive almost anything." She smiled faintly. "Seemed appropriate."

"Life finds a way," Rachel said softly, thinking of all the times she'd felt like those fragile stems, bending but not breaking.

"That's what I'm counting on." Scarlett reached down to touch one of the small plants. "The yellow ones here are—"

Rachel's phone buzzed in her pocket—much the same way it had buzzed when

Scarlett had called and broke up the Monopoly game. She pulled it out to see Novak's name on the display. Her new partner never called unless it was important. In fact, ever since Director Anderson had paired them up for the first time six months ago, she could only recall him calling outside of a case on two occasions.

"I'm so sorry," she said, genuinely regretful. "It's work—I have to take this."

"Of course." Scarlett's eyes lit up with interest, some of her old spark returning. "FBI business? How exciting."

Rachel nodded, already bringing the phone to her ear. "I'd love to see how these roses turn out. Maybe I could come back next week?"

"I'd like that." Scarlett's smile was small but real—the first genuine one Rachel had seen today. "The roses will still be here. And so will I."

As Rachel turned away to answer the call, she couldn't help but think that maybe those simple words were the most important progress of all. She had a feeling, though, that whatever Novak was calling about would soon redirect her thoughts entirely.

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The morning sun cast long shadows across the FBI field office parking lot as Rachel made her way inside. She was heading inside with no context at all. Novak had not been able to share anything with her merely because Director Anderson had given him no details to go on—only that there was a potential case he needed to see them about.

In her experience, when Anderson held his cards this close to his chest, it usually meant they were dealing with something unprecedented. Her shoes clicked against the polished floor of the lobby, the sound echoing off the high ceiling and mixing with the general murmur of agents scattered around the building. It was Saturday, so it wasn't the usual noise of the weekdays, but there was still a feeling of anticipation in the air.

She caught sight of Novak waiting by the elevators, dressed in his typically crisp suit. His fingers drummed an irregular pattern against his thigh – a tell she'd noticed during their last case that showed he was more anxious than he let on. Apparently, the lack of information was bothering him, too.

"So, no details at all yet?" Rachel asked as she joined him at the elevators.

"None," Novak replied, jabbing the elevator button with perhaps more force than necessary. "Anderson wouldn't even give me a hint over the phone. Just said to get here ASAP. Wouldn't even tell me where we'd be headed if we were assigned the case."

As they stepped into the elevator, Rachel felt an unsettling twist in her stomach. Even during her most active years in the field, cases that came with zero preliminary

information rarely ended well. The last time Anderson had been this tight-lipped, they'd uncovered a human trafficking ring operating out of abandoned subway tunnels. That had been seven or eight years ago, but the case had given her nightmares for weeks. The elevator's quiet hum did nothing to settle her nerves, and she found herself checking her phone again, though she knew there wouldn't be any new messages from Anderson.

The doors opened with a soft ding, and they stepped out into the familiar beige hallway leading to Anderson's office. Rachel found herself falling into step beside Novak naturally, their footfalls synchronizing without conscious effort. She realized, somewhat surprisingly, that working with him felt almost normal now. Their last case, though challenging, had forged an unexpected bond. While he wasn't Jack by any means (and it wasn't fair to make the comparison), he'd proven himself capable and trustworthy.

Rachel's mind drifted to Jack, of how they'd started as strangers, too. It had taken them nearly a year to find a groove to become seamless partners. To expect anything more of Novak was unfair—especially given that she had ended up marrying her last partner.

When they came to Anderson's doorway, it was already opened. He heard them coming, looked up, and waved them in. The sunlight streaming through his window highlighted the grey in his hair and the tension lines around his mouth. A half-empty coffee cup sat beside a stack of files, the steam still rising in lazy spirals. "Agents, please have a seat," he said, gesturing to the chairs across from his desk.

"Sir, is everything okay?" Novak asked.

"Yes, all is well," he said, finally directing his gaze toward them. "I apologize for all the mystery," he began, folding his hands on his desk. "But this case is...unusual, to put it mildly. And there are still small bits of information coming in here and there."

He paused as if choosing his next words carefully. "Are either of you familiar with a company called EndLight?"

Rachel's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't heard that name in nearly two years, not since those dark days when the cancer had been winning. The memories rushed back – lying awake at night, scrolling through medical forums, desperate for any option that might spare her family from watching her suffer.

"Yes," she said quietly, aware of both men watching her closely. "During my illness, I... researched them. They were developing what they called 'peaceful passage pods.' Though that's just marketing speak for suicide machines." She felt Novak shift slightly beside her, but kept her eyes on Anderson. "The technology wasn't ready back then. Too many variables, too many risks. They were still in the testing phase."

Anderson nodded grimly. "Well, they're ready now. The peaceful passage pods have been up and running for about two months. No wide release at all, but there have been thirty distributed around the globe. Most are here in America, but there are a few that made their way to Japan, Australia, and Iceland."

"Does this case have something to do with the pods?" Rachel asked, her curiosity piqued.

"We're not sure just yet, but it appears so...or at least some knock-off version. Last night, one of the pods was discovered in the forests within the Shenandoah Valley. There was a woman inside of it...and based on the little bit we know, the woman did not step into it voluntarily."

He took the moment to turn his laptop around to face them. There was a single image on the screen showing a sleek white pod, almost beautiful in its minimalist design. It was nestled among fallen leaves and tall grass in what appeared to be a dense woodland area. Yellow crime scene markers dotted the ground around it. What

caught Rachel's attention wasn't the pod itself, but the drag marks in the soil leading up to it. Someone had fought hard not to go in.

She leaned forward, studying the details. "This location is weird. I mean... I thought they were only placing these in medical facilities, hospice centers..."

"That's right," Anderson said.

"So how did it get out there, in the middle of nowhere?"

"That's just it," Anderson said, leaning back in his chair. The leather creaked as he moved. "According to EndLight's records, this pod shouldn't exist at all. All their authorized units are accounted for as of two hours ago. Which means either someone inside the company is operating off the books, or worse – someone has figured out how to replicate their technology."

He pulled out a manila folder and handed it to Rachel. The folder was surprisingly thick. "As I said, the pod was found in the Shenandoah Valley area, about two hours from here. Local PD is securing the scene, but given EndLight's desire to keep this quiet and the... unique nature of the situation, we need our best people on this." He met Rachel's eyes. "The victim has been identified as Sandra Mitchell, and preliminary reports suggest signs of a struggle. Defensive wounds. This wasn't a suicide – it was murder."

Rachel flipped open the folder, scanning the first page. Crime scene photos showed scuff marks on the pod's pristine surface, a smear of blood on the control panel. "Has EndLight been cooperative?"

"So far," Anderson replied, but his tone suggested he didn't expect that to last. "Their CEO is flying in from California today. But here's what concerns me most – their chief engineer claims this pod is pretty much a direct copy of their design."

Novak spoke up for the first time since entering the office. "So we could be looking at more of these out there? Underground assisted suicide facilities?"

"Or worse," Rachel said, her mind already racing ahead to darker possibilities. "If someone's willing to use one of these as a murder weapon once..."

Anderson nodded. "Exactly. The coordinates to the Shenandoah Valley site are in the file. I need you two to head out there now. Find out what happened, and more importantly – if there are more of these things out there."

Rachel stood, folder clutched in her hand, mind already racing through possibilities. "Yes, sir."

"Keep me posted, and take whatever time and resources you need on this...not just to figure out what the hell is going on, but to keep it as quiet as possible, too."

As she and Novak headed for the door, she couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the beginning of something much darker than even Anderson suspected. The sick feeling in her stomach had only grown stronger. End of life pods as a murder weapon? It was morbid. She could only hope that this case would turn out to be a one-and-done affair.

"I'll drive," Novak said as they headed back to the elevator. "You can fill me in on everything you know about EndLight on the way."

Rachel nodded, but her thoughts were already two years in the past, to those long nights when she'd researched EndLight's pods, wondering if they might offer an escape from the pain and helplessness that was consuming her life. She had never seriously considered it, but there had always been an odd sort of comfort in knowing such a thing existed.

She'd never imagined she'd encounter one of their devices like this – as a murder weapon. Someone had taken a technology meant to ease suffering and turned it into something monstrous.

The elevator doors closed with a soft click, and Rachel took a deep breath, pushing away the memories of her illness and focusing on the case ahead. They had a crime scene to process, a company to investigate, and a killer to catch – one who had found a terrifyingly new way to murder. And she also had a family to reach out to, informing them that she wouldn't be home right away...that she may be gone for a while.

Again.

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The bureau-issued sedan wound its way along the two-lane highway, cutting through Virginia's autumn landscape. As they'd come into the Shenandoah Valley, the change in scenery from the crowded spaces of Richmond was almost mesmerizing. The leaves from the trees of the surrounding forests had just started to change—not yet the harsh oranges and yellow of fires, but a softer hue that still gave off a feeling of warmth even in the presence of autumn's cooler temperatures.

Rachel watched the trees blur past her window, enjoying the colors. The morning sun caught fragments of frost on the branches, making them glitter like broken glass. The leather of the passenger seat creaked as she shifted her weight, trying to work out the knot of tension between her shoulders. Two years of light desk work and physical therapy had changed her relationship with long car rides. And this one had only been two hours. Had she really, once upon a time, endured five and six-hour car rides with Jack in tow?

Yes, she knew she had. But that felt like a completely different life. She found it hard to even send her mind back in that direction, searching for the memories.

"You seem different today," Novak said from behind the wheel. His hands rested at ten and two, perfect form as always. Even after months of working together, his military precision still amused her. "More... energized."

Rachel shifted again, considering his observation. He wasn't wrong. There was something about this case that had awakened something in her—a familiar surge of adrenaline she hadn't felt since before her illness. Fear and anxiousness came with it, sure...but it had her excited as well. The old Rachel, the one who had chased down Alex Lynch, was stirring.

"Maybe I am," she admitted, watching a flock of birds scatter from a nearby tree. "First time in a while I've had a case this... unique."

"Unique is definitely one word for it." Novak glanced at her, his green eyes briefly leaving the road. "Most people would say disturbing."

"Most people aren't FBI agents." She allowed herself a small smile. "And most people haven't seen what we've seen."

A comfortable silence settled between them. Rachel had resisted working with a new partner at first, missing the easy rhythm she'd had with Jack. But Novak was growing on her. He was steady, methodical—different from Jack's instinct-driven approach. Where Jack had been lightening, Novak was the slow roll of thunder: predictable, reliable, and no less powerful.

"How's Paige doing?" Novak asked, smoothly changing lanes to pass a slow-moving truck. "Middle school's rough territory. I remember my sister saying it was like Lord of the Flies with smartphones."

Rachel smiled, thinking of her daughter's latest academic triumph. "Straight A's again this quarter. She's got a solid group of friends, too. Though these days, they mostly communicate through their phones, even when they're in the same room."

"The joys of raising kids in the digital age?" Novak's voice carried the warmth of personal experience.

"She spends so much time in her room. I sometimes have to check if she's still breathing." Rachel paused, then added, "And how about your son... I'm sorry, I can't remember—"

"Carter," Novak supplied without a hint of offense. "He's eight. And don't worry

about it—I know you've had a lot on your plate."

Rachel winced, the memory coming back to her. "Yeah, but still...I should remember something like that."

Novak smiled, the expression softening his usually stern features. "Carter's doing well. Although lately, he's been trying to negotiate his way out of school every morning. Hasn't resorted to faking sick yet, but I can see the wheels turning. Yesterday, he tried to convince his mother and me that education is just a social construct. At eight years of age!"

"The classic 'my stomach hurts' routine is probably just around the corner," Rachel said, remembering Paige's own creative attempts to avoid school. "Where does an eight-year-old even learn about social constructs?"

"YouTube, probably. I'm already preparing my 'concerned but skeptical dad' face." He demonstrated, making Rachel laugh despite the grim nature of their destination.

Their laughter faded as the conversation naturally turned back to the case. The EndLight pods. The victim, Sandra Mitchell. The morning sun seemed dimmer now, as if the very mention of the case had drawn clouds across its face.

"I just can't wrap my head around it," Novak said, his voice quieter now. "A company actually manufacturing suicide booths. Like something out of a dystopian novel. And people are actually signing up to use them..." He shook his head, his jaw tightening. "I can't imagine ever being in that headspace."

Rachel felt something tighten in her chest. She looked out the window again, remembering the dark days during her cancer treatment. The pain. The helplessness. The moments when the end seemed not just inevitable, but almost welcome. The nights when she'd stared at her service weapon, thinking about Paige, about Jack,

about endings and beginnings.

"You're fortunate then," she said carefully, choosing each word with precision. "To never have been there."

Novak glanced at her, understanding dawning in his eyes. His cheeks reddened. "Rachel, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay." She turned back to him, seeing the genuine concern in his face. "Really. But having faced my own mortality... I get it. The pods themselves might seem morbid, but the concept behind them? Giving people dignity in their final moments? That's not evil. It's human. Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is let someone go."

He nodded, giving her comment and insight time to breathe. After taking a deep breath of his own, he said, "And speaking of humans...it would be just like humans to take something meant for those uses and turn it into a murder weapon."

"Which makes it our job to find out who perverted something meant to ease suffering into a tool for causing it," she said. Rachel checked her phone's GPS. "We should be getting close."

Moments later, Rachel pointed out a turn up ahead. Novak slowed the sedan as they approached the turnoff. A gravel road stretched before them, disappearing into dense forest. The GPS confirmed this was their destination, but something about the scene made Rachel's skin prickle. The trees seemed too dense, too dark, as if they were guarding secrets.

As they continued down the gravel road, the forest seemed to close in around them. Branches created a natural tunnel, blocking out most of the morning light. The gravel crunched beneath their tires, the sound impossibly loud in the sudden stillness. Each pop of stone felt like a gunshot in the quiet.

"According to the coordinates," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, as if the forest itself demanded silence, "the pod should be about a quarter mile ahead."

Novak nodded as the trees continued to usher them along, leading them deeper into the kind of darkness that had nothing to do with the absence of light. This was the darkness of purpose, of malice, of carefully planned endings disguised as choices.

The gravel road curved sharply ahead, and Rachel caught a glimpse of something metallic through the trees. It caught the sunlight and reflected it weakly. Her pulse quickened, the familiar surge of adrenaline flooding her system.

"I see it," she said.

"Same here," Novak commented.

He came around the bend and now they saw not only the metal object hidden by the trees, but a single police car as well. As they approached, a lone officer got out. He looked quite old, his beard completely white. Novak parked beside the police car, and they slowly got out to join him.

"Feds, I take it?" the officer asked in a thick southern drawl.

"That's us," Novak said, showing his badge and ID. "Special Agents Novak and Gift."

As the officer nodded and started walking to the edge of the space where the gravel road dead-ended, Rachel became aware of the absolute silence of the forest. Not even a single bird seemed to be singing anywhere.

"Well, I'm just the guard," the officer said. "Just sitting here making sure nobody messes with that contraption." He hitched a thumb over his shoulder as he said this.

They both looked in that direction—at the so-called peaceful passage pod that had absolutely no business being out here. For a moment, its high-tech presence in the forest made Rachel feel like she'd stepped into a science fiction movie. She nearly expected a little green man to open the lid and step out to greet them.

After a good, long look, Rachel glanced back to Novak and he met her gaze. No words were necessary. They'd both been doing this long enough to know when a scene felt wrong. And this one felt very wrong indeed. The air itself seemed charged with potential violence.

She'd heard stories about agents stepping into situations or locations that just felt wrong. Some might say the energy was simply off, or that there was a bad vibe. She got that feeling now as she and Novak started forward, toward the pod.

The pod waited for them in that tall grass, and Rachel was suddenly very nervous to approach it. Maybe it had something to do with her own thoughts on death—things she had buried deep and not yet processed since her own brush with death.

Or maybe it's just creepy as hell , she thought.

With a sigh, she took the first step toward the pod and Novak followed.

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Rachel approached the pod with measured steps, her shoes crunching against loose gravel until she made her way into the tall grass. Something about the device seemed wrong, beyond its alien presence in these woods. The shape was similar to the EndLight pods she'd researched during her illness, but subtle differences nagged at her trained eye. The pristine white she remembered from promotional materials had been replaced by an off-white that bordered on ivory, as if someone had attempted to match the original but couldn't quite get the shade right. The material itself seemed different, too, but she couldn't be certain.

"Notice anything?" Novak asked, circling to the other side.

"The logo's missing, for starters," Rachel said, running her gloved hand along the smooth surface. "EndLight puts their branding everywhere—it's part of their whole 'dignity in death' marketing. If I recall, their logo was on the front end of it, as well as at the bottom of the hatch...or door, or whatever you want to call it. But I don't see it anywhere."

"Proof that Anderson was right," Novak said. "This one looks to be a knock-off."

Now standing close to it, Rachel found that a good deal of her fear was gone. She reached out and touched it. The pod's surface felt cool beneath her touch, its curved lines resembling something between a medical device and a coffin. Rachel pushed away the thought of how many desperate people might have sought out the real versions of these machines, looking for peace in their final moments. And for it to be out here, very much misplaced, it felt almost like a disgrace to those people.

"We need to see inside," Novak said, pulling her back to the present. His fingers

traced the seam where the lid met the base. "There has to be a mechanism somewhere."

Rachel looked at both ends and saw nothing. And there was no handle or latch of any kind on the hatch. She knelt down, examining the bottom edge. A thin depression ran along the base, almost invisible unless you knew to look for it. "Here," she said, pressing gently with her hand even though she was pretty sure it was intended to be pressed by a foot.

The lid rose with a pneumatic hiss, hydraulic arms lifting it smoothly. The sound echoed through the silent forest, making the hair on Rachel's stand on end. As the pod opened fully, the interior came into view: a padded surface meant to cradle a body, simple controls mounted on the inner wall. No screens, no medical monitoring equipment—just an On/Off switch and what appeared to be an emergency release button. But that particular button was damaged.

"This is wrong," Rachel muttered, leaning in closer. "The real pods have extensive monitoring systems, backup power, emergency protocols..." She pointed to the damaged release button. "Look at this—someone deliberately sabotaged it. Once the lid closes, there's no way out."

Novak's jaw tightened. "Turning it into a trap." He scratched at his chin and sighed. "Any idea how these things are supposed to work?"

She knew he meant nothing by it...that he was only asking her because he knew that she had at least a bit of knowledge on the machines. "The ones I had read about would have the occupant push that button...and that would start an instant decrease of oxygen. As the oxygen levels decrease rapidly, the interior would keep a low level of carbon dioxide. As the nitrogen is pumped in while the oxygen level gets very low...well, that's about it. You lose consciousness and you die."

“No pain at all?”

“None. I think you may get a little dizzy...sort of light-headed. But that’s it.”

“Damn,” Novak said, starting at the pod. “That does sound rather peaceful.”

Rachel stepped back, surveying the area around the pod. Drag marks scarred the earth, telling a story of desperate resistance. She could almost see it playing out: Sandra Mitchell, fighting against her attacker, her heels cutting furrows into the soil as she was forced toward the waiting pod. The thought made her stomach turn. She wondered why Sandra had been here at all...and what had prompted her to get out of the car.

Maybe seeing this strange object just chilling out in the forest, she thought.

"Officer," she called out to the guard still standing by his cruiser. "The local detectives—what did they find in terms of tracks?"

The officer ambled over, his weathered face grave. Rachel looked to the patch over his left breast and saw that his last name was Williamson. "Not much to speak of," Williamson said. "Found clear tracks from the victim's Honda over there." He gestured toward where the gravel widened into a makeshift parking area. "But nothing else concrete. Whoever did this knew what they were doing."

“I take it the police moved the car?”

“Sure did. About two and a half hours ago.”

“And the body?”

“Oh, that was early this morning. Right after it was found by that kid on the dirt

bike.”

Rachel nodded and looked back to the pod. She wondered how much it weighed...and how someone would get it out here without being seen. Under the cover of night almost certainly.

Rachel moved to examine the gravel area herself, Novak following close behind. The ground told a frustratingly incomplete story. Sandra's tire tracks were clear enough, but any others had been obscured—whether by time, weather, or deliberate action, she couldn't be sure.

"The killer had to have driven here," Novak said, voicing her thoughts. "No way they walked in carrying that pod."

“True,” Williamson said. “But the sheer number of little logging roads and trails that cut through these woods is crazy. If the guy knew these woods well enough, he would have found a way.”

"Which means they knew the area well enough to hide their approach." Rachel stood, brushing dirt from her knees. "This wasn't random. The location, the modified pod, the sabotaged release—everything about this was planned. It had to be to get that pod out here."

She walked back to the pod, its white surface now seeming less pristine and more predatory. The sun cast strange shadows through the trees that made the machine appear to shift and move when viewed from the corner of her eye. Rachel forced herself to look directly at it, to see it for what it was: evidence of a carefully orchestrated murder.

“Officer Williamson, I take it a full forensics sweep was performed?”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything you need in terms of evidence or forensics analysis, you can get from Detective Wheeler.” He plucked a business card from his front pants pocket and handed it over to her.

Rachel looked back to the pod once again. Novak sidled up beside her and said, “Here’s a terrible thought...but if someone can make this thing...what’s to stop them from making more?”

The question hung in the air between them, heavy with implications. Rachel looked back at the pod, imagining others like it hidden throughout the area, waiting in remote locations for their victims. A killer who could turn a device meant for mercy into an instrument of torture—what else were they capable of?

Rachel straightened up, fighting back a shiver that had nothing to do with the morning chill. “We need to get ahead of this. If there are more out there, we need to find them. And if we find even one more of them before the killer is able to use it...maybe we find the killer, too.”

The forest seemed to close in around them at the thought, branches creaking in a sudden breeze. Rachel could feel the weight of what they’d discovered pressing down on her. She desperately wanted to think that this was a solo murder. But for someone to have created a replica of EndLight’s pods...it spoke of cruel intention. And why make just one if you knew how to do it? Why waste your sick talents on one when you could make several?

In her mind, she could hear Sandra Mitchell’s final moments—the panic, the desperation, the realization that help wasn’t coming. Rachel had faced death before, had made peace with it during her illness. But this... this was something else entirely. This was death perverted into a weapon, mercy twisted into malice.

Rachel took one last look at the pod before turning away. They had work to do, and

somewhere out there, a killer was watching, waiting, perhaps already planning their next target.

“I want to speak to next of kin,” Rachel said. “In the files...there was a sister mentioned...”

Williamson spoke up, leaning against his patrol car. “That would be Claire Mitchell. Lives about half an hour away. Want her address?”

“Yes, that would be great,” Rachel said. “Thank you.”

As Williamson looked through his phone for the information, Rachel took in the wide expanse of the forest. On the way to this location, the soft fires coming to life in the autumnal trees had been comforting...almost welcoming. Now, they seemed more like poison. Now it seemed as if the very trees wanted to trap them here, pushing her and Novak toward the pod where there was no way out once they were closed in.

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Claire Mitchell's house sat back from the road, a blueprint of middle-class suburbia with its well-maintained flower beds and neatly trimmed hedges. Rachel noted the fresh mulch around the dogwood trees, the recently painted shutters. Someone in this house cared deeply about appearances.

"Nice place," Novak said, killing the engine. He squinted through the windshield at the two-story colonial. "You want to take point on this one?"

Rachel nodded, already opening her door. The afternoon sun beat down on them as they made their way up the curved walkway. Wind chimes tinkled softly from the covered porch, their gentle melody at odds with the gravity of their visit. Before Rachel could ring the bell, movement caught her eye through the frosted glass panel beside the door. A shadow approached, hesitated, then the door creaked open.

Claire Mitchell stood in the doorway, and her height was the first thing Rachel noticed. She was easily six feet tall, with the kind of plain, honest features that probably photographed better than they appeared in person. Her eyes were swollen and red-rimmed, a tissue crumpled in her left hand. She wore a navy cardigan despite the reasonably warm weather, as if seeking comfort in its embrace.

"Ms. Mitchell?" Rachel kept her voice gentle. "I'm Special Agent Rachel Gift, and this is Agent Novak. We're with the FBI. We'd like to ask you a few questions about your sister, Sandra."

Claire's face crumpled slightly at Sandra's name, but she stepped back, gesturing them inside. "Of course. Please, come in."

The entryway opened into a living room that spoke of a life carefully curated. Family photos lined the walls in matching frames – holidays, graduations, moments frozen in time. Rachel's trained eye caught Sandra in several of them, always slightly apart from the group, her smile never quite reaching her eyes. A leather-bound photo album lay open on the coffee table, as if Claire had been revisiting happier times when they arrived.

"We can sit in the kitchen," Claire said, leading them through a dining room where a child's art project dominated the refrigerator door. "It's... it's more comfortable there."

The kitchen was bright and airy, windows overlooking that spacious backyard where a swing set stood sentinel against the tree line. Modern appliances gleamed under recessed lighting, and a row of potted herbs lined the windowsill above the sink. A half-eaten toast sat abandoned on a plate near the coffee maker, testament to a morning appetite lost to grief.

Claire all but collapsed into a chair at the oak table, her hands immediately finding and gripping a half-empty mug of coffee. The table itself bore the marks of family life – slight scratches, water rings partially hidden by placemats, a stack of mail pushed to one corner.

"I saw the drawings on your fridge," Rachel said. "You have a kid?"

"I do. Mariah. But she's at a friend's house. I haven't told her about her aunt Sandra yet."

Rachel nodded and looked to Claire's left hand. No wedding band...which meant she was a single mother.

"At the risk of sounding uncaring, would you mind if we got right to the questions?" she asked. "I'm sure you can understand how odd this case is. The quicker we get

answers—”

“Oh, of course. Please...go ahead.”

Rachel sorted her questions out in her head while Novak leaned against the opposite end of the kitchen counter. "When was the last time you spoke with your sister?" Rachel asked.

"Tuesday." Claire's voice cracked. She cleared her throat, tried again. "We had our weekly call. She seemed... normal. Maybe a little distracted, but nothing unusual. We talked about..." She paused, closing her eyes briefly. "We talked about getting together this weekend. Maybe hitting the trails with Mariah.”

“And she seemed fine then?” Novak asked.

“Yes. Same old Sandra.”

"Was she seeing anyone?" Rachel asked. "A boyfriend, perhaps?"

Claire shook her head, her fingers tightening around the mug. "No, not for months. She was focused on work. The accounting firm kept her busy. She said... she said she needed time to focus on herself." A bitter laugh escaped her...a sound that almost turned into a soft cry.

Rachel leaned forward slightly, noting how Claire's gaze kept drifting to a photograph on the refrigerator – Sandra and Claire at what looked like a beach, both squinting toward the camera. "Had anything unusual happened recently? Any changes in her routine, new friends, strange phone calls?"

"No, nothing like that." Claire twisted the tissue in her hands until it began to shred. "She was just Sandra. Reliable. Organized. Always ready to help anyone who needed

it. She'd been doing better at work, too. Said she was finally getting recognition for her attention to detail."

The questions continued, each answer adding nothing substantial to their understanding. Through the window, Rachel watched a neighbor walking their dog, the mundane scene a sharp contrast to the heavy atmosphere in the kitchen.

Rachel was about to ask her next question when Claire spoke again, her voice barely above a whisper. "You know... the fact that someone stuffed her into one of those suicide pods... it's sort of eerie." Claire swallowed hard, her throat working. "Sandra... um, she attempted suicide last year."

The air in the kitchen seemed to thicken. Rachel exchanged a quick glance with Novak before asking, "Can you tell us about that?"

Claire's hands trembled as she brought the coffee mug to her lips. A drop spilled onto her cardigan, but she didn't seem to notice. "It was in our family's old barn. She... she tried to hang herself. But the rope was old, thank God. It broke." She set the mug down with a sharp click. "I found her there, just sitting on the floor, crying. We got her help after that. She was doing better. She was doing better ."

"Do you know she would have wanted to attempt suicide?" Novak asked.

Claire only shrugged. "She's always been sort of a gloomy person, you know? Intense mood shifts, that sort of thing. And it got so much worse two years ago when our dad passed away unexpectedly."

Rachel committed all of this to memory, her mind already cataloging the possible connections. A failed suicide attempt followed by murder in a suicide pod two years later – it felt meaningful, but she couldn't yet say how.

"Was Sandra seeing a therapist?" Rachel asked gently.

Claire nodded, wiping fresh tears with what remained of her tissue. "Dr. Harriet Chen. Twice a month. She really liked her. Said she was finally starting to understand herself better." She stood suddenly, moving to a drawer near the sink. "I have her card somewhere. Sandra gave it to me in case... in case I ever needed someone to talk to, too."

"We can get the number if we need it," Rachel said. "In the meantime, would it be okay if we contacted you should we need any more information?"

"Yes, please do. I want...Christ, I want answers. I want to know who did this." She bit at her bottom lip to stop a flow of tears...perhaps an intense bout of wailing, judging from the way her cheeks had gone tight.

Claire Mitchell grabbed a fresh tissue as she escorted them back to her front door. She gave them a small, defeated wave as the agents made their way back to their vehicle. As they walked back to their car, Rachel pulled out her phone. She took note of a neighbor across the street, watching them with undisguised curiosity.

"Who you calling?" Novak asked as he opened the driver's side door.

"Going to give Detective Wheeler a call," she said, fishing for the business card Officer Williamson had given them out at the site of the pod. "I wonder if he could maybe fill in some blanks about Sandra's suicide attempt."

She got into the car and dialed the number as Novak started the engine. The line was answered after two rings. "This is Wheeler." His voice was gruff, distracted.

"Detective, this is Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI. I'm calling about Sandra Mitchell's case. We got your contact info from an Officer Williamson."

"Gift? Yeah, Williamson mentioned you might be reaching out." There was the sound of papers shuffling. "Actually, your timing is perfect. We just managed to unlock Sandra's phone."

Rachel's pulse quickened. "And?"

"We found a text message. Someone asked her to meet near where we found the pod. Message came from a contact listed as Alana Townsend – coworker at the accounting firm. And it looks like she's the one who sent her out there."

"When did the message come through?"

"Just shy of nine o'clock last night."

"And this was a friend?"

"Seems that way," Wheeler said. "You want me to send you the transcript?"

"That would be amazing. You can text it to this number. Can you also send me contact information for this friend?"

"Sure thing. But I can tell you right now that we've already tried calling, and there's no answer. You need an assist?"

"No, not just yet," Rachel said. "My partner is here with me, too. But we'll certainly call if we need help. Thank you." Rachel ended the call and looked at Novak. "Feel like making another house call?"

"Lead the way."

As if in the form of a response, Rachel's phone buzzed as Wheeler sent over the

information. She looked to the screen and went directly to the text message. It was simple and direct. It literally read: Need to see you tonight. Important. Follow these coordinates. And then there were set of GPS coordinates.

A failed suicide attempt, a mysterious text message, and now an unreachable coworker. The pieces were there, but the picture they formed was still frustratingly unclear.

She then copied and pasted the address into her GPS software before inputting Alana Townsend's phone number. It rang six times before going to voicemail. She ended the call without leaving a message, a familiar tension building at the base of her skull. In her experience, people who couldn't be reached often had something to hide.

Or worse – they had something to run from.

"Head east," she told Novak, looking to the address.

Novak pulled out onto the street and did just that.

The sun climbed higher in the sky as they drove, casting sharp shadows across the dashboard. Rachel watched the suburban landscapes blur past her window, her mind circling back to an image of a broken rope in an old barn, wondering what connections she was missing, what deadly pattern might be forming just beyond her grasp.

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The late autumn sun cast long shadows across the dashboard as Rachel and Novak drove toward Alana Townsend's house. The weather had taken a turn, bringing with it the kind of gray skies that made 2:00 PM feel like dusk. Rachel watched the neighborhoods gradually improve through the passenger window, from working class to something a little more comfortable. She couldn't help but think about Sandra Mitchell, about how someone had lured her out into the darkness with a simple text message. The thought made her fingers curl into fists in her lap.

"It doesn't sit right," Novak said, breaking a silence that had stretched for several minutes. He was gripping the steering wheel too tightly, his knuckles white. "EndLight might not be directly involved, but they have to know something...right?"

Rachel took it all in, but her mind was elsewhere. "The booth feels secondary somehow. Like window dressing. Someone wanted Sandra Mitchell dead and found an elaborate way to do it." She watched a mother pushing a stroller along the sidewalk; it seemed like an almost eerie sight, given the things they'd seen and heard so far today.

"To make it look like suicide," Novak added. He turned onto a street called Sycamore Ridge, where cookie-cutter houses spread out before them in neat rows. "But why go through all that trouble? A simple gunshot would have been easier."

"Unless the method was part of the message," Rachel mused. "Or maybe they wanted to make absolutely sure it would look like suicide."

"But that doesn't quite make sense," Novak pointed out. "It goes back to the idea that someone put that pod out there...in a very strange place. We need to figure that out,

too.”

Rachel nodded, starting to get the feeling that this case might just be too big for the two of them. There were too many questions...too many moving parts.

The houses in Alana's neighborhood were all variations on the same theme—two stories, brick facades, manicured lawns, and two-car garages. They had that mass-produced quality of developments built in the early 2000s, but time and individual ownership had given each one subtle characteristics. Some had garden beds. Others had bright shutters. Children's bikes lay abandoned in driveways, and Halloween decorations clung to some porches in preparation for trick-or-treaters in six days.

The Townsend house was distinguished by a red door and carefully trimmed topiary flanking the entrance. The bushes had been shaped into perfect spheres, suggesting either a professional landscaper or someone with too much time on their hands. A silver BMW sat in the driveway, its pristine condition at odds with the subtle signs of wear on the house itself—aging gutters, a few missing roof shingles, paint beginning to peel around the window frames.

Rachel's knuckles had barely left the door when it opened a crack, held in check by a security chain. A man's face appeared in the gap—early forties, clean-shaven, with the kind of tension around his eyes that suggested recent sleepless nights. His gaze darted between them, then past them to the street, as if expecting more visitors. It was clear he did not want to let them inside.

"Can I help you?" His voice was guarded, almost hostile. Rachel noticed his left hand was hidden behind the door, and she wondered if he was holding something.

Novak held up his credentials. "FBI, sir. I'm Agent Novak, this is Agent Gift. We need to speak with Alana Townsend."

The chain scraped against metal as Mike Townsend reluctantly undid it, the sound sharp and grating in the quiet afternoon air. The interior of the house revealed itself gradually: hardwood floors that had seen better days, walls painted in safe beiges and grays, furniture that was chosen for comfort over style but still managed to look presentable. A large sectional dominated the living room, facing a mounted flatscreen TV. Family photos lined the walls—happy moments frozen in time, featuring Mike, Alana, and two young children who weren't currently present.

The house smelled of lemon cleaning products and fresh coffee, but underneath there was a tension that seemed to permeate everything. A half-eaten sandwich sat abandoned on the coffee table, and a laptop was open but dark on the kitchen counter. Signs of a normal day interrupted. It made Rachel think of her own interrupted Saturday—Monopoly board and all.

"Alana," Mike called out, his voice tight. "The FBI is here." He stood aside to let them in, but positioned himself between them and the hallway leading deeper into the house. Rachel noted the protective stance, the way his shoulders remained rigid.

As they made their way into the house, Rachel heard small footsteps running around somewhere upstairs. One of the Townsend children, she assumed.

Alana emerged from what appeared to be a home office, her face pale and drawn. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties, wearing business casual clothes that suggested she'd been working from home on a Saturday. Her hands were visibly shaking as she gestured for them to sit. Dark circles under her eyes matched her husband's, and she kept glancing at her phone as if expecting bad news.

"Mrs. Townsend," Rachel began, settling onto the edge of the sectional, "we need to ask you about a text message sent to Sandra Mitchell last night."

"What text messages?" The words came out sharp, defensive. Alana's right hand

clutched at her collar, a nervous gesture that drew attention to a simple gold necklace.

“Please don’t play dumb,” Rachel said. “If you have no idea why I’m talking about, why have you not been answering your phone. The local police have tried calling, as did I.”

“I...I have my reasons.”

“Good,” Rachel said. “Now explain them.”

“How about you lighten up?” her husband said, trying to put some bass in his voice but failing.

“Fine,” Rachel said. “Let’s start over. You are aware, correct, that Sandra Mitchell was killed last night?”

“Yes,” Alana said, her bottom lip trembling.

“Okay. Well, local PD managed to unlock her phone. And on her phone, there was a text message she received last night that told her to go to the location where she was killed. That text came from you. Or...your phone, at least.”

"That's impossible." Alana's voice cracked. She fumbled in her pocket and produced her phone, fingers trembling as she unlocked it. "I never sent her any messages that night. Look—you can check. I've had my phone with me the whole time." She thrust the device toward Rachel, nearly dropping it in her haste.

Rachel leaned forward, studying Alana's face more than the phone she was frantically scrolling through. The woman's hands were shaking and her fear was genuine, but there was something else there too—guilt, perhaps? But Rachel could see that there were indeed no texts to Sandra last night. The last text she'd sent Sandra had been

two days ago, and it had been a gif of a tired, cartoon cat.

She could have simply deleted the text, Rachel thought. Or I suppose her phone could have been hacked remotely...

"Okay...so then tell me this," Rachel said. "Why would Sandra believe a text asking her to meet you in such a remote location at night?"

Alana's eyes darted to her husband, who had taken up a protective stance behind her chair. She seemed to be weighing something in her mind, and Rachel could almost see the moment the decision was made. The woman's shoulders slumped slightly, as if surrendering to inevitability.

"We found something," she said quietly. "At work. Carson Industries—they're one of our biggest clients. The numbers... they didn't add up. Sandra was the one who noticed it first." She swallowed hard. "We've been meeting in private to discuss it. Large-scale embezzlement, cooking the books. Millions of dollars. It was really big, and we had no idea how to properly approach it...no idea where to go or what to do. If she got that text...maybe she thought I wanted to meet here there to talk about something new? I...God, I don't know..."

Mike's hand found her shoulder, squeezing gently. The gesture seemed to give her strength to continue.

"It started small," Alana went on, her voice barely above a whisper. "Discrepancies that could have been clerical errors. But Sandra kept digging. She was always thorough, always..." Her voice caught. "She found a pattern. Money being moved through shell companies, fake vendors, inflated expenses. All the hallmarks of systematic fraud."

"You were going to report it?" Novak asked.

Alana nodded, then seemed to collapse in on herself slightly. "I was getting scared. The amounts we were finding... people kill for less. Sandra wanted to move forward, but I..." She pressed her hands to her face. "And now she's dead. Oh God, she's dead."

Rachel gave the woman time to collect her thoughts and her breath before going on. "Alana, I wonder...have you ever heard of EndLight before?" Rachel asked, watching carefully for any reaction.

"No," Alana said, dropping her hands. Her mascara had smudged slightly, leaving dark smears under her eyes. "I mean...not until today. Not until I saw the news this morning. Those... those suicide pods? Is that really how—" She couldn't finish the sentence.

Mike spoke up for the first time since letting them in. "We've got kids. Upstairs, playing. Should we be worried?" His hand hadn't left Alana's shoulder, and Rachel noticed how his fingers tightened protectively.

It took Rachel a moment to process the question. But then she realized that Mike and Alana had come to the conclusion that Sandra had died as a result of whatever financial fraud they'd stumbled across. He saw no reason why they might not be next.

Rachel and Novak exchanged a look. "We'll speak with local PD and have a patrol car drive by regularly," Novak assured them. "And Mrs. Townsend, we'd like you to forward any unusual messages or calls directly to us. Right away."

She nodded as Novak handed over a business card.

"But we do need to ask one last time," Rachel said. "You're certain Alana wasn't acting out of sorts these last few days?"

"No. Just...just scared about what we'd found."

Rachel nodded, but she was wondering if a woman who had been suicidal roughly two years ago could have been pushed by enough stress to try ending her life again. It was a theory that she thought had some wheels to it, but it all came back to how Sandra had been directed out to the woods to that pod. And, of course, it raised the even bigger question of how the pod had gotten there in the first place.

“Thank you,” Rachel said. “Please let us know if anything else comes to you.”

They left the house under the weight of the Townsends' fear. The afternoon had grown older, the weak sunlight failing to warm the chilly air. Houses cast long shadows across their perfect lawns, and somewhere a dog barked, the sound echoing off vinyl siding and brick facades.

Rachel checked her watch: 2:57 PM. The day was slipping away faster than she'd like.

"Carson Industries," Novak said as they reached the car. It wasn't a question.

Rachel nodded, already pulling out her phone to look up the address. "Someone there knows something. Sandra Mitchell didn't just stumble onto fraud and then coincidentally end up dead in a suicide pod." She paused, considering the Townsends' fear. "We should put a tail on Alana. If someone's cleaning house..."

As they pulled away from the curb, Rachel noticed Alana watching from behind her living room curtains, Mike's silhouette visible behind her. They looked like prisoners in their own home, waiting for the other shoe to drop. The curtain fell back into place as they drove past, hiding the frightened couple from view.

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Rachel watched the urban landscape gradually give way to the manicured lawns of office parks. Further ahead, there was another stretch of Virginia countryside. The address she had pulled up for Carson Industries told them that they had a drive of a little more than an hour ahead of them. She did her best not to be annoyed at this waste of time on the road, seeing it instead as an hour to dig deeper into what they were dealing with. The autumn sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the highway and reminding her of how quickly the day was slipping away.

She knew that being Saturday, the chances of anyone being in the office were slim. On the other hand, Carson Industries was a big company, and she doubted that most of the employees cared what day it was; if work called for it, they'd be in the office.

Realizing just how quickly the day was slipping away from them, a little pang of guilt wormed its way through her. She looked over to Novak, steady behind the wheel, and said: "Mind if I make a quick call home?" she asked, already reaching for her phone. "Looks like we won't be making it back for dinner. Or bedtime."

"Or maybe even Sunday," Novak said with a hesitant smile. "Go ahead. I need to do the same when you're done." He navigated through the scant traffic of the four-lane ahead of them as they worked their way toward the town of Higdon Hills, where the Carson Industries offices were located.

Rachel placed her call home. The phone rang twice before Jack answered. His voice carried a hint of strain she recognized—the sound of him trying too hard to be casual. "Hey, Rach."

"Hey yourself." She softened her tone, remembering their tense exchange that

morning. The memory of his frustrated expression over breakfast still nagged at her conscience. "How are things?"

"Things are good," he said with a sigh. He sounded pretty tired. He waited a beat and then, with sincere sadness in his voice, he added, "About earlier..."

"Don't worry about it."

"No, I was being a jerk. I was distant and not even remotely engaged with you."

"It's really okay. I get it."

"Yeah, but I don't even know anything about this case you're on. Where are you, anyway?"

"In the Shenandoah Valley."

"How's the case going?"

Rachel watched a cluster of office buildings slide past, their windows reflecting the orange glow of the setting sun. "Weird one. That's all I can say for now." She paused, wondering how much she could share without compromising the investigation. Probably whatever she wanted, given Jack's stature at the bureau. "Is Paige around? I wanted to say hi."

"She's actually at Brittany's house, just up the street." Jack's voice took on that slight nervous edge she'd come to recognize. "I hope that was okay. I know I should have—"

"Jack," she cut him off gently. "Of course, it's okay. You don't need to check with me on things like that. We know Brittany and her parents. It's okay."

But even as she said it, something warm settled in her chest. After two years of marriage, he still sometimes second-guessed his role as Paige's stepfather. It was sweet, really—frustrating sometimes, but sweet. He tried so hard to respect boundaries that didn't need to exist anymore. Sometimes she wished she could make him understand that his caution, while well-intentioned, was unnecessary. He'd earned his place in their family a hundred times over.

"Right. Yeah. Thanks." The relief in his voice was palpable. "Stay safe out there, okay?"

"I always do," she replied, though they both knew that in their line of work, such promises were tentative at best.

"I love you," he said.

"Love you, too."

After she ended the call, Rachel twisted around to grab her iPad from the back seat, giving Novak privacy as he made his own call. She pulled up a search for Carson Industries, but found herself distracted by snippets of his conversation.

"No, you absolutely cannot paint the dog blue," Novak was saying, his voice warm with suppressed laughter. "I don't care if Jackson next door did it to his dog... Because our dog would look ridiculous in blue, that's why." A pause. "Hey, buddy! No, Daddy's working late tonight. But when I do get home, we can definitely build that rocket ship, okay? The one with the real smoke effects."

Rachel smiled despite herself. It was like glimpsing through a window into another life—one where playful banter and rocket ships were the order of the day. The contrast between Novak's domestic warmth and the cold reality of their current case struck her forcefully. Here they were, tracking down a killer who used suicide

machines as murder weapons, while Novak's kid was planning to build model rockets with his dad.

Forcing her attention back to the iPad, she began scanning through articles about Carson Industries. Almost immediately, Victor Reeves' name jumped out at her. The CEO had a history of financial investigations trailing behind him like a shadow and current accusations of embezzlement through an elaborate scheme. Rachel's pulse quickened. Could this be what Sandra and Alana had stumbled onto?

She dug deeper into the company itself. Carson Industries presented itself as a technological innovator, specializing in medical advancement. Their latest breakthrough was particularly interesting—a new generation of CAT scan machine capable of detecting previously undetectable tumors. The technology utilized a novel approach to image reconstruction, combining multiple scanning angles with advanced AI analysis to identify anomalies that traditional scanners might miss.

Something about that made Rachel's stomach clench, memories of her own battle with cancer still too fresh. She remembered lying in those machines, the whirl and click of the equipment around her, the waiting for results that could mean life or death. Her hand unconsciously moved to the back of her neck, where a small scar remained from one of her procedures.

Reeves' personal profile on the company website read like a who's who of medical technology. Guest speaker at international conferences, expert witness at Senate hearings on medical innovation, advisory board member for multiple research institutions. The man clearly knew how to build an impressive resume. Rachel noted that he had a particular talent for being photographed with important people—senators, tech innovators, medical pioneers. Each image is carefully crafted to convey authority and trustworthiness. It made the idea that he might be involved in some very illegal financial activity all the more interesting. Perhaps he hid such actions behind his impressive list of friends and acquaintances.

But it was the last connection that made her sit up straight. She came across it just as Novak was saying goodbye to his wife—apparently having managed to wrangle the phone away from their son. She clicked through several links in rapid succession, confirming what she'd found.

"Find something?" Novak asked, noticing her change in posture.

"More than something. Get this...the CEO of Carson Industries is a guy named Victor Reeves. And Reeves just happens to sit on the board of MedTech Solutions. Ring any bells?"

Novak frowned, navigating around a slow-moving truck. "Should it?"

"MedTech Solutions has hired several engineers from EndLight."

"So...the guy who Sandra Mitchell discovered was involved in insurance fraud sits on the board of the company who builds the suicide pods...one of which she was found dead in." He did not phrase it as a question, but as a statement.

"Seems that way. Only...we have to go back to the fact that the pod we saw was not an actual EndLight one."

"But it was damn close," Novak pointed out.

"So that all links Reeves to Sandra Mitchell in two ways," she said. "Even if one is sort of a stretch."

"Sounds like a suspect to me," Novak said.

"Me, too."

"But he's a CEO...a hot shot kind of guy, right?" Novak said. "Why would he risk something so out in the open and...and, well, weird?"

"No clue. But one thing I've learned in this job is that sometimes men with lots of money and power start to think they can get away with anything. If he's not the killer, I can guarantee he's connected to something. "

They drove on through the afternoon with their first real suspect somewhere up ahead. She knew that Saturday afternoons were traditionally not an easy time to easily locate people, but she suddenly felt that they needed to do whatever was necessary to find Victor Reeves as soon as possible.

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The Carson Industries building loomed before them, a glass and steel monolith reflecting the overcast sky. Rachel pulled into the nearly empty parking lot, her eyes scanning the handful of cars scattered across the vast expanse of asphalt. A sleek black Mercedes caught her attention, parked near the front of the building. The lot would likely be much busier on a weekday afternoon.

"Pretty quiet for a company under investigation," Novak remarked, unbuckling his seatbelt.

"Well, it is the weekend," Rachel said. "Even crooked businessmen need some time off."

Rachel noticed how Novak was already scanning the building's exterior, marking exits and entrance points—a habit she recognized from her own early days as an agent. As they approached the building, Rachel was already preparing herself to find the building locked. And even if they could get in, she doubted Reeves was there.

The main entrance was indeed locked, but through the tinted glass panels, they could make out a security guard stationed behind a curved desk, his attention fixed on a small TV mounted on the wall. Novak rapped his knuckles against the glass, pressing his badge against the surface. The sound echoed through the empty lobby.

The guard—young, maybe mid-twenties, with close-cropped hair and an eager-to-please expression—hurried to unlock the door. He opened it up with a smile, his eyes still taking in Novak's badge.

"Feds?" he asked, eyes widening as he examined their credentials. His nameplate read

Martinez. "What can I do for you?"

Rachel kept her voice neutral, professional. "We need to speak with Victor Reeves. If he's not in, we'll need his address."

Martinez's face brightened. "Oh, Mr. Reeves is here just about every Saturday...when he's not off traveling somewhere, that is." He gestured them inside the building and when they entered, Rachel thought it felt like a tomb—likely the result of such a large space being occupied by only Martinez on a Saturday afternoon.

Martinez seemed to sense their urgency so once he had locked the door back behind them, he nodded over toward the elevator bank all the way on the other side of the massive lobby. "Third floor. Can't miss his office—it's the one at the end of the hall, looking out over the woods."

The elevator ride was silent, but Rachel could feel Novak's nervous energy beside her. She knew he was still trying to prove himself to her, still trying to fill Jack's shoes. Sometimes his eagerness made her want to scream, but today she found it oddly comforting. At least he's not doing that thing where he feels the need to fill every single silence with small talk, she thought.

The third floor was a maze of cubicles leading to a row of executive offices. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting harsh shadows across the empty workstations. Family photos and personal trinkets adorned the desks they passed, frozen moments of lives Rachel couldn't help but analyze. A habit from years of profiling that she'd never shake.

Rachel paused at one desk, her attention caught by a photo of a smiling woman with Sandra Mitchell. The frame was dusty, but the image was clear—two women celebrating something, champagne glasses raised. Another connection, Rachel thought, filing it away for later investigation.

Reeves's office was exactly where Martinez had said it would be. Through the glass walls, Rachel could see him hunched over his desk, his silver hair catching the light. The office itself was a statement of power—corner placement, floor-to-ceiling windows, expensive art on the walls. An enormous picture window along the back of the room looked out over an expanse of a field and a literal sea of trees—mostly pines and firs from what Rachel could tell.

Reeves looked up as they approached, his expression morphing from concentration to irritation.

"Victor Reeves?" Rachel asked as they approached his open door. The office was immaculate—everything arranged with military precision. A row of financial awards lined one wall, while framed photos of Reeves shaking hands with various politicians decorated another.

"What's this about?" Reeves didn't bother standing. "It's Saturday, and I'm rather busy."

"We're agents Gift and Novak, with the FBI," she said, showing her badge. "We're here to discuss the murder of one of your employees, Sandra Mitchell."

Rachel studied his face as she said Sandra's name. The change was subtle but unmistakable—a flicker of genuine shock crossed his features, followed by what appeared to be authentic sadness. His hand trembled slightly as he reached for a glass of water on his desk.

"Sandra's dead?" He leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. "How?"

If he's faking his surprise, he's a good actor, Rachel thought.

She took a deep breath and described the knock-off suicide pod that had been placed in a very random rural location, as well as the evidence that she had been forced inside of it. As she came to the end of the summary, understanding dawned in Reeves's eyes. His posture stiffened, and she could almost see the walls going up.

"So you're not here to inform me of Sandra's death, are you?" he asked, incredulous. "You're here because of my passing connection to EndLight."

"Partly," Rachel confirmed, noting how his left hand twitched slightly. "We also need to discuss the financial fraud allegations."

Reeves's face flushed. For a moment, it seemed like he was caught between two worlds, not sure of which terrible bit of news to address first. "That's not any of your business. I have lawyers handling those matters, and I'm not at liberty to discuss them. Besides that...I don't quite see what any of that has to do with this...this terrible news."

"Mr. Reeves," Rachel leaned forward, resting her hands on his desk. "One of your employees is dead. Someone murdered her using technology that your company helped develop, and in a very odd way. We need to understand the connection."

"There is no connection," Reeves snapped, but Rachel caught the slight tremor in his voice. "EndLight just happens to be a product produced by MedTech...a company I am, quite frankly, proud to support. How one of their creations and one of my employees are connected in this terrible tragedy...I have no idea."

Novak stepped forward, his patience visibly wearing thin. "And the fraud?"

Reeves's jaw tightened. "You have no idea what you're talking about, Agent..."

"Novak," he said, voice sharp. "And I think we both know there's more to this story

than you're telling us."

Rachel watched the interplay, noting how Reeves's eyes kept darting to his computer screen. Something was making him nervous, and it wasn't just their presence.

"Ms. Mitchell was killed sometime last night between ten and midnight," Novak pressed. "Care to tell us where you were during that window?"

Reeves's composure cracked. He was practically fuming with anger as his eyes left the agents and focused on his keyboard. He jabbed at his laptop keyboard, bringing up recorded security footage. He then spun the laptop to face Novak, shoving it so hard that Rachel thought it might fly right off of his desk.

"I was right here," Reeves snapped, fast-forwarding through hours of footage showing him in a boardroom with several other people. The timestamp clearly showed him present from early evening through past midnight.

"I was here , in this damned building from eight in the morning until 12:30 at night. I was in an investors meeting that ran long." He stood, planting his hands on his desk. "You can verify with everyone who was there. Hell, check the building logs, the security cameras...watch this footage to your heart's content! Whatever you want." His voice rose with each word. "Now... anything else, agents?"

Rachel studied the footage playing on the screen. Reeves was clearly visible in most shots, engaged in what appeared to be a heated discussion with several other men in suits. But something about his eagerness to provide the alibi nagged at her. Maybe he was just pissed off, sure, but he seemed more defensive than the situation called for.

"These investors," she said carefully, "they wouldn't happen to be connected to EndLight, would they?"

Reeves's face reddened further. "Get out," he growled. "You want to ask more questions? Talk to my lawyers."

Rachel caught Novak's eye, giving him a subtle head shake. She recognized the look on Reeves's face—they'd pushed as far as they could without things getting ugly. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Reeves. We'll be in touch if we have any additional questions."

The walk back to the elevator was tense. She could feel Reeves watching them, his eyes boring into their backs as they left his office. Their footsteps echoing through the empty office. Rachel's mind was already racing ahead, plotting their next moves. They needed to dig deeper into EndLight and MedTech Solutions. Something wasn't adding up, but she couldn't put her finger on what. And as much as she'd love to keep thinking Reeves had something to do with it, she went back to the moment she had revealed Sandra's death to him. He had genuinely seemed to be shocked.

As they waited for the elevator, Rachel glanced back at Reeves's office. He was still standing at his desk, watching them. There was something in his posture that bothered her—a nervousness that seemed at odds with his alibi.

"He's hiding something," Novak muttered as they stepped into the elevator.

Rachel nodded. "Maybe. But what?" She pressed the lobby button, watching the doors slide closed. "And is it related to Sandra Mitchell's murder, or just the fraud?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "But he did seem legitimately shocked to hear about Sandra."

"Yeah, Novak said, sounding almost disappointed. "I noticed that, too."

As they came back into the lobby, they waved politely to Martinez, back at his place

behind the counter. He gave them a cheerful wave in return, but Rachel barely noticed. Her mind was already racing through possibilities, connections, leads to follow. They needed to touch base with Detective Wheeler, find somewhere to work through the evidence they had. It was becoming quite obvious that this case was going to keep them away from home for the night...and likely tomorrow as well.

As they walked to the car, Rachel felt the familiar tickle at the base of her skull—the one that always came when pieces were starting to fall into place, even if she couldn't see the full picture yet. After years on the job, she'd learned to trust that feeling.

"Let's call Wheeler," she said as they got into the car. "We need to find a place to set up for the night...see if we can find anything about EndLight and MedTech Solutions that might have fallen through the cracks. For all we know, they might be part of Reeves's financial fraud allegations."

Novak was already pulling out his phone, but Rachel barely heard him making the call. Her eyes were drawn back to the Carson Industries building, to Reeves's office high above. She felt as if he was looking down, watching...and it made her want to get answers even faster than before.

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The bare walls of apartment 1C seemed to pulse with anticipation. It was almost as if the very apartment itself was alive. David Morton—though that wasn't his real name—stood in the center of the sparse living room, surrounded by carefully arranged stacks of papers and photographs. The October wind whistled through a gap in the weatherstripping, making the photos flutter like butterfly wings. He looked out to the basement patio on the other side of the glass of his side door and watched the few fallen leaves from the street dance in the breeze.

He'd chosen this building carefully. Bottom floor, corner unit, clear sight lines to all approaches. The property manager hadn't asked too many questions when he'd paid six months' rent in advance. Cash spoke louder than references in a run-down place like this one.

A twin mattress lay directly on the floor in one corner, its military-precise hospital corners a habit he couldn't shake after a decade behind bars. A folding table and single chair occupied another corner. The walls remained bare except for one: his peculiar little shrine to Rachel Gift.

The triumphant survivor. The devoted mother. The dedicated agent. He stared down a clipped newspaper page. His fingers traced the headline: "Local FBI Agent Returns After Beating Terminal Diagnosis."

He'd spent his prison days dreaming of this moment, but reality had exceeded his darkest fantasies. Not only had she thrived while he rotted in that cell—she'd become some kind of inspiration. The sort of little news headline that they played at the start of the evening news to make people smile—to give them hope.

A laugh escaped his throat, dry and hollow as autumn leaves. "Terminal diagnosis," he whispered to the empty room. "You don't know the meaning of the word. Not yet."

His laptop screen cast a sickly blue glow across the room from its place on the old, second-hand desk he'd gotten at Goodwill. Browser tabs filled with every scrap of information he could find about her new life. Her marriage to Jack Rivers. A brief mention of her daughter in the obituary of her grandmother. He'd even managed to discover her volunteer work at Evergreen Valley Hospice, where she spent every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon "giving back" to terminal patients.

The hospice sign-in sheet—courtesy of a sympathetic janitor who hadn't asked why he needed it—lay on his folding table like a treasure map. Rachel's flowing signature appeared weekly, right on schedule. She was nothing if not reliable.

Moving to the kitchen, he opened the single cabinet above the sink. Inside sat one plate, one bowl, one cup. Minimum requirements for maintaining appearances. And that was fine. When he'd been in prison, he'd never dreamed he'd have a place like this again. It was a bit of a shithole, really, but it was also freedom.

He grabbed a bowl and then filled it with dry cereal. He ate it like that, using just his fingers, as he returned to the wall of Rachel, letting his eyes drift over the collection he'd assembled. Articles about her confrontation with Alex Lynch. Coverage of her recovery. A write up about the crazed Lynch devotee who had killed her grandmother and came for her kid. A grainy photo of her walking into the FBI building on her first day back.

"You think you know suffering," he murmured, reaching out to touch a photo of her smiling with her new husband. "Ten years, Agent Gift. Ten years while you built your perfect little life. While you played hero and survivor."

The wind picked up outside, rattling the loose window frame. He barely noticed, lost

in contemplation of his plans. The hospice volunteering—that was the key. Such a perfect symbol of her newfound lease on life. Her way of processing her brush with death by helping others face their own mortality.

That was where he'd have to strike. It would hurt her the most.

Moving to his laptop, he pulled up the hospice's staff directory. So many ways to hurt someone who had everything to lose. Rachel Gift had faced down killers. She'd beaten cancer. She probably thought herself invincible now.

But he knew better. He'd spent ten years studying how to break people who thought themselves unbreakable. Rachel Gift wasn't special. She was just another person with vulnerabilities, with pressure points, with soft spots that could be exploited.

"You should have let me be," he whispered to her image. "Should have been content with those petty charges. But you had to dig deeper. Had to find the truth. And now..."

He left the thought unfinished, moving to the window. Outside, the city was coming alive with evening lights. Somewhere out there, Rachel Gift was probably having dinner with her family, secure in the knowledge that she'd conquered every demon life had thrown at her. Or maybe she was out in the field, chasing down a killer.

He smiled at the thought. Her...chasing down killers when he was the most devious and dedicated of them all.

He pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the door to his basement patio, watching his breath fog the pane. Let her enjoy these moments while she could. Soon enough, she would learn what it truly meant to suffer. To watch helplessly as everything she cared about was stripped away.

He smiled at his own genius. After all, what better place to begin dismantling someone's life than in a building full of people already preparing for death?

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The police precinct parking lot was a patchwork of harsh shadows and yellow-white light cast by aging sodium lamps. Rachel watched those shadows flicker by as Novak pulled their car into an empty spot, the headlights briefly illuminating the weathered brick facade of the building in front of them.

Rachel sat for a moment, studying the building through the windshield. After two years away from active duty, these late-night visits to local precincts still felt both familiar and strange, like putting on an old jacket and finding it didn't quite fit anymore. The thought of Jack back home in a quiet house (with Paige at a friend's house) crossed her mind. She missed working cases with him, missed the shorthand they'd developed over years of partnership. Novak was capable enough, but it wasn't the same.

The precinct building seemed to huddle under the night sky. A flag hung limp and motionless above the entrance, and somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed—a sound Rachel had long ago learned to tune out. The few cars left in the lot were mostly patrol vehicles, their light bars dark, waiting for the next shift to bring them to life.

They stepped out into the night together and as they approached the entrance, their footsteps echoing across the nearly empty lot, Rachel again thought of the brief argument she and Novak had shared about the pods on their way to the site...about how Novak couldn't imagine ever using a device like the EndLight peaceful passage pods. Was there something inherently wrong with her because she could understand it?

The night air was cool against her face, carrying the metallic tang of approaching

rain. Weather reports had predicted storms moving in overnight, and Rachel could feel the pressure building in the atmosphere. It matched the tension she felt building in the case—something was coming, gathering force like the clouds above them.

Detective Wheeler was waiting for them just inside, his lean frame propped against the front desk. He looked exactly as Rachel had expected from their phone conversations: late forties, with tired eyes and the kind of thin, grizzled beard that suggested he often forgot to shave rather than made a conscious choice to grow it.

"Agents," he nodded, pushing himself away from the desk. His badge caught the fluorescent light as he moved, the gold dulled by years of wear. "Working late hours, I see?"

A quick round of introductions was made but it was clear that all three of them were eager to get down to business. Wheeler led them down a fluorescent-lit hallway. The walls were lined with the usual mix of community outreach posters and wanted bulletins, faces of the missing and the hunted staring out at them as they passed. Rachel had always thought there was something accusatory in those gazes, as if each face was asking why they hadn't been found yet.

The sound of their footsteps echoed off the institutional tile floor, mixing with the distant sound of phones ringing and the steady hum of computer fans. Even at this hour, the precinct wasn't completely quiet—crime never slept, and neither did those who fought it.

Wheeler guided them into a small conference room—more of a glorified closet, really. A scratched wooden table dominated the space, surrounded by four chairs that had seen better days. A whiteboard hung on one wall, spotted with ghostly remnants of previous cases, half-erased notes and diagrams that hinted at other mysteries, other crimes. The single window looked out onto the parking lot, its blinds casting prison-bar shadows across the table. A stack of file boxes sat in one corner, labeled with case

numbers in black marker.

"Not exactly the Ritz," Wheeler said with a self-deprecating smile, gesturing to the chairs. "But it'll do the job."

Novak set his laptop on the table, the movement stirring up a small cloud of dust that danced in the harsh overhead lighting. "We'll make it work. What can you tell us about this case that isn't in the initial reports?"

Wheeler pulled out one of the chairs, its legs scraping against the linoleum floor with a sound that made Rachel wince. He settled into it with the weariness of someone who'd spent too many hours in similar chairs.

"Sandra Mitchell was well-liked at her workplace. No enemies that we could find. We had the same conversations with the people she worked with, looking for anything. How about you two? Were you able to speak with Alana Townsend?"

Rachel leaned forward, her hands clasped on the table. "We were. And the plot thickens with her." She then explained their conversation with Alana, going into the financial fraud allegations and their ensuing visit to speak with Victor Reeves.

Wheeler processed it all, nodding. "Jesus. You guys have been all over the place today, huh? And in terms of Reeves...that doesn't surprise me. I've heard rumblings about him for years...the kind of guy who would sell his own kids if the price was right. But you said he checked out?"

"Seems that way."

"Also," Novak said, "Claire Mitchell—Sandra's sister—told us that Sandra attempted suicide almost two years ago. Seemed odd, given how she was killed."

"Yeah, we didn't get that out of the sister," Wheeler said. "But some good old detective work helped me find the very brief report. An ambulance was called out when she fell from that beam in the barn."

Rachel felt a chill run down her spine, despite the stuffiness of the small room.

Wheeler stood, his chair creaking. "Listen, we've been doing some digging into EndLight and MedTech Solutions. Got a pretty substantial file built up in the database. It's... well, it's something else."

"How so?" Rachel asked, watching as Wheeler moved to the computer terminal in the corner.

"Let me log you in, and you can see for yourself. It's interesting stuff. Morbid as hell, but interesting." His fingers moved across the keyboard, the clicking sounds echoing in the small space.

As Wheeler worked at the keyboard, Rachel studied the room more closely. A coffee maker sat in the corner, its carafe stained brown from years of use. The air smelled of stale coffee and printer paper, with an underlying hint of industrial cleaner. It was a room where countless horrible stories had been pieced together, where killers had been identified and victims had found justice. Now it would serve as their war room in the hunt for whoever was turning EndLight's "peaceful passage" technology into a weapon.

After getting them logged in, Wheeler headed for the door, pausing in the threshold. "Got a few other cases I need to check on, but call if you need anything. I mean that. And help yourself to the coffee—it's terrible, but it's hot."

Once he was gone, Rachel and Novak dove into the files. The information on EndLight painted a picture that was both fascinating and disturbing. Rachel found

herself absorbed in the technical details of the pods: the precise control of oxygen levels, the careful balance of gases, the multiple confirmations required before activation. Everything designed to be peaceful, controlled, humane, she thought, scrolling through page after page of specifications. Until someone stripped away all the safeguards.

But then, as she looked over the many other features, she found another detail that seemed to tie directly into their case.

"Look at this," she said to Novak, turning her laptop so he could see. The blue light from the screen cast strange shadows on his face. "The legitimate EndLight pods have tinted glass tops so users can see out. They're meant to be portable—people can choose to spend their final moments looking at something beautiful."

"Which explains our killer's choice of location," Novak muttered, his eyes never leaving his own screen. The reflection of endless lines of text scrolled across his glasses. "The woods, the view... he's perverting their intended purpose, but keeping elements of their design philosophy."

Rachel nodded, scrolling through more documents. "The waiting period is interesting too. The real pods have multiple confirmation requirements, fail-safes. Our killer's knock-off stripped all that away. Made it immediate and irreversible."

"Speaking of knock-offs," Novak said, finally looking up from his laptop, "I'm looking for any sign that the designs might have leaked. Someone would need detailed technical knowledge to recreate these, even in a simplified form. The engineering involved isn't simple. Which means our killer may have an engineering background."

Rachel was about to respond when something caught her eye in Wheeler's files. The timestamp showed it had been added just hours ago—a link from a news website

saved to the database. The article was less than a year old. "Hold that thought. Look at this..." She read over each line as she summed it up for Novak. "It looks like several engineers were fired from EndLight over ethical concerns about nine months ago. One in particular, Dr. Marcus Kent, was extremely vocal about safety protocols being ignored."

Novak leaned over to look, his chair squeaking in protest at the movement. "Looks like Wheeler already pulled his records too. Think he's worth talking to?"

Rachel checked the time: 11:42 PM. Late, but not too late for a house call in a murder investigation. She thought of Sandra Mitchell, of the killer who could potentially have another EndLight knock-off hiding somewhere out in the forests.

"Yeah," she said, already standing and gathering her things. "I think we need to pay him a visit. That address...maybe half an hour away?" The case files on her screen seemed to stare back at her, full of details that felt important but hadn't quite connected yet. "I think Dr. Kent might have quite a story to tell us."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The first thing Timothy Walsh noticed was the throbbing sensation. A deep, insistent pulse that seemed to radiate from the base of his skull down through his neck. His thoughts came in fragments, disconnected and hazy, like trying to recall a dream that was already fading.

Something's wrong. Something is very wrong.

The surface beneath him was hard, unyielding. Metal, maybe. A vibration hummed through his body, accompanied by a low rumble that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. When he tried to move, his muscles screamed in protest—and then he discovered he couldn't move at all. His wrists were bound behind his back, his ankles lashed together with what felt like rope.

Panic rose in his throat like bile. He tried to call out, but his voice was muffled by something pressed against his mouth. Duct tape. The adhesive pulled at his skin as his jaw worked uselessly against it.

And as his body strained to fight, to get free, to do anything , a roaring headache passed through his head like a thundercloud.

And this is what brought the events of the night crashing back into his consciousness like a wave breaking against rocks. He'd been at home, asleep. A sound from somewhere else in the house and woken him up. He's gotten out of bed and padding down the hallway in his bare feet, dressed in only his boxers. He was fully expecting to find his cat up to her usual midnight mischief. Not my cat, he thought in the back of the truck. Molly's cat. I never wanted the damned thing...

There had also been that brief, foolish moment of hope when he'd thought maybe his Molly had come home early from her hospital shift. But she never got off early, and he knew that. And then he'd seen the cat on the couch, half asleep itself.

The detail stuck in his mind, sharp and clear against the blur of everything else. The cat, perched on the arm of the sofa, her yellow eyes reflecting the dim light from the street outside. She'd been staring past him, into the kitchen.

Then movement. A shadow detaching itself from the darkness. The flash of a face—ordinary, unremarkable, yet somehow terrible in its plainness. Something whistling through the air. Pain exploding across his temple.

And now this.

The vehicle—he was certain now it was some kind of truck—hit a bump. Timothy's body left the floor for a fraction of a second before slamming back down. The side of his face caught the brunt of it. His head bounced against the metal, sending fresh waves of agony through his skull. The quality of the movement had changed. The steady hum of pavement had given way to an erratic jostling that suggested dirt or gravel.

They were leaving civilization behind.

His heart hammered against his ribs as the implications sank in. How long had he been unconscious? It was still dark outside, so not long. It had been about one in the morning when he'd woken up to the sound in his house. How would Molly react when she found the house empty, his phone still on the nightstand, his wallet untouched? Would she call the police?

Would anyone find him in time?

The suspension groaned as the truck navigated what felt like a particularly rough stretch of road. Timothy tried to control his breathing, fighting against the rising tide of panic. He needed to think. To plan. But his thoughts kept circling back to one terrible question:

Am I going to die tonight? And why have they taken me?

The truck suddenly lurched to a stop. The engine's rumble cut out, leaving behind a silence that seemed to press against Timothy's ears like a physical thing. A door creaked open, then slammed shut. Footsteps crunched on what sounded like gravel, growing closer.

Metal scraped against metal—the tailgate dropping. Cool night air rushed in, carrying with it the scent of pine needles and damp earth. Hands grabbed his ankles, rough and impersonal, and dragged him backward. He hit the ground hard, shoulder first, unable to break his fall with his bound hands. He let out a groan through his taped mouth. The night was dark, and he was on thick, rich grass. Dark trees loomed overhead, as if watching the scene play out.

The man—his kidnapper—began working at the ropes around his ankles. Timothy's mind raced. This was his chance. Once his legs were free, he could run. Fight. Do something. Anything.

The last of the rope fell away. Timothy kicked out wildly, trying to scramble to his feet. But his legs were numb from being bound, and his attacker was ready. A fist drove into his solar plexus, driving the air from his lungs in a whoosh. He doubled over, gasping uselessly against the tape covering his mouth, spots dancing at the edges of his vision.

Strong hands seized his arms, yanking him upright. He stumbled forward, propelled by series rough shoves. Through tear-blurred eyes, he took in his surroundings. Trees

stretched on all sides, their branches weaving together overhead to block out most of the starlight. The air was thick with the musty smell of decomposing leaves and old growth forest.

Then he saw it.

At first, his mind couldn't make sense of what he was looking at. It seemed absurdly out of place—a sleek, almost elegant structure nestled between three ancient trees. Its surfaces gleamed dully in the weak light, all curves and smooth panels that looked more like they belonged in a science fiction story than in these dark woods.

Recognition dawned slowly, horror close behind it. He'd seen something like this before. In technical drawings. In prototype designs. On nights when his sorrows had gotten the best of him and he wondered what it might be to...to just let it all go.

As they drew closer to it, his captor reached out to the thing, and its top came up with a pneumatic hiss.

Timothy's legs went weak. He knew with sudden, crushing certainty that he wouldn't be leaving these woods alive. The device in front of him like an open grave, its door ajar, beckoning him into its sterile embrace.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice whispered that perhaps this was justice. Perhaps this was what he deserved, after everything he'd helped create. After all the tests he'd run, all the data he'd analyzed.

All the times he'd looked the other way. Yes, this was what he deserved, and now, it might very well be time to face the music.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The sedan's headlights cut through the darkness of Higdon Hills, illuminating pristine sidewalks and meticulously maintained flower beds. Even at this hour, the neighborhood screamed old money—the kind that whispered rather than shouted. Three-story colonials and sprawling Tudor-style mansions loomed behind wrought iron gates and perfectly trimmed hedgerows, their windows dark except for the occasional security light.

Rachel watched the houses scroll past, each one easily worth seven figures. The streets were empty save for their car, the silence broken only by the purr of their engine and the soft crunch of fallen leaves beneath their tires. October had painted the neighborhood in shades of amber and burgundy, though in the darkness, everything took on a bluish tinge from the LED street lamps.

"Eight-fifteen Maple Grove," Novak muttered, slowing the car. "Should be coming up on the right."

They rounded a gentle curve, and Dr. Marcus Kent's house came into view. It was a modern interpretation of Mediterranean architecture—clean lines and stark white walls softened by terracotta roof tiles and generous arched windows. A curved driveway led to a two-car garage flanked by sculpted olive trees in massive ceramic planters.

Rachel checked her watch: 1:27 AM. She knew the protocol about late-night visits—knew they were pushing it—but the gnawing in her gut wouldn't let her wait until morning. Two years away from active duty hadn't dulled her instincts. If anything, her brush with death had sharpened them. A case this unpredictable meant that every minute counted. And if it meant waking up an apparently wealthy man at

1:30 in the morning, so be it.

They approached the front door, their footsteps echoing off the stone pavers. A Ring doorbell camera stared at them like a cyclopean eye. Rachel held her badge up to it, making sure the credentials were clearly visible in the infrared light. She figured the first thing Kent would do was check the footage before coming to the door at 1:30 in the morning.

Several moments passed. Rachel was about to press the doorbell when they heard movement inside—the soft thud of footsteps on stairs, the rattle of a security chain being removed, the mechanical hum of an electric lock being disengaged. The door opened to reveal a man in silk pajamas and a hastily donned robe, his silver hair disheveled from sleep. Deep lines around his mouth deepened as he frowned at them.

"What in God's name do you want at this hour?" His voice was rough with sleep but carried the precise diction of someone used to commanding attention.

Novak stepped forward, badge already out. "Dr. Kent? I'm Special Agent Novak, this is Special Agent Gift. We're with the FBI, and we need to speak with you about an urgent matter concerning."

"Concerning what, exactly?" he asked.

"EndLight."

Kent's expression shifted from annoyance to something more complex—worry, perhaps, or fear. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped back, gesturing them inside. Rachel noticed his hands trembling slightly as he did so.

As they entered, a woman's voice called out from somewhere above: "What in the hell is going on down there?"

"It's all right, Margaret," Kent called back. "Just give me a moment." He turned to Rachel and Novak. "Please, wait in there." He gestured to an archway on their right where a large sitting room awaited. He then walked halfway down a stunted hall and headed upstairs...likely to inform his wife of what was going on, Rachel assumed.

The sitting room was a study in understated luxury. Coffered ceilings soared fourteen feet overhead, while floor-to-ceiling windows looked out onto a moonlit garden. The furniture was all clean lines and rich fabrics—a pale gray sectional that probably cost more than Rachel's car, paired with leather club chairs in a warm cognac color. Abstract paintings in muted tones hung on the walls, while built-in shelves displayed what looked like first editions behind glass doors. A baby grand piano occupied one corner, its polished surface reflecting the soft light from Murano glass sconces.

Kent returned just a minute or two later, his robe now properly tied and his hair somewhat tamed. "Now then," he said, lowering himself into one of the leather chairs, "what's so urgent it couldn't wait until morning?"

Rachel decided to cut straight to the chase. "We understand that when you were fired from EndLight, you had voiced some major safety concerns. Can you tell us about those?"

The change in Kent was immediate and dramatic. His face drained of color, and his hands gripped the arms of his chair. "I—I can't discuss any of that without a warrant and my lawyer present. EndLight made it very clear what would happen if I broke the non-disclosure agreement."

"Dr. Kent," Rachel said, leaning forward, "someone has died, and we're currently working the case. We believe someone has reverse-engineered one of EndLight's pods and is using it to commit murder."

Kent's eyes widened, and for a moment, Rachel thought he might break. His mouth

opened, then closed, and she could see him wrestling with some internal decision.

"My God," he whispered, more to himself than to them. "Someone else made one?"

"It seems that way. It's very similar to the EndLight designs, only without the safety mechanism in place. No room for error, no series of commands to get it started. Once you're in...you're dead."

Kent looked furious but also, in an odd way, broken-hearted. "I warned them. I warned them this could happen."

"What could happen?" Rachel pressed, sensing a crack in his resolve. "Dr. Kent, please. Whatever you're afraid of, we can protect you."

He laughed bitterly. "Protect me? Doubtful. And even if you could, anything I say can have me end up in court...tied up in courtrooms and litigation for years. No, thank you."

"Dr. Kent," Rachel said softly, "whatever you know, whatever you're afraid of—it's not worth another life. Someone has used the idea and design of a project you once worked on and used it as a killing machine."

For a long moment, Kent seemed to be on the verge of speaking. Rachel could almost see the words forming on his lips. But then his eyes darted to a family photo on the mantel—him, his wife, and what looked like grandchildren—and the moment passed.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "All I can say is that, yes, I had serious concerns about EndLight's safety protocols. Anything more than that—I just can't. Please understand."

"And while I am very sorry to hear that, it does not change the fact that I can get into

a world of trouble if I talk about anything related to EndLight. If you need further proof of this, I can give you the number of my lawyers.”

"What about the schematics?" Novak pressed, clearly sensing that this was currently leading a dead end. "Were you worried about them being leaked?"

Kent stood abruptly, his hands shaking more noticeably now. "I think you should go now. Please. I'm sorry I can't be more help, but I have my family to think about." His eyes kept darting to the windows, as if expecting to see someone watching.

Rachel wanted to push harder, but she recognized the fear in Kent's eyes. Whatever he knew, whatever he'd seen at EndLight, it had him terrified. They let him escort them to the door, the tension in his shoulders visible even through his robe.

“Can you at least confirm that you did indeed express safety concerns over certain aspects of the design?” Rachel asked.

Kent nodded, but just barely. “Yes. It’s one of the primary reasons they terminated me. It was when I remained vocal after they released me that they started threatening me with severe legal action.” He eyed them both for a moment, a pleading look settling into his gaze. “I really do wish...I wish I could help you.”

You can, you coward, Rachel thought. But she knew that wasn’t fair to him. She only nodded her thanks as she and Novak made their way back to the door. “Sorry to have woken you,” she said as they opened the door—but she didn’t mean it.

The night air felt colder as they walked back to their car. Rachel's mind raced, trying to piece together Kent's behavior with what they already knew. Ultimately, this visit did little to help push the case along...only that some of the higher-ups involved with EndLight didn’t take kindly to their employees—past or present—voicing concerns over safety and protocols. And that, she supposed, said a lot.

She was so wrapped up in these thoughts that when her phone buzzed in her pocket, she jumped a bit in mild fright. Embarrassed, she dug it out and an unsaved local number. She answered it as Novak looked over to her, curious.

“This is Agent Gift,” she said.

“Gift, it’s Detective Wheeler.” His voice was tight and worried.

“Hey, detective. What’s up?”

There was a moment of hesitation before he answered. "We've got another one. Another pod...another victim."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

Novak guided the sedan down yet another dirt road and Rachel watched as their headlights cut through the pre-dawn darkness like dull knives. Here and there, the headlights illuminated patches of mist that hung between the trees. It was 3:05 in the morning when they pulled up behind the row of police cruisers. She noted that none of the cruisers were flashing their reds and blues, wanting to keep any possibly prying eyes away.

Rachel stepped out of the passenger side, her boots crunching on gravel that had spilled over from the nearby access road. The sound seemed unnaturally loud in the otherwise quiet scene, where even the usual nighttime chorus of crickets and owls had been silenced by the human intrusion. Above them, a waning moon hung like a crooked smile between breaks in the cloud cover, casting weak shadows through the leafless branches of maple and oak trees. The air held that particular kind of October chill that seemed to crystallize everything it touched, making the entire scene feel brittle and breakable.

The woodland setting should have been peaceful—the kind of place where teenagers might come to stargaze or elderly couples might walk their dogs during daylight hours. Instead, it had been transformed into something else entirely. Three portable flood lights cast harsh white circles on the ground, creating islands of artificial day in the darkness. The nervous chatter of uniformed officers floated through the air, their voices kept low as if they were afraid to disturb something that was already irreversibly disturbed.

"There's Wheeler," Rachel said, nodding toward a tall figure speaking with a uniformed officer near one of the cruisers. As she and Novak approached, their footsteps synchronized without conscious effort, Rachel's attention was drawn to the

edge of the woods. Three officers stood in a loose semi-circle around something she couldn't quite make out, their flashlight beams converging on a single point like spotlights on a stage.

But she already knew what it was. It was another pod. A fake peaceful passage pod.

Wheeler turned as they approached, his face grave in the mixed lighting. The officer beside him shifted his weight from foot to foot, his hands fidgeting with the notepad he held. He was young, maybe twenty-five, with the beginning of a pot belly straining against his uniform shirt. Despite the hour and the circumstances, there was an unmistakable gleam of excitement in his eyes—the look of someone who had stumbled onto something bigger than their usual beat.

"Agent Gift, Agent Novak," Wheeler nodded to them both. "This is Officer Muntz. He's the one who made the discovery an hour ago." Wheeler turned to the younger officer. "Officer, tell them what you told me, would you?"

Muntz straightened his posture, clearly practiced at giving reports but nervous about his audience. He also looked slightly bothered by the discovery he'd made.

"Yes, sir. I was out on routine patrol, sir—ma'am," he corrected himself, glancing at Rachel. "Had my usual spot on Route 16, watching for speeders and drunk drivers. We get a few of them usually...between midnight and four on Saturdays. Anyway...it was dead quiet, hadn't seen a car in over half an hour. I was actually about to pack it in when I caught something out of the corner of my eye."

He gestured eastward, where the tree line disappeared into darkness. "Headlights, out in the woods. But they were where they shouldn't be—out on those old dirt roads by Bates Pond." He shook his head. "That pond's been dried up for years now. Nothing out there but old beer cans and deer tracks. Made me think maybe it was kids looking for a make out spot, or..." He lowered his voice, "maybe a drug deal going down. You

never know out here."

Rachel noticed how his hand kept moving to his utility belt as he spoke, touching his radio, then his flashlight, then back to his radio—a nervous tick that betrayed his youth and inexperience with major cases.

"I knew I wouldn't catch them in time," Muntz continued. "It was about a mile between my position and the entrance to the dirt road—the very dirt road we're standing on, you know—and from the way the lights were moving, I knew they were already leaving. So I just wasn't going to catch them. But something just felt off about it, you know? So I figured I'd drive over, take a look around." His eyes darted toward the woods. "That's when I found... well..."

He stopped and nodded over to the small cluster of cops along the tree line.

"Thank you, Officer," Novak said. "Good work."

They nodded their thanks to Muntz and Wheeler, and Rachel was already moving toward the gathered officers at the tree line with Novak close behind. As they approached, the outline of the suicide pod emerged from the darkness like a sleeping beast. It was identical to the previous one—the same sleek design, the same clinical whiteness that seemed to glow under the officers' flashlights. Someone had already opened the lid, and Rachel's stomach tightened at what lay inside.

Timothy Walsh looked peaceful, almost as if he were sleeping. He was dressed only in a pair of boxers, the front of which was slightly caked with dirt. His brown hair was mussed, and there was a bruise along the side of his head. Rachel noticed a scratch on his wrist as well. When she leaned in closer and examined it by the glare of the spotlights behind her, it looked more like an abrasion.

Wheeler's voice came from behind them. "The victim is a thirty-nine-year-old local

named Timothy Walsh. One of the officers on the scene knows him personally; they're in a pickleball league together." There was a slight catch in his voice—the kind that only appeared when a case struck close to home. "His wife works at the hospital... we had a unit drive over there to break the news."

Rachel reached out, gently touching Timothy's wrist, but a good distance away from the abrasion she'd spotted. The skin yielded slightly under her touch, still holding the last remnants of warmth. "He's still warm. This is recent." Her voice carried the weight of what that meant—they had missed their killer by mere hours, maybe even minutes.

"Jesus," Novak said. "What if the headlights Muntz saw were the killer? What if it's that recent?"

Rachel didn't say so, but she very much thought this was the case.

Novak seemed to be bothered by this idea and had moved to the edge of the road, where the gravel and dirt gave way to grass and pine needles. He crouched down, his flashlight beam scanning the ground in methodical sweeps.

"These skid marks are just as recent as the death," he said, tracing the beam along dark scuffs in the dirt. "Looks like a fight... some kind of struggle." The light moved to a depression in the grass. "And there's the edge of a tire track here... it's recent too."

Rachel joined him, studying the scene. The story was written in the disturbed earth and broken vegetation. Here, the mark of a heel drag where Timothy had tried to brace himself. There, a wider scuffle mark where he had likely been overtaken. The trajectory led straight to the pod like a cruel breadcrumb trail.

The forest around them seemed to press in closer, its darkness holding secrets just beyond the reach of their lights. A slight breeze stirred the branches overhead,

creating moving shadows that made every officer on scene glance up nervously. Rachel could see their reflection in the pod's open lid—a bizarre light show playing across its surface like some twisted carnival attraction.

She stood slowly, her eyes moving from the pod to the tire tracks and back again. The same questions that had plagued the previous scene rose up like ghosts: How were these pods being manufactured? Who had the technical knowledge to replicate EndLight's proprietary technology? And most disturbing of all, how were they being placed here, in these remote locations, without anyone noticing?

The crime scene technicians were arriving now, their van crunching up the gravel road. Soon the area would be a hive of activity—photos taken, evidence bagged, measurements made, the coroner having a peek. But Rachel knew the most important elements of the scene were already disappearing. The warmth leaving Timothy's body with each passing minute. The headlights that Muntz had seen, now long gone down some dark road, carrying their secrets with them.

She looked at Timothy's face one more time, committing it to memory. In death, his features had settled into an expression that might have been peaceful if not for the violent story told by the ground around him. Another victim. Another family shattered. Another piece in a puzzle that seemed to grow more complex with each new discovery.

The world around them was beginning to lighten imperceptibly as dawn approached, but Rachel knew this case was leading them into darker territory. Somewhere out there, someone was building these pods, choosing their victims, and executing their plans with terrifying precision. And unless they could find them soon, Timothy Walsh would not be the last name on their growing list of victims. Who knew how many more of these pods were out there?

The crime scene techs began to set up their equipment, the sounds of cases being

opened and cameras being checked adding to the quiet chaos of the scene. Rachel turned to Novak and Wheeler, both still studying the ground with intense concentration.

"We need to get search parties out into these forests," she said. "Drones, helicopters, whatever it takes. If there are more of these things out there, we need to find them. It would be like disarming a killer, in a way."

Wheeler nodded and she could see him thinking, trying to put together the pieces of what needed to be done to get that sort of manpower and effort together. "I can work on it on the State level. You think the bureau can lend a hand?"

"I'll make the call right now," Novak said.

"What else do you need from me?" Wheeler asked.

Rachel thought it over for a moment before asking, "You said the victim's wife works at a hospital. Where's it located?"

"Leesburg...about half an hour outside of town. A forty-minute drive."

"You said a unit was on the way, right?"

"Yeah, probably already there."

"When the officers are done speaking with his wife, I need to talk to them. I need to know anything they find from her. And if you don't mind...can you reach out to them and make sure they ask one particular question?"

"Yeah, I can do that," Wheeler said. "What do you need?"

It crept her out to even think such a thing while standing in these dark forests just ten feet from the recently dead body of Timothy Walsh. But in that moment, it seemed like the most important thing of all.

“Have them ask her if at any point during his life, did Timothy ever attempt to kill himself.”

Wheeler’s face went slack for a moment, almost a brief state of shock. But he nodded as he took his phone from his pocket and turned away to make the call.

The forest watched silently as they worked, its shadows holding close whatever secrets it had witnessed in the hours before their arrival. Above them, the moon continued its slow arc across the sky, indifferent to the human drama unfolding beneath its pale light. Another day was beginning, but for Timothy Walsh, time had stopped at the moment he was forced into that pod—another victim in a case that seemed to grow darker with each passing hour.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The suicide pod gleamed under the harsh portable floodlights, its brushed steel surface reflecting fractured beams across the forest floor. Rachel stood before it, her shadow stretching long and dark against the surrounding trees. The night had grown colder since they'd arrived, and her breath escaped in visible puffs that dissipated into the darkness.

She studied the device, almost feeling bad for its creators. Peaceful passage pods. She figured you could call them whatever you wanted, but their main intentions would always mar any name you gave them. Suicide. Even someone like her, who understood and appreciated the thought and intention behind them, had to admit that there were dark and slightly morbid undertones.

Inside the pod, Timothy Walsh's body remained untouched, waiting for the medical examiner's team. His face was frozen in an expression that Rachel couldn't quite read – something between terror and resignation. The pod's interior lights cast an unnaturally blue glow across his features, making him look almost artificial, like a mannequin posed in death. His attire – just a light blue tee shirt and boxer shorts – seemed incongruous with the surrounding wilderness, as if he'd been plucked from his ordinary life and dropped into this nightmare. Which, she supposed, was probably very much the case.

Rachel's eyes traced the pod's smooth contours, noting how its design masked its lethal purpose behind sleek modernism. The whole thing looked more like a piece of high-end furniture than a death machine. If this was indeed inspired by the EndLight models, the creator had done an amazing job...and they'd obviously studied the inspiration for it on a nearly molecular level.

She was pulled away from her observations by the voice of Detective Wheeler. "Agents?" he said, hurrying over to them from a small group of police officers he'd been speaking to. "I've got one of the officers who spoke with Walsh's wife on the line."

Rachel moved away from the pod, grateful for the distraction from her dark thoughts. She and Novak joined Wheeler as he placed the call on speaker mode. The rustling of dead leaves under her feet seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet forest. A cool breeze stirred the branches above them, creating moving shadows that danced across the crime scene.

"Officer Koontz?" Wheeler said. "I'm here with Agents Gift and Novak."

"Hey there, agents."

"Officer," Rachel said, "are you still at the hospital with Mrs. Walsh?"

"I'm at the hospital, but no longer with Mrs. Walsh. She is currently on her way home now. One of her coworkers is driving her, and her sister and mother are meeting her there."

Rachel nodded, though Koontz couldn't see it. She'd seen enough grieving families to know Molly Walsh shouldn't be alone tonight. The first night was always the worst – when the shock began to wear off and reality started seeping in through the cracks. She remembered her own first night after losing Peter, how the darkness had seemed to press in from all sides until she thought she might suffocate from it.

"What did you learn?" Novak asked.

There was a pause on the line, the sound of papers shuffling. "Well, we found something interesting. Like Sandra Mitchell, Timothy Walsh had a history with

suicide attempts."

Rachel's eyes snapped to the pod, her mind already racing ahead. Next to her, she felt Novak tense. The wind picked up, rattling through the trees and carrying with it the musty scent of decaying leaves and damp earth.

"Go on," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady.

"Two attempts, both in his early twenties. Overdoses, painkillers both times." Koontz cleared his throat. "But that's not the most interesting part." Another pause, more shuffling. "We did some digging into his employment history. Mr. Walsh had a direct connection to EndLight."

"What kind of connection?" Rachel asked, feeling the pieces started to click together.

"He did consulting work for them, about six months during their early development phase. He was involved in programming their prototype interface." Koontz's voice took on an edge of excitement. "Molly Walsh confirmed this. She says there's contracts and paperwork at home somewhere but, to be frank, I wasn't about to ask her for access to all of that while she'd just been told her husband was dead."

Rachel looked at Novak, who was already staring at her, his expression grim. The implications hung heavy in the air between them.

"Thank you, Officer Koontz," Rachel said. "This is extremely helpful."

She nodded to Wheeler and he took the call off of speaker mode, hanging up. Once the call was ended, silence fell between them. The forest seemed to press in closer, the darkness between the trees deeper than before. The portable floodlights hummed, creating pools of harsh white light that made the shadows beyond them seem impenetrable. In those shadows, Rachel could almost imagine someone watching,

waiting, planning their next move.

She walked back to the pod, her footsteps deliberate. The machine's sleek design belied its lethal purpose. She studied the control panel, noting the rather simple interface that Timothy Walsh himself might have helped design. The thought sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the night air.

"Let's lay it out," Novak said. "Both victims had attempted suicide in the past."

"Both were professionals," Rachel added, her eyes still on the pod. "Sandra Mitchell was an accountant who'd uncovered financial fraud. Timothy Walsh was a software developer who'd worked directly with EndLight's technology."

"Both were found in identical pods, in remote locations," Novak added. "Both showed signs of struggle. Both had connections, however tenuous, to EndLight."

Rachel leaned closer to the pod's entrance, examining the interior more carefully. The padding on the seat showed signs of disturbance, consistent with someone fighting against restraints. There were scratch marks on the inner panel, barely visible but unmistakable to her trained eye. She could almost see Timothy Walsh's final moments – the desperate struggle, the realization that this wasn't his choice anymore.

"He fought hard," she murmured. "Just like Sandra Mitchell." She traced a finger along one of the scratch marks. "These aren't deep enough to be from a weapon. He used his fingernails."

The wind picked up, whistling through the trees. In the distance, an owl called, the sound echoing eerily through the forest. Rachel straightened up, her mind piecing together the pattern she saw emerging.

"These weren't random victims," she said, turning to face Novak. "The killer knew

about their past suicide attempts. Knew about their connections to EndLight, whether direct or indirect." She gestured at the pod. "This isn't just about murder. Not completely, I don't think. It's about perverting something these people survived. Taking their darkest moments and turning them into weapons."

Novak nodded slowly, his face cast in shadows. "The question is, what's the endgame? Why these specific people? What did they know?"

Rachel looked back at Timothy Walsh's body. His hand was slightly raised, as if reaching for something – or someone. The blue light from the pod's interior made his skin look waxy, artificial. She thought about Sandra Mitchell, found in an identical position, in an identical pod, her final moments just as violent and terrifying.

"We need to go to EndLight," she said finally. "Tomorrow morning. Their corporate headquarters in Charlottesville."

"That's a two-and-a-half hour drive," Novak said, checking his watch. The fluorescent display read 3:42 AM.

Rachel's lips curved in a grim smile. "Not like either of us is going to get any sleep tonight anyway."

They stood there for a moment longer, watching as the crime scene technicians worked methodically around them, photographing, measuring, collecting evidence. The forest seemed to breathe around them, alive with shadows and whispered sounds. The pod continued to gleam under the floodlights, its surface pristine except for the places where Timothy Walsh had tried to fight for his life.

Rachel felt the familiar tension building in her shoulders, the same tension she'd carried through countless investigations. But this was different. This wasn't just about murder – it was about someone taking people's darkest moments, their most

vulnerable times, and turning them into weapons. Using their past pain to inflict new trauma.

The sound of approaching vehicles broke through her thoughts – the medical examiner's team, finally arriving to collect Timothy Walsh's body. Their headlights cut through the trees, creating new shadows that danced and shifted across the crime scene. Soon, the pod would be empty, just another piece of evidence to be photographed, documented, and analyzed. But Rachel knew the answers they needed wouldn't be found in the physical evidence alone.

They needed to understand EndLight. Their technology, their people, their secrets. Tomorrow, they would begin to peel back those layers, no matter what they might find beneath. Rachel had a feeling that Timothy Walsh's work on the prototype interface was just the tip of a very dark iceberg.

As she watched the medical examiner's team begin their work, Rachel couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time. Somewhere out there, the killer was watching, waiting, perhaps already planning their next move. And all they had were questions, each answer leading to two more mysteries.

“Well, what are we waiting for then?” Novak said. “Let’s make our way out to Charlottesville.”

The night grew colder, and the forest darker, as she and Novak headed for their car. As she got into the passenger seat, she looked over to the pod one last time, where the ME was getting his first good look at the body—the second victim of a killer who was apparently smart enough to create these mock suicide pods while also staying several steps ahead of the authorities.

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The morning sun cast long shadows across EndLight's nearly empty parking lot as Rachel and Novak pulled in at 8:05. Rachel nursed the last of her coffee, still warm from their breakfast stop at the diner where they'd spread case files across the worn Formica table, piecing together what they knew so far.

That had been an hour and a half ago, a little pit stop where Rachel had also done some basic online research on EndLight, trying to figure out who they'd need to speak to if they wanted the most direct route to useful information. It was there, with an omelet eaten and a second cup of coffee perched beside her, that she'd learned that Diana Tatum was their best bet.

Tatum had been the CEO since EndLight's controversial founding five years ago. She was a former biotech executive with degrees from MIT and Stanford. She had a reputation for not just sitting behind a desk and ordering people around; she was apparently also known for being hands-on with product development. Almost obsessive about quality control.

"Well, there are a grand total of five cars in this parking lot," Novak said. "I doubt there's a good chance any of them are the CEO of the company."

"Well, if not, I did pull her address from the bureau database," Rachel pointed out. "And the woman must love her job because her address is just three and a half miles from here."

"Damn, that's dedication," Novak said.

He pulled their sedan into a space near the front entrance. The EndLight headquarters

rose before them, a structure that seemed to defy conventional architecture. Despite its modest size—just four stories—the building appeared to have been designed by someone with a distinctly modernist vision. Curved glass panels wrapped around the exterior like ribbons, creating an almost organic flow that reminded Rachel uncomfortably of the pods they'd been investigating. The morning light caught the glass at odd angles, making the building seem to shift and move as they approached, its surfaces rippling like liquid mercury.

Steel support beams, visible through the glass, curved and intersected in patterns that seemed both random and precisely calculated. The overall effect was unsettling—beautiful, but with an underlying sense of something not quite natural, as if the building itself was trying to seduce visitors into accepting its twisted version of reality.

"Looks like something out of a movie," Novak muttered as they approached the main entrance. "The kind where the evil corporation is doing experiments on people."

Rachel shot him a sharp look. "That's not helping."

The main entrance was set back in a curved alcove, its doors made of the same flowing glass as the rest of the structure. Steel accents in matte black provided a stark contrast, including a sleek intercom box mounted beside what appeared to be an after-hours mail slot. The company logo—a stylized "E" that seemed to be breaking free from its own constraints—was etched into the glass above the doors.

Rachel tested the door. Locked, as she'd suspected.

"Sunday morning," Novak muttered, reaching for the intercom. "I doubt this will do any good."

He pressed the call button once, waited, then again. On the third try, a woman's voice

crackled through the speaker, the sound quality surprisingly crisp for an intercom system. She sounded tired and annoyed that she was being bothered.

"This is Miranda Holt, production engineering. Who's trying to access the building at this hour on a Sunday?"

Rachel stepped forward, her voice clear and authoritative. "Special Agents Gift and Novak with the FBI. We need to speak with Diana Tatum regarding an ongoing investigation. It's urgent, please. Is she here?"

The silence that followed stretched so long that Novak's hand drifted toward the call button again. Rachel could feel tension building in her shoulders. Finally, the voice returned: "Mrs. Tatum will meet you in the lobby in five minutes. The doors are now unlocked for you."

Novak looked over to her and shrugged as if to say: Sure. I'll take it. They walked inside, Novak opening the tall glass door and holding it for Rachel as she stepped inside.

The lobby was a study in calculated minimalism that took Rachel's breath away—not with its beauty, but with its careful precision. The ceiling soared two stories high, with a geometric light fixture that cast intricate shadows across the pale marble floor. The shadows shifted and danced as clouds passed overhead, creating patterns that seemed almost hypnotic.

Modern artwork adorned the walls—abstract pieces that seemed to echo the building's exterior design. One particularly large canvas caught Rachel's attention: swirls of deep blue and black that suggested both comfort and oblivion. It was eerily fitting, given what EndLight dealt it. Rachel quickly looked away, disturbed by how easily she'd made that connection.

The waiting area featured low-slung leather chairs in chrome frames arranged around a glass coffee table that appeared to float above the floor. The leather was butter-soft and cool against Rachel's back as she sat down.

Novak remained standing, pacing slowly as he took in the space. "Hell of a place," he said quietly. "Everything's so... perfect."

Rachel nodded. Everything about the space spoke of precision and control, from the perfectly spaced potted plants to the way the morning light filtered through carefully positioned skylights. It was beautiful, but there was something almost clinical about it that made her skin crawl. The air itself seemed precisely temperature-controlled, not a degree too warm or too cool.

The soft ping of the elevator from the far right of the space drew their attention. Diana Tatum emerged, her heels clicking purposefully across the marble floor in a rhythm that echoed off the high ceiling. She was tall, with short silver hair cut in an expensive asymmetrical style that emphasized her sharp cheekbones. Her charcoal suit looked as if it had been tailored within the last hour, despite the early Sunday hour. Everything about her screamed precision and control—exactly like her building.

"Mrs. Tatum," Rachel said, rising to meet her. "Thank you for seeing us."

"Of course." Diana's voice was clipped, professional, but Rachel caught a slight tremor underneath the polished exterior. "Though I admit, it's not typical for me to be here at this hour on a Sunday."

"And yet here you are," Rachel observed, watching carefully for her reaction.

A flash of something—worry, perhaps, or fear—crossed Diana's face. "We're here for the same reason you are, I suppose. As soon as we heard about this knock-off

machines.. someone stealing our design..." She paused, composing herself, one manicured hand absently adjusting her jacket. "When we learned someone had been killed in what appeared to be one of our pods, I assembled a team immediately. We've been calling every site where we currently have units installed, making sure this isn't one of ours."

Rachel watched the woman carefully. The distress in her voice seemed genuine, her hands clasped tightly together as she spoke. Despite the perfect appearance, there were signs of strain —slight shadows under her eyes that makeup couldn't quite conceal, a barely noticeable tremor in her hands.

"Mrs. Tatum," Rachel said gently, "I need to inform you that a second victim has been found in another pod."

Diana's professional facade cracked. Her hand flew to her mouth, and Rachel could see her fighting to maintain composure, tears threatening to spill over. "Oh God," she whispered. "This can't be happening. Our pods... they're meant to provide peace, dignity. Not this. Never this."

"Yes, we know. And having seen these pods up close, we can confirm that while they bear many similarities to your peaceful passage pods, there are just enough differences to confirm that they do seem to be recreations...knock-offs, as you said."

"We should ask, though," Novak said, "if you have been able to account for all of your pods?"

Diana took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders as she regained control. A ray of sunlight caught her hair, making the silver strands gleam like polished steel. "We've located all but one." Her voice wavered slightly. "The location-sharing feature has been overridden somehow, and we can't reach anyone at the facility where it's supposed to be."

Rachel and Novak exchanged glances. In the soaring lobby of EndLight's headquarters, with morning sun streaming through the windows, Rachel felt a chill run down her spine. One pod is unaccounted for. One pod that could be anywhere, with anyone. Could it have been used as the template and inspiration for the two they'd seen? The perfect murder weapon, designed with all the precision and attention to detail that surrounded them in this very lobby.

"Tell me everything you know about that pod," Rachel said.

Diana nodded, sinking into one of the chrome and leather chairs. In the harsh morning light streaming through the geometric skylights, she suddenly looked much older, much more aware of the evil her company had inadvertently inspired.

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Rachel fought the urge to pace. After years of working homicide cases, she'd developed an almost visceral reaction to watching time slip away while a killer remained free. Each second that ticked by felt like another grain of sand through an hourglass, another moment someone else might die. And the odd, morbid nature of this case was making it so much worse.

"One pod," Diana repeated, her voice echoing slightly in the vast space. "One peaceful passage pod unaccounted for." She pushed herself back a bit more into the chair, as if hoping it might swallow her up and take her away from this conversation. "It was delivered to a small experimental hospice center in Woodbridge just two days ago."

Rachel's stomach clenched. Hospice centers had, after all, become quite near and dear to her heart. Over the past year or so. It made the entire ordeal feel more personal. She glanced at Novak, who stood with his back to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, his frame silhouetted against the afternoon light.

A young employee hurried past them, heels clicking against the polished floor, the sound emphasizing the gravity of their conversation. Rachel shifted her weight, positioning herself to block the woman's view of Diana's increasingly distressed face. The contrast between the lobby's serene atmosphere and the darkness of their discussion felt almost obscene.

"And the staff?" Novak pressed, his voice pitched low to avoid carrying across the lobby. "No one has contacted you back?"

Diana shook her head, her perfectly styled hair catching the light. "We've tried

everything. Calls, emails, texts – three different people are responsible for that pod on-site. Not one of them has responded." She sighed and stared out into the morning through the massive windows. "It's not like them. These are dedicated healthcare professionals. They understand the importance of maintaining contact."

Rachel felt the familiar pull, that nagging instinct that told her to get in the car and drive the four hours to Woodbridge right now—to hunt down that missing pod. But experience had taught her that sometimes the most valuable information came from staying put, from pressing just a little harder where you already stood. She'd learned that lesson the hard way, through years of cases where rushing in had meant missing crucial details.

She studied Diana's face, noting the shadows under her eyes poorly concealed by expensive makeup. The CEO's polished demeanor was cracking, revealing the worried woman beneath. Small lines around her mouth betrayed nights of lost sleep, of wrestling with the knowledge that her company's creation had been perverted into something monstrous.

"Ms. Tatum," Rachel said, choosing her words carefully, "during our investigation, we spoke with Dr. Marcus Kent." She paused, watching for any reaction. "He had some rather strong opinions about EndLight's safety protocols. Strong enough to get him fired, from what we understand."

Diana also apparently had issues standing still when she was anxious; she stood from the chair less than two minutes after taking it and began to pace slowly. She smoothed her skirt with trembling hands, a nervous gesture that reminded Rachel of Paige when she was trying to hide something.

"Dr. Kent," Diana said slowly, "was instrumental in developing our existing safety protocols. But he... he became fixated on implementing measures that would have required a complete overhaul of our control panels." She began to pace, her heels

marking a steady rhythm on the polished floor. "We tried to work with him, to find compromises, but he wouldn't hear of it."

Novak stepped away from the window, moving closer to their small group. His shadow stretched across the floor, distorted by the angle of the sun. "Was he ever concerned about replication? About someone copying the technology?"

The color drained from Diana's face as she slowly began to nod. "Yes, actually. He became obsessed with it." She glanced around the lobby, as if afraid there might be someone hiding in plain sight, listening in. "We brought in outside experts – three different firms we chose, plus one Kent selected himself. All four reached the same conclusion: the pods were safe and functional as designed."

A security guard passed by, nodding respectfully to Diana. Rachel noticed how the CEO's shoulders tensed until he was out of earshot. The woman's eyes followed him across the lobby, and Rachel wondered what secrets she was still holding back.

"But you had to let him go," Rachel prompted, stepping closer to maintain their bubble of privacy.

"He just wouldn't let it go," Diana confirmed, resuming her pacing. Each turn was precise, mechanical, like she was trying to maintain control through sheer force of will. "And then, when we terminated his contract, we discovered something else. He'd been working on an alternative design before he was terminated, one that we rejected. But he picked it back up and started spending company time and resources on it, without authorization."

"Why was his design rejected?" Rachel asked, though she suspected she already knew the answer.

"Too complex," Diana said, but something in her tone made Rachel's instincts

prickle. There was more there, something unspoken. Rachel. Her hand rose to her throat, adjusting a necklace that wasn't there – another nervous tell.

"Ms. Tatum," Rachel said carefully, "would someone with Dr. Kent's knowledge be capable of overriding not just the location features, but all the safety protocols in the current design?"

Diana's face went ash-white. She clutched her tablet tighter, knuckles whitening. The device made a small creaking sound under the pressure. "Yes," she whispered. "That's been my fear since we learned about the first murder."

"From what we've seen on these fake pods, the controls are almost too simple," Novak said. "And there appears to be no failsafe at all."

"My God," Diana said. "I can't...I can't even imagine who would do this."

"Do you think Kent would be capable of it?"

Diana looked almost heartbroken when she answered. "Technically, from an engineering standpoint, yes. Without a doubt. But...even though we disagreed on a lot, I'd have a very hard time picturing him as a murderer."

Rachel met Novak's eyes across the space between them. They'd already had Kent in their sights, had already been to his house. Now, the pieces were starting to align in a way that made Rachel's pulse quicken. A brilliant engineer, pushed out of his position, working on unauthorized designs. A man who knew the technology inside and out, who had been vocal about its vulnerabilities. Most importantly, a man with a grudge. She knew that Diana Tatum's feelings that Kent would not be capable of murder may mean nothing. So often, killers hid perfectly in plain sight.

Rachel thought of the hospice center in Woodbridge, of the silence at the other end of

Diana's calls and messages. How many more bodies would they find before this was over?

"Thank you for your honesty, Ms. Tatum," Rachel said, already mentally mapping their route to Kent's house. It would be several hours, but it was a drive they had to take. "If we need anything else—"

"Please," Diana interrupted, reaching out to touch Rachel's arm. Her fingers were ice-cold. "Call me anytime. Day or night. I can't..." she swallowed hard. "I can't bear the thought of another death. Not when we created these pods to help people, to give them peace."

At that moment, Diana's cell phone rang. She jumped a bit and then reached into the pocket of her slacks to pull it out. "It's the Woodbridge facility," she said in a whisper. Rachel noticed that her hands were trembling as she answered the call.

"Hello?...yes. We've been calling all of the facilities with a pod. The location setting on the one you have is...yes. What? What? And no one bothered to tell me?"

Rachel watched as a huge range of emotion played out on Diana's face. Horror, anger, sadness, worry. She nearly asked her to put the call on speaker mode, but she could tell it was already winding down.

"That is absolutely unacceptable in so many ways!" Diana nearly screamed into the phone. "Yes, well, I don't care. I want every single bit of information you have on that shipping manifesto...right down to the driver's name. Do you understand?"

There was a moment of pause as Rachel assumed, the person on the other end stammered out an apology or confirmation. And then Diana ended the call and looked to both of them. She was still trembling and her face still looked as if it was having a very difficult time deciding on an emotion.

“That was the vice-president of the facility,” she said. “She says the truck delivering their pod was supposed to show up yesterday at around three in the afternoon. But not only did it ever show up, but because it was a Saturday no one even made an effort to report it! So we’ve got a pod floating around out there...and...and...Christ, this is a mess.”

“But I heard you request the shopping manifest and related information,” Rachel said. “That was a smart move.”

“I swear to you both...this is incredibly strange. We run a very tight ship around here and...and I just don’t know what the hell is happening right now.”

“We don’t fault you in any way,” Rachel assured her. “For now, Agent Novak and I need to take a rather long drive and have another word with Marcus Kent. But please...as soon as you get information about that shipping manifest or any news about the location of that pod, please contact me.”

She handed Diana one of her business cards from her inner jacket pocket. Diana took it, though she barely looked at it. The woman looked tired, baffled, and as if she could literally step outside and set the world on fire with her anger.

Novak was already moving toward the entrance, his stride purposeful. Rachel nodded to Diana as a means of goodbye and turned to follow him, their footsteps echoing in the vast space. Novak opened the door, holding it for her again.

“Looks like another Sunday drive,” he muttered under his breath as they made their way to their car.

“You need me to drive?” she asked.

He grinned and said, “You know what? Yeah. You can drive.”

They got into the car, and as soon as Rachel started the engine, she realized that she was glad to be behind the wheel. It was a very small way to help her feel as if she was at least in some kind of control.

As they pulled away from EndLight's gleaming headquarters, Rachel watched it shrink in the side mirror. The building's white exterior reflected the setting sun like a beacon, or perhaps a warning. Beside her, Novak was sitting rather uncomfortably in his seat as if he wasn't quite sure what to do if he wasn't behind the wheel.

They had a nearly four-hour drive ahead of them to Kent's house, four hours for a killer to act. She just hoped they weren't already too late. With the knowledge of a confirmed missing pod and a killer who had apparently learned to create similar ones, the case felt far more sinister and unpredictable now.

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The morning sun cast long shadows across the Evergreen Valley Hospice parking lot as a man who was currently going by the name of David Morton guided his sedan into an empty space. He switched off the engine but remained seated, allowing himself a moment to savor the delicious anticipation of the moment. Through the windshield, he studied the building's gentle curves and warm brick facade—architecture carefully designed to soften the reality of what happened within these walls.

This is where Rachel Gift had been spending so much time lately. This is where she had been trying to make her amends.

A slight smile played at the corners of his mouth as he adjusted his tie in the rearview mirror. The face that looked back at him was utterly unremarkable—pleasant even. Brown hair neatly combed, wire-rimmed glasses, the kind of face that seemed trustworthy without trying. The kind of face people forgot almost immediately. He was almost handsome, but not quite. He blended into a crowd in an almost masterful way...but he could also switch on the charm when he needed to.

He'd chosen his wardrobe with care: khakis, blue oxford shirt, navy blazer. The outfit of a middle-management professional or perhaps a pharmaceutical rep. Someone who belonged in a professional setting without drawing undue attention.

As he stepped out of the car, he took a deep breath of the crisp autumn air. There were two other visitors moving through the parking lot—both arriving, from the looks of it. Their faces were etched with the particular strain that came from watching loved ones slip away. He matched their pace and demeanor perfectly, just another figure in the daily dance of life and death that played out here.

The automatic doors whispered open as he approached the entrance. The lobby's interior was awash in natural light from floor-to-ceiling windows, with comfortable seating areas and nature photographs adorning the walls. There was a not unpleasant smell in the air, some sort of potpourri mingling with whatever had been served for breakfast about an hour or so ago.

A middle-aged woman with silver-streaked hair sat behind the curved reception desk, speaking softly into a telephone. He walked to the desk and waited patiently, hands clasped loosely in front of him, expression pleasant but not overly eager. When she hung up, he approached with an apologetic smile.

"Hi there," he said, his voice carrying just the right note of friendly professionalism. "I'm hoping you might be able to help me with something. I work with Rachel Gift at the Bureau. An assistant to the director. Rachel reached out and asked me to check if she might have left her planner here during her last volunteer shift."

The receptionist—her name tag read "Patricia"—brightened at the mention of Rachel's name. "Oh, Agent Gift! She's such a wonderful volunteer. We've missed her these past few days."

He nodded sympathetically. "Yes, her director sent her out on a case rather suddenly two days ago. She's still not back yet, which is why she asked me to check about the planner. She's usually so organized, but I get the idea that this case came up suddenly and unexpectedly."

"Of course, of course," Patricia said, already reaching for her phone. "Let me check with Volunteer Services. They keep track of all found items."

As Patricia made the call, another staff member emerged from a nearby hallway—younger, probably in her early thirties, wearing purple scrubs with the hospice logo. She caught the tail end of the conversation and paused.

"Are you looking for something of Rachel's?" she asked, interest piqued. She was quite pretty and, if he wasn't on such a mission, he may have really turned the charm up on her. He'd not been with a woman in a very long time thanks to Rachel Gift throwing him in prison, and she was the best-looking specimen he'd seen since getting out. Blonde hair up in a tight ponytail, breasts quite defined despite the slightly baggy shirt, piercing blue eyes.

But he remained calm and cool as he turned his careful smile toward her. "Yes, her planner. She thinks she might have left it here a few days ago."

"Do you know what day?" the woman asked. Her nametag read "Amy."

"No, I don't. Sorry."

"Well, I hope you find it. I've gotten to know Rachel quite a bit. She's amazing with the patients. Especially after everything she's been through herself."

"She really is pretty great," he agreed, allowing genuine warmth to color his voice. "The way I've heard about how she connects with people here...it's inspiring."

As he said this, Patricia hung up the phone with a slight frown. "I'm sorry, but they haven't found any planners recently. Are you sure she left it here?"

Morton's shoulders dropped slightly—just the right amount of disappointment. "According to Rachel, she's pretty sure. But I'll pass it along. She could have easily left it in one of the conference rooms at the field office." He chuckled and added, "And guess who will get to go hunting for it..."

"I'm sure it will turn up somewhere. And oh...if you don't mind me asking, do you happen to know if Rachel has made it over to see Scarlett yet?"

He had no idea how to answer this...no idea who Scarlett was. So, he did his best to respond in a way that wouldn't raise any red flags. "I have no idea. We're not really best friends, honestly. But the name Scarlett does ring a bell. I'm pretty sure Rachel has mentioned her a few times in the past week or so. Scarlett...ugh, the last name escapes me."

"Scarlett Kline," Patricia said. And for a moment, he almost pitied her. What an idiot, to just hand over information like that. "She probably mentioned Scarlett because she recently went into remission. She just moved back home a week ago."

"Oh yes!" he exclaimed. "That's right! But all the same...I have no idea if she's visited yet."

Patricia nodded enthusiastically. "Rachel was over the moon. I don't think I've ever seen her so happy as the day Scarlett Kline got to go home."

His pulse quickened, but his expression remained merely interested and pleased. "Ah, well, that explains her good mood these last few days."

"They formed such a special bond," Patricia said, leaning forward slightly as if sharing a confidence. "I think Scarlett reminded Rachel of her own journey, you know? Both of them fighting so hard, never giving up hope..."

"That's our Rachel," he said, glancing at his watch with well-practiced casualness. "Well, I should get going. Thank you both so much for checking about the planner. I'll let her know it wasn't here."

"Of course! Tell her we miss her," Amy called after him as he headed for the exit.

He kept his pace measured and unhurried until he reached his car. Only then, safely behind the tinted windows, did he allow himself a moment of pure elation. His hands

trembled slightly as he started the engine—not from fear or nervousness, but from the sheer thrill of it all.

Scarlett Kline.

The name tasted like honey on his tongue. Another piece of the puzzle, another thread in the tapestry he was weaving. Rachel's special patient, the one who reminded her so much of herself. The one who had beaten the odds, just like Rachel had. He could only imagine the sort of bond they'd formed...how close Rachel must be to her.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, David Morton began to hum softly to himself. Everything was falling into place so perfectly, it was almost poetic. He had thought, at first, that ten years in prison had robbed him of precious time for his Great Work. Now he understood that those years had been an investment, teaching him patience, honing his skills of observation and manipulation.

Rachel Gift thought she knew what it meant to fight for her life...to claw her way back from the edge of death. It made him smile....because soon enough, she would know what it was really like.

He merged smoothly into traffic, just another commuter zipping around town, carrying out errands or heading to church for Sunday service. Just another face in the crowd, unmemorable and unthreatening.

Just the way he liked it.

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Marcus Kent's house looked different somehow as they pulled up in front of it again. Rachel was delighted that the drive had gone by quickly, pushed along by conversations and theories related to the case. She was starting to see more and more of the sort of analytical agent Novak was. He was honestly a little too by-the-book for Rachel, but he had a very level head on his shoulders.

The late morning sun cast harsh shadows across Marcus Kent's front lawn as Rachel and Novak stepped out of the car. Rachel's mind felt as if it was bursting at the seams with questions about the alternative EndLight pod designs Dr. Kent had conveniently failed to mention during their first visit. It made her assume that during their first visit, she and Novak had gotten nothing more than carefully measured responses during their first interview. And, going on no sleep the night before, that sort of offense had her nice and pissed off.

The neighborhood was quiet...a typical late Sunday morning. Most of the surrounding houses showed signs of life: a forgotten garden hose snaking across a lawn, children's bikes tipped over in driveways, a wind chime tinkling in the late autumn breeze. But Kent's property felt sterile, maintained with an attention to detail that bordered on obsessive. The grass was perfectly trimmed, the hedges mathematically precise, the windows spotless.

When their first knock at the front door went unanswered, Novak tried again, the sound echoing through the quiet suburban street. Rachel counted in her head: one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand. Then she stepped off the porch and started making her way across the grass to the side of the house.

"What are you doing?" Novak called after her, his voice carrying the edge of

someone who already knew the answer but hoped he was wrong.

"Going to check the back," she said, already rounding the corner of the house. The manicured lawn crunched under her feet, each blade of grass seeming to stand at attention.

"Check the back for what, exactly?" Rachel could hear the disapproval building, could practically feel his by-the-book sensibilities bristling.

Rachel paused at the gate leading to the backyard, her hand resting on the latch. "For a way in."

"You can't be serious." Novak grabbed her arm, forcing her to turn and face him. His usually calm demeanor had hardened into something closer to anger, his jaw set in a way she'd never seen before. "We don't have probable cause. We don't have a warrant. We don't have anything that gives us the right to enter this house."

She looked down to where his hand still gripped her arm. It was a gentle, almost caring grip, but it was still doing nothing more than making her angrier.

"What we have are two dead bodies," Rachel shot back, jerking her arm free. The motion was sharper than she'd intended, and she saw Novak's eyes narrow at the display of emotion. "Also...you saw how Diana Tatum reacted when we mentioned Kent's name. You know there's more here. We know he was not being totally honest with us the first time we were here."

"Maybe. But breaking and entering isn't going to help us build a case. It'll poison everything we find inside." Novak ran a hand through his hair, a rare gesture of frustration. "Everything we find becomes fruit of the poisonous tree. You know this, Rachel. This isn't your first year on the job."

Rachel felt her teeth grinding together. Was he really trying to go this route with her? Who the hell did he think he was? "Sometimes you have to bend the rules to—"

"To what?" Novak cut her off, stepping closer. "To get results? To play hero? That's not how this works, Rachel. That's not what we do. We're FBI agents, not vigilantes. The rules exist for a reason."

The words hit harder than Rachel expected, stirring up memories of other lines she'd crossed, other times she'd convinced herself the ends justified the means. She thought of Alex Lynch, of Alice, of all the times playing by the rules hadn't been enough to protect the people she loved. The weight of those decisions—and their consequences—pressed down on her shoulders.

"What we do," she said quietly, each word measured and deliberate, "is stop killers before they can strike again. You really want to wait for a warrant while this guy potentially moves or destroys evidence? While he maybe preps another pod? While someone else's family gets that phone call?"

"What I want is to do this right." Novak's voice had dropped to match hers, but the intensity remained. In that moment, he reminded her painfully of Jack—the same stubborn adherence to procedure, the same frustrated concern. However, Jack would have likely given in by now. "You're letting your emotions about these pods cloud your judgment. I get it—after everything you've been through, how could you not? But that's exactly why you need to step back and think this through."

Rachel turned back toward the gate, pushing it open with perhaps more force than necessary. "You're right. I am emotional about this. Because I've been where these victims were...thinking of suicide. I've stared death in the face and felt that desperation. The difference is, I got a second chance. These people? Not so much." She then started walking toward the car, gravel crunching under each determined step. "I'm getting my lock picks. You don't have to come with me."

"Rachel!" Novak called after her. "I'll have to report this to Anderson." It was a last-ditch effort, a desperate attempt.

She retrieved the small leather case from the glove compartment, not bothering to respond. Let him report it. Some things were worth the reprimand. Some things were worth sacrificing your reputation for, if it meant saving lives. She'd learned that lesson the hard way during those dark days when cancer had been eating away at her body while killers threatened her family. Sometimes the right thing and the legal thing weren't the same thing at all.

She went around to the back of the house, not giving a damn if Novak followed her or not. The back porch steps creaked beneath her weight as she climbed them, each sound seeming to announce her presence to the empty house. Her hands were steady as she worked the lock picks—muscle memory taking over despite the months away from field work—but her mind was churning. Novak was right—this was wrong. Illegal. The kind of thing that could torpedo a case if handled badly. The kind of thing Jack would have tried to talk her out of.

The lock clicked open under her fingers, and Rachel opened the back door. She stepped into a modest kitchen. The space was immaculate—granite countertops gleaming, copper pots hanging in perfect alignment above a professional-grade range. Everything had its place, each appliance positioned with geometric precision. It opened into an equally pristine living room, where modernist furniture created careful geometric patterns against pale hardwood floors. Everything felt staged, like a showroom rather than a home. There were no magazines scattered on the coffee table, no mail waiting to be sorted, no cups left out or throws casually draped over chairs. It was the kind of perfect that made Rachel's skin crawl.

A hallway branched off to the right, and Rachel's attention immediately locked onto a home office visible through its open door. Her pulse quickened as she crossed the threshold. A glass desk dominated the space, its surface clear except for a closed

laptop and a few scattered papers. But it was the row of thick black binders against the far wall that drew her eye, their spines unmarked but somehow managing to look important.

The first binder opened to reveal exactly what she'd hoped: detailed technical specifications for the EndLight pods. Page after page of blueprints, engineering notes, and material requirements. Rachel's phone came out, capturing key pages in rapid succession. Her hands moved quickly, efficiently, years of experience guiding her through the process of documenting evidence—even if this evidence might never see the inside of a courtroom.

She found that the second and third binders contained more of the same. She took her phone out and snapped pictures of each binder before turning her attention to a long desk pushed against the far wall. The laptop sitting in its center was a dead end, locked behind password protection. But as she looked at the laptop, a piece of paper partially hidden beneath it caught her attention. Rachel carefully slid it free, her heart rate picking up as she registered what she was seeing.

Her breath caught. It was a rental invoice for a box truck, dated two days ago. No a huge one, but bigger than the more modest ones as well. In other words... it is just large enough to transport a peaceful passage pod.

And the rental date was from three days ago—recent enough to match their timeline. The details jumped out at her: twelve-footer, local rental company, valid for a week. Truck number, license plate number, make and model, rental company information. Everything they needed to track it down.

Rachel's hands shook slightly as she photographed the invoice. This was it—the missing piece they needed. The thing that would make breaking in worth it, consequences be damned. Sometimes, you had to sacrifice the small rules to uphold the bigger ones. Sometimes you had to trust your gut, even when your head—and

your partner—were telling you otherwise.

She exited the house quickly and found Novak exactly where she'd left him, pacing by their vehicle. His expression was thunderous, but it shifted when he saw her face. Years of working with witnesses had taught Rachel to read people, and she could see the moment curiosity overcame disapproval.

"What did you find?"

Rachel held up her phone, already pulling up the invoice photo. "I know where our missing pod went. And more importantly? I think I know how we're going to find it. Oh, and then there's this." She then scrolled through the photos she'd taken of the EndLight schematics. "It's him, Novak. We got the bastard."

The anger hadn't fully left Novak's face, but now it warred with reluctant interest. "This doesn't make what you did right."

"No," Rachel agreed, "And I'll be okay with that for now. And while it may not have been the right thing to do, it might help us prevent another murder. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to call this in. We need an APB on that truck right now."

"I'll do it," he said, and she could sense some of his growing excitement.

As Novak pulled out his phone, Rachel glanced back at Kent's house. The pristine windows reflected the midday sun, revealing nothing of the secrets inside. She'd crossed a line today, no question. But standing here, with solid evidence in hand and a real lead to follow, she couldn't bring herself to regret it.

Not if it meant stopping another death. Not if it meant keeping another person from having their moment of desperation twisted into murder.

The real question was: how many more lines would she have to cross before this was over? And would she recognize herself when it was done?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

Rachel was starting to feel the burnout from lack of sleep as they approached the precinct; being so far away from home, heading back to the precinct Detective Wheeler called home seemed like the most logical next step while they waited for movement on the APB for the box truck. Morning had become afternoon since they'd left Kent's house but already felt so much later. Just barely to the east, the constant thrum of traffic on the nearby highway provided a steady backbeat to her racing mind, each passing truck a reminder of how quickly their killer could slip away.

She glanced at her watch for the third time in as many minutes. Time was working against them, as it always seemed to in cases like this. The digital display on the dashboard showed 12:47 – another Sunday that should have been spent with Paige, maybe trying to talk her into going to see a movie, or trying out that new burger place Jack had been raving about. Instead, she was here, hunting a killer who turned machines meant to end suffering into instruments of murder.

"If Kent did take that pod," she said, more to herself than to Novak, "where would he go? A guy like that, methodical, careful..." She trailed off, watching a flock of pigeons scatter as they drove into the precinct parking lot. "The profile doesn't suggest impulse. Everything we've seen points to careful planning."

Novak shifted in the passenger seat, a notepad open on his lap. She'd noticed that he had started keeping one on him at all times. He rarely used it in the moment, as things were happening, but rather after the fact...as if to document everything. The pages were filled with his precise handwriting, timeline annotations, and possible scenarios – all of which seemed to lead nowhere. "The timeline's tight. If Diana Tatum's right about how things went down in Woodbridge yesterday afternoon—"

Rachel's phone cut through the quiet of the car, its display showing an unknown number. The harsh buzz against the console made her jump slightly – a reminder of how tightly wound this case had made her. She answered, putting it on speaker.

"Agent Gift speaking."

"Agent Gift, this is Sergeant Briggs with Wyler County PD." The voice was gruff, carrying the weight of authority and years of experience. "One of my officers has eyes on that truck you put the APB out for."

Rachel and Novak exchanged glances, a spark of electricity seeming to arc between them. Twenty minutes. The APB had only been out for twenty minutes. In Rachel's experience, breaks this quick usually meant one of two things: either they were incredibly lucky, or the information they were getting was dead wrong.

"Would you mind giving me the details you have?" she said. "License plate number, make, model?"

Briggs seemed happy enough to do it. To Rachel's surprise, everything he recited did indeed fit. It seemed that a member of his force had come across the truck...and very likely their killer, Marcus Kent.

"Where is this?" Rachel asked, already turning the wheel sharply, causing a BMW to honk as she cut across the parking lot entrance. The driver's angry gesture went unnoticed as adrenaline began coursing through her system.

"Small storage facility in Haven Branch. Officer Matthews spotted it about five minutes ago. Says it's just sitting there, backed up to one of the units."

Rachel's pulse quickened as her mind raced through the implications. A storage unit meant preparation, planning – this wasn't some random stop for the driver of the

truck—a driver she felt had to be Kent, but she didn't want to solidify such an assumption. Not yet.

"Haven Branch...I believe that's about half an hour from our current location," Novak said. "Maybe a bit less if we make it speedy."

"Sergeant," Rachel said, "please tell your officer to maintain visual contact but do not—I repeat, do not—engage unless that truck moves."

"Roger that."

"And can you send the address of that facility to this number?"

"Roger that as well, agent. And Matthews knows the drill. He's keeping his distance, just watching."

"Thanks, Sergeant," Rachel said, ending the call.

Wasting no time, she sped out of the lot. The tires squealed as Rachel accelerated onto the main road, her phone's GPS already calculating the route. Novak gripped the dashboard, but she noticed he wasn't complaining about her driving this time. The way his jaw was set told her he felt it too – the electric tension that came with closing in on a suspect. And hell...was that the start of a small grin forming on his lips?

The car's engine roared as Rachel pushed it harder, weaving through early afternoon traffic with practiced precision. Each minute felt crucial now. If Kent was really at the storage unit park in Haven Branch, if this wasn't just another dead end...

"You really think Kent's there?" Novak asked after a few minutes of tense silence, giving voice to her own doubts.

"If not Kent, then someone who knows something." Rachel took a sharp turn onto the highway, the g-force pushing them both to the right. "Either way, we're about to find out."

The speedometer crept past seventy as they merged into highway traffic. Rachel's hands were steady on the wheel, but her mind was racing through scenarios, contingencies, possibilities. This could be it – the break they needed. Or it could be nothing. In this job, you learned to hope for the best while preparing for the worst. And if they did get there and it turned out that maybe Kent had just ordered the truck to move some stuff out of his house and into a storage unit forty-five minutes from his house...then they'd have to just face that music. But even as she thought such a thing, she realized how absurd it seemed.

"About what happened at Kent's house..." Novak began.

For a moment, Rachel had no idea what he was talking about. She was focused on the here and now, to getting to Haven Branch as quickly as possible. But then it came to her. The disagreement from earlier...

"The lock picking?" She glanced at him. "Still bothered by that?"

"We're supposed to be the good guys, Rachel. Following proper procedure isn't just bureaucratic nonsense—it's what separates us from them." His voice was quiet but firm. "It's about maintaining the moral high ground."

Rachel watched the speedometer climb past eighty, the engine's pitch rising with their speed. "You want to talk about separation? We're hunting someone who turns devices meant to help people end things peacefully when they have no other options into murder weapons. Someone smart enough to reverse-engineer sophisticated technology and twisted enough to use it for killing." She took a breath, trying to keep the edge out of her voice. "So yeah, I picked a lock. And I'd do it again if I had to."

Because sometimes the rulebook doesn't account for everything we face." She wanted to add something like: Maybe a few more years of experience will teach you that, but she chose to stay on the high ground.

The countryside began to blur past their windows as they drove, urban sprawl giving way to rolling hills and scattered farmhouses. Signs for Haven Branch started appearing, advertising a farmer's market and something called the Annual Butterfly Festival.

Novak was quiet for a long moment, his fingers absently tapping against his knee. "I get it," he said finally. "I don't like it, but... well, we are heading toward a potential killer because of that choice. So I don't guess I can fault you too much."

"Ah, you'll be a rule-breaker in no time," Rachel said, surprising herself with the sarcasm in her voice. "But in all honesty....it comes down to knowing when it's okay. It's...it's a gut thing. And if I'm being honest, sometimes it's wrong."

"But you feel that your gut was right this time?"

"I do. But...I'll feel a lot better when I know for sure."

It took another seventeen minutes before they arrived in the town of Haven Branch. It appeared ahead of them like a painting from another era—a slice of small-town America frozen in time. The main street was barely wide enough for two cars to pass, lined with brick buildings that probably hadn't changed much since the 1970s. A faded mural on one wall advertised "Carter's Hardware – Serving Haven Branch Since 1942."

It was the kind of Sunday afternoon that seemed to move in slow motion. An elderly couple walked hand in hand outside the town's single ice cream parlor, their movements unhurried, peaceful. A group of kids rode their bikes in lazy circles

around a war memorial in the town square, their laughter carrying on the warm breeze. A man washed the windows at the local diner, his movements methodical and practiced.

The scene was so peaceful it felt almost obscene, considering what they might find at the storage facility. These people had no idea that their quiet Sunday afternoon might be harboring a killer. Rachel felt the familiar weight of responsibility settle onto her shoulders – the duty to protect this peace, to keep places like Haven Branch from becoming crime scenes.

They made their way through the main stretch of the town and, right along the edge, took a right turn per the instructions. It was there, on the outskirts of town, that they found the storage facility. It was a small and unremarkable complex of identical metal doors set into concrete walls. Rachel was more accustomed to the larger ones in Richmond, the facilities that contained more than a hundred units. This one was the exact opposite. She supposed there might be twenty in all. The sign at the entrance was sun-faded: "Haven Branch Storage – Security You Can Trust." Rachel might have found that ironically funny under different circumstances.

The patrol car was exactly where Sergeant Briggs said it would be, parked across the street with a clear view of the entrance. Rachel saw the shape of Officer Matthews behind the wheel, and Novak held his badge up to the window as they passed, getting a small nod from Officer Matthews inside. The young officer's posture was alert, professional – good training showing through.

Rachel turned into the facility, driving slowly down the narrow alleys between units. The place was laid out simply, with five units per row, each row divided between a straight, paved thoroughfare. The sound of their tires advancing through the lot seemed too loud in the afternoon quiet. Each unit they passed could hold anything – old furniture, forgotten belongings, or something far more sinister.

"There," Novak whispered, pointing.

Rachel saw it, too. The truck, backed up to unit 18. Her heart rate picked up as she parked their car at an angle that would block any attempt at a quick getaway. They got out silently, both drawing their weapons in practiced movements that spoke of years of training and too many similar situations. Neither of them bothered closing their doors, not wanting to give Kent any indication that someone was outside.

The air was thick with tension as they approached the unit. Rachel could hear birds singing somewhere nearby, the sound jarringly cheerful. A bead of sweat rolled down her temple despite the mild temperature. The metal units reflected the sun's heat, creating a shimmer in the air above them.

They moved forward in perfect sync, one of those moments that made Rachel aware that, given time, this partnership with Novak could turn out to be a very good one. Her grip tightened on her weapon as memories of similar moments flashed through her mind – other doors, other suspects, other moments when everything could change in the blink of an eye.

Rachel met Novak's eyes, seeing her own mixture of anticipation and dread mirrored there. They came to the front of the box truck. It had been backed up to the unit perfectly, blocking off any sight of what might be inside. There was just enough room to squeeze in on her side, and through that crack, all she could see was the concrete floor of the unit and what appeared to be the edge of a plastic crate. She held up three fingers, then two, then...

The box truck's engine roared to life, tearing apart the tense silence of the moment. And after that, Rachel felt that everything moved way too fast.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The distinctive rumble of a diesel engine was like thunder pressing against her. Rachel raised her firearm, not quite sure what sort of response was appropriate.

"FBI! Stop the—" Novak's shout was cut short as the massive vehicle lurched forward like a wounded animal, its acceleration far more aggressive than Rachel had anticipated. She watched in horror as Novak threw himself sideways, his body twisting in mid-air to avoid the edge of the truck's front bumper.

Rachel winced; for a moment, it had been so close that she felt certain Novak had been struck. "Ethan!" Rachel called out, her heart hammering against her ribs.

But Novak was already scrambling to his feet, but the truck was accelerating past their sedan. Metal shrieked against metal as the truck's rear end caught their car's bumper, sending a shower of sparks into the afternoon air. The impact jolted their vehicle sideways, leaving deep scratches in the black paint and crumpling the rear quarter panel.

Rachel spun toward the storage unit, weapon raised, adrenaline flooding her system. What she saw made her blood run cold: the sleek, unmistakable curves of an authentic EndLight pod. Not one of the crude copies they'd found before—this was the real thing, partially dismantled but still recognizable. Its metallic surface gleamed under the fluorescent lighting, panels removed to expose the complex machinery within. The implications hit her like a physical blow.

"He's getting away!" Novak shouted, already sprinting toward their car. Blood trickled from a scrape on his forearm where he'd hit the pavement, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

Rachel ran after him, her mind racing faster than her feet. Kent was their man. He'd somehow stolen the pod during delivery and had been using this storage unit to reverse engineer it—or perhaps to make improvements he'd wanted to make while working for EndLight. Somehow, he'd gotten his hands on an actual EndLight pod.

And now he was getting away.

Rachel ran behind Novak and watched, slightly impressed, as he threw himself into the driver's seat. Rachel barely had time to close her door before he gunned the engine. The sedan's tires squealed in protest as they peeled out of the storage facility, the engine roaring as it fought to overcome its damaged rear end. Through the windshield, Rachel caught sight of their backup—Officer Matthews's patrol car, lights already flashing—falling in behind the retreating truck.

The box truck weaved erratically across the narrow streets, its driver clearly unused to handling such a large vehicle at high speeds. It mounted the curb as it took a corner too sharply, sending a middle-aged man scrambling back from his afternoon walk. The small Yorkshire terrier he was walking yapped furiously as the truck's wheels crushed her neighbor's carefully tended flower bed, sending mulch and petunias flying through the air.

"He's going to kill someone driving like that!" Rachel gripped the dashboard as Novak expertly navigated through the residential streets, her knuckles white with tension. The truck ahead was doing easily fifty in a twenty-five zone. Rachel supposed it was fortunate that the driver—again, she was assuming it was Marcus Kent—had turned right out of the parking lot rather than left. Driving this recklessly through Haven Branch's quiet little main stretch would have been so much deadlier. Still, there was a smattering of small, suburban homes along this secondary road; the siren of the patrol car in front of them seemed to echo off the houses and yards, warning civilians to clear the way.

As the truck took another slight turn in the road, it hugged the shoulder too closely. As a result, three mailboxes went down like bowling pins, their contents scattering across perfectly manicured lawns and freshly sealed driveways. Bills, magazines, and personal letters created a paper trail behind the fleeing vehicle. A group of kids playing basketball scattered as the truck thundered past, the ball bouncing forgotten in its wake. Rachel caught a glimpse of their terrified faces as they pressed themselves against a garage door.

"We need to end this now," Novak growled, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "Before he hits someone, or worse." He expertly threaded their sedan through the obstacle course of scattered mail and debris, keeping pace with the truck despite their damaged rear end.

Rachel's tactical mind was already working, analyzing angles and options. "Matthews is holding steady behind him. If we can get alongside..." She left the thought unfinished as she braced herself against another sharp turn.

The truck swerved suddenly, taking a hard right onto another secondary street. The move caught Kent off guard—the truck tilted dangerously, its wheels on the driver's side briefly leaving the ground. Rachel's breath caught in her throat as she watched the massive vehicle balance on two wheels for what seemed like an eternity before crashing back down.

"He's desperate," Rachel observed, noting how the truck's trajectory was becoming increasingly erratic. "He knows he's running out of options." She could see Kent's head whipping back and forth in the truck's side mirror, searching for an escape route that didn't exist.

Novak spotted an opening along a straight stretch and gunned the engine, their sedan shooting forward through a gap between the truck and an undeveloped piece of land where it looked as if a house was in the process of being built. The engine of the car

whined in protest, the damage to their rear end affecting its performance. Rachel's stomach lurched as they pulled alongside the truck's cab, their speed matching the truck's moment by moment. Through the passenger window, she caught a glimpse of the driver's face.

It was Kent. His face was wide-eyed, sweating, his features contorted in panic. His hands were white-knuckled on the steering wheel, and she could see his lips moving, though she couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Now!" Rachel shouted, seeing their opportunity.

Novak cranked the wheel, guiding their car into a controlled drift that would cut off the truck's escape route. Kent reacted instinctively, yanking the steering wheel away from the sedan. It was exactly what they'd hoped for—the truck's momentum carried it straight toward the drainage ditch running alongside the road.

Time seemed to slow as the truck's front wheels caught the lip of the ditch. Metal groaned as the vehicle's weight shifted forward, its nose dipping into the shallow trench. The sound of straining metal filled the air as the truck's framework protested the awkward angle. Behind them, Matthews's patrol car squealed to a stop, boxing the truck in completely, its red and blue lights painting the scene in alternating colors.

Rachel was out of the car before it had fully stopped, her weapon trained on the truck's cab. The acrid smell of burning rubber and hot brake pads filled her nostrils as she moved into position. Novak flanked her on the right while Matthews approached from the rear, all three advancing with the choreographed precision that came from years of training.

"FBI! Get out of the vehicle with your hands where we can see them!" Rachel's voice carried the full weight of authority, echoing off the suburban homes that had become their impromptu audience. Curious faces were already appearing in windows,

smartphones recording the scene from behind curtains and blinds.

The truck's door creaked open slowly, the sound painfully loud in the sudden silence. A pair of trembling hands appeared, followed by Dr. Marcus Kent's ashen face. The brilliant engineer who had once commanded respect in EndLight's boardroom now looked small and frightened, his expensive shirt soaked with sweat, his wire-rimmed glasses slightly askew on his face.

"Don't shoot," Kent pleaded, his voice cracking. "Please... I can explain everything." His eyes darted between the three weapons pointed at him, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard.

Rachel kept her weapon steady, even as her mind raced through the implications of what they'd found. The authentic EndLight pod in the storage unit. Kent's desperate flight. It placed him under a very bright spotlight. Yes, there would need to be more evidence gathered, but for right now, it seemed like he was their killer.

"Get out. Slowly," Novak ordered, his gun never wavering from Kent's chest. "Keep your hands where we can see them."

As Kent complied, sliding awkwardly from the truck's cab, Rachel caught something in his expression—not just fear, but something deeper. Desperation? Guilt? Or perhaps...

She wasn't sure. She did her best to sort it out as she watched Officer Matthew lend an assist by cuffing Dr. Kent. The end had seemed to come along fast and without much warning, but she knew that's just how it went sometimes. It was hard to feel that things were closed when everything still felt as if it were moving forward at one hundred miles per hour.

The sound of approaching sirens filled the air as backup units responded to their

location—likely sent and led by Sergeant Briggs. But Rachel barely heard them. She was too focused on Kent's face, on the way his expression had shifted from terror to something almost like a strange kind of relief.

They had their man, but she felt that this whole thing was far from over.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The Wyler County Police Department was a small and unassuming precinct, typically handling nothing more exciting than the occasional drunk driver or petty theft. But as Rachel and Novak entered with Dr. Marcus Kent between them, the building was now a hive of activity. Officers darted between desks, phones rang incessantly, and the air crackled with an energy that seemed foreign to the dated wood-paneled walls and yellowing ceiling tiles. The usual smell of stale coffee and printer toner was overwhelmed by the charged atmosphere of urgency.

Rachel stood in the lobby while Kent was being processed. Her legs still felt unsteady from the high-speed chase, though she'd never admit it to anyone, least of all her new partner. The adrenaline crash was starting to hit, leaving her with that familiar hollow feeling in her stomach. She'd been through enough of these moments to know it would pass, but that didn't make it any easier. She also knew the fact that she'd had no sleep in about thirty hours was responsible for part of this feeling.

Kent's distinguished features remained a mask of resigned calm as officers took his fingerprints. His hands didn't shake, his expression didn't waver – not the typical behavior of someone who'd just been arrested after a high-speed pursuit. Rachel had seen enough guilty men to know their tells, but Kent's composure was throwing her usually reliable instincts into confusion.

The booking officer's voice droned in the background, reading Kent his rights for the second time. Rachel could still see the sleek, deadly suicide pod in the storage unit—where Kent had tried to keep his secret, deadly work hidden. How many more of these machines were out there? How many more lives hung in the balance while they stood here, processing paperwork?

"Hell of a catch," a familiar voice said from beside her. She turned and spotted Detective Wheeler looking around at the controlled chaos of the moment. His weathered face broke into a smile as he clapped Novak on the shoulder. "Both of you. Damn fine work."

Rachel noticed how Novak straightened slightly at the praise. Despite their occasional tensions, she had to admit he'd performed brilliantly during the chase. Maybe Jack had been right about him after all – a thought that brought both comfort and a twinge of something like guilt. She hadn't even thought to check in with her family this morning.

As the paperwork was finished up, a portly-looking man came walking over. The lapel over his breast read brIGGS. His salt-and-pepper hair was disheveled, suggesting he'd been running his hands through it a lot recently.

"Agents, I'm Sergeant Briggs," he said. "Just wanted you to know that we have an interrogation room ready whenever you need it. Just say the word if you need anything else."

"Thanks so much," Novak said. "And wherever Office Matthews is, let him know we appreciate the assist. He played a big part in this arrest."

"Okay," the booking officer finally said. "He's all yours."

Novak gave Kent a little nudge as Briggs led them around a small bullpen area and toward a narrow corridor. Rachel studied Kent as they walked – his measured steps, his straight posture, the way his eyes darted around taking in every detail. She'd learned long ago that monsters came in all forms, but something about Kent's demeanor wasn't fitting the profile she'd constructed in her mind.

The interrogation room was small, barely large enough for the metal table and two

chairs it contained. The walls were a pale, institutional green that had probably been intended to be soothing but instead created an atmosphere of subtle unease. A large mirror dominated one wall – the observation window, behind which Rachel suspected Wheeler and Briggs would be watching every move.

Kent sat without being asked, folding his hands on the table in front of him. The overhead light cast harsh shadows across his face, emphasizing the lines of fatigue around his eyes. Now, sitting in an interrogation room, the man started to look nervous again. Rachel took the seat across from him while Novak positioned himself against the wall, arms crossed. The pose was meant to be intimidating, and Rachel had to admit he pulled it off well.

She took a moment to arrange her thoughts, letting the silence build. It was an old technique, one she'd learned early in her career – sometimes the weight of silence could crack a suspect faster than any question. But Kent seemed unaffected, his breathing steady, his gaze direct.

"Let's not waste time," Rachel said finally, her voice steady. "Two people are dead, Dr. Kent. Two people who survived suicide attempts, killed in pods identical to the one we found in your storage unit. And we're assuming that it would take someone with a great deal of knowledge on how to build those pods to pull this off. Care to explain?"

Kent's laugh was hollow, empty of humor. The sound bounced off the bare walls, making it seem larger than it was. "I knew this was coming. From the moment you two knocked on my door that first time, I knew exactly what you were thinking." He leaned forward, his eyes meeting Rachel's. "And I understand completely why you'd think so."

The fluorescent light flickered momentarily, creating a strobe-like effect that made Rachel blink. When her vision cleared, Kent's expression had softened slightly,

showing something that looked remarkably like compassion. She was shocked to see the glimmer of tears in his eyes.

"If you understand our line of reason and are trying to state that you're innocent, then you better start explaining why you have a stolen EndLight pod in a storage unit in the middle of nowhere," Rachel countered, her words sharp and precise. She could feel Novak shift behind her, picking up on the tension in her voice.

Kent's shoulders slumped slightly, the first crack in his composed facade. "I stole it during transit in Woodbridge yesterday. I found the shipping route easily enough because I still have backdoor ways of getting into EndLight's files and data systems. But I didn't steal it for the reasons you're assuming." He ran a hand through his graying hair, the gesture making him look suddenly older, more vulnerable. "EndLight was cutting corners. Dangerous corners. I tried to warn them, tried to go through proper channels. No one would listen. But...you already know all of this."

"So you decided to steal company property?" Novak pushed off from the wall, his voice heavy with skepticism. He moved to stand beside Rachel, a subtle show of partnership that didn't go unnoticed.

"I needed proof," Kent insisted, his voice rising slightly. "Concrete evidence of how easily their technology could be replicated, how dangerous it was to rush these pods into production. But I never killed anyone." His hand slammed down on the table, the sound sharp and sudden in the small room. "I was so stubborn about trying to prove my point with those people because I wanted to save lives...to make sure these designs were never replicated. And...lo and behold, it appears somehow has done it. Just like I was afraid of!"

Rachel studied his face, looking for the telltale signs of deception she'd learned to spot over years of interrogations. His eyes remained steady, his breathing even. Either he was telling the truth, or he was one of the most accomplished liars she'd ever

encountered. The problem was, in her experience, the truly dangerous ones were often the best at appearing sincere.

"Give us a minute, would you, Dr. Kent?" she said abruptly, standing. Her chair scraped against the floor, the sound harsh and metallic. She nodded to the door as she locked eyes with Novak. He followed her out into the hallway, closing the door behind them with a soft click.

The corridor felt cooler than the interrogation room, and Rachel took a deep breath, trying to clear her head. The case was starting to feel like a puzzle where the pieces kept changing shape just as she thought she had them figured out.

"He's lying," Novak said immediately, keeping his voice low. His face was set in lines of certainty, but Rachel could see the question in his eyes. "We've got him dead to rights on the pod—not to mention the blueprints you found in his house. "

Rachel shook her head slowly, feeling the weight of the decision pressing down on her. "Something's not adding up. My gut is telling me he's being straight with us." She could see the skepticism in Novak's expression and pressed on. "Look, I know how this sounds. But I've been doing this long enough to know when something feels off."

"Your gut?" Novak's eyebrows rose. "Rachel, we've got physical evidence. The pod—"

"Proves he stole from EndLight, yes. But murder?" She met his gaze, willing him to understand. "Look, I know we're still finding our rhythm as partners. And I know how this sounds. The last thing I want is to come off sounding condescending. But I've learned to trust my instincts on these things."

The moment stretched between them, heavy with implications. This wasn't just about

Dr. Kent anymore – it was about trust, about whether their partnership could withstand disagreement. Rachel could see Novak wrestling with it, his jaw working as he thought. The distant sound of phones ringing and officers talking seemed to fade away, leaving them in a bubble of tension.

Finally, he nodded. "Okay. Fine. We'll go with your gut...for now. But we verify his alibis first. But if they don't check out..."

"Then we nail him to the wall," Rachel finished. "Deal."

They returned to the interrogation room, where Kent sat exactly as they'd left him, though his fingers were now drumming a silent pattern on the table. Rachel took her seat again, laying her notepad on the table with deliberate precision.

"Alright, Dr. Kent. Let's talk about where you were the night Sandra Mitchell was killed."

Kent's response was immediate and detailed, as if he'd been waiting for this question. "I was in Greensboro, North Carolina. I stayed overnight at a hotel following a job interview with Campbell and Shook – they're a medical supply manufacturer. Stayed overnight at the Hampton Inn on West Market Street. I've got the digital receipt in my phone...email. You can call the hotel, check the security cameras. Hell, just call Campbell and Shook – I had dinner with their hiring manager that night."

Rachel felt her heart sink slightly as she verified the information. The timeline matched perfectly, and Kent's eagerness to provide verifiable details wasn't typical of someone trying to construct a false alibi.

As for his availability in killing Timothy Walsh, she wasn't sure how hard it would be to get the timeline to match up, but she assumed that if he'd been busy heading to Woodbridge to steal the peaceful passage pod, there was very little chance he'd also

managed to be in the Shenandoah Valley, tracking a victim.

Rachel exchanged a glance with Novak. Kent's alibi, if proven correct, made it next to impossible for him to have killed Sandra. Which meant...

"You're still under arrest for the theft and transport of the EndLight pod," Rachel said, standing. "And for now, we'll still check your phone. I assume it's back at the storage unit with the stolen pod?"

As she made this statement, as a thought struck her with the force of a physical blow. The fluorescent light seemed to buzz louder in her ears as the pieces began to rearrange themselves in her mind. What if they'd been looking at this all wrong? What if EndLight wasn't the source of the killer's motivation? What if it was the commonality between the victims?

It was a theory she'd already given some consideration to...that the killer was selecting his victims because they'd all attempted suicide in the past. And now, having dealt with Kent and seen how possible it truly was to replicate the pods...maybe there was another avenue to pursue here.

"Novak," she said urgently. "We need to make a call."

She again exited the interrogation room. Novak followed her out, playing catch up. "Call who?" he asked as he rushed up beside her.

"Diana Tatum."

They found an empty office down the hall, closing the door behind them. The room was small and cluttered with old case files, but it offered privacy. Rachel pulled her cell phone from her pocket and ran a quick Google search for the EndLight offices again. She found the number and called it, certain that it would take a lot of

connections and transfers, given how dead the building had been earlier in the day.

"What are you thinking?" Novak asked as the phone rang in her ear. He'd closed the door behind them, leaning against it as if to physically block out any interruptions.

"We've been focusing on the wrong connection," Rachel explained, her words coming faster as the theory solidified in her mind. "These victims weren't killed because of their connection to EndLight – they were killed because they survived suicide attempts. EndLight is just where the killer found them. Maybe where he was...I don't know...where he was hunting. "

An automated system picked up and she selected the option that stated: "If you need to speak to someone right away after hours." The phone rang a few times, and she began the dance of transfers. After several transfers and holds—and identifying herself as Special Agent Rachel Gift a grand total of four times—Diana Tatum's voice filled the line.

Rachel placed the call on speaker mode, setting it on the desk so Novak could also hear.

"Agent Gift," she said, sounding a bit scared. "Have you found something else?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a new theory. But I need to ask you a strange question."

"Okay..."

"Mrs. Tatum, can you think of any employees, past or present, who might have lost someone to suicide?"

The silence that followed was long enough that Rachel thought they might have lost the connection. Then Diana spoke, her voice barely above a whisper, carrying the

weight of painful memories.

"Only one name comes to mind... Christopher Bradley. He was with us for two years. Brilliant engineer, really. Until..." She paused, and Rachel could hear her taking a steadying breath. "Until his wife committed suicide. It destroyed him. He left the company shortly after. He just became a completely different man after that."

Rachel's pulse quickened. "Do you keep in touch with him?"

"I've tried. Several employees have. But..." Diana's voice grew troubled. "No one has been able to reach him for about six months now. It's like he just... disappeared."

Rachel's eyes met Novak's, and she saw her own certainty reflected there. The pieces were falling into place, forming a picture that was both crystal clear and deeply disturbing. The energy in the small office seemed to shift, charged with the electricity of revelation.

Christopher Bradley had just become their prime suspect.

"Thank you, Mrs. Tatum." She ended the call before Diana Tatum could give any arguments that certainly none of her employees were capable of such a thing.

As Rachel ended the call, she felt the familiar surge of energy that came with a breakthrough. But mixed with it was something else – a creeping dread that settled in her stomach like ice. Because now they weren't just looking for a killer. They were looking for someone who had intimate knowledge of EndLight's technology, engineering expertise, and a deeply personal motivation for seeking out suicide survivors.

"We need to move fast," she said to Novak, already reaching for the door. "If Bradley's been off the grid for six months..."

"He could be anywhere," Novak finished, his face grim. "And he could have several of those pods scattered around the area."

Rachel nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps. They had a name now, but time was still against them. And somewhere out there, Christopher Bradley was watching, waiting, planning his next victim. The race to find him before he could strike again was on.

As they exited the office, Rachel caught sight of Sergeant Briggs, speaking with Officer Matthews and a few others. She hurried over to him, and when he saw her approaching, he instantly stepped away from his group.

"Something I can do for you?" Briggs asked.

"Yes, actually. Two things. First...can you get someone to look up any sort of criminal record for a man by the name of Christopher Bradley? And second...what sort of drone capabilities does Wyler County have?"

Briggs looked excited and eager to help when he answered. "In terms of drones, the department has just two. But we also work with a local photographer that has three...he does freelance work for commercials, documentaries, things like that."

"We need as many drones as you can get in the air as soon as possible," she said. She looked to Wheeler and added, "Can you get to work on the same thing in your county? If there are more pods hidden away on back roads or in the woods, we need to find them now. "

"Got it," Briggs said. "And as for the records for Bradley, we can—"

"Already on it, sir," Matthews said, marching to a slightly cluttered desk in the bullpen.

All the pieces were in motion and for just a split second, Rachel allowed herself to enjoy the feeling of progress—as chaotic as it might be. Then, with a shared look to Novak, she walked over to the desk Matthews had commandeered and waited patiently for criminal record results, an address...anything they could find on their new suspect.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The forest wrapped around him like a shroud, dense and ancient. He sat in his small-bodied truck, parked on a narrow dirt road where undergrowth threatened to reclaim the edges. The late afternoon sun filtered through the canopy of leaves, casting dappled shadows across the dashboard, and the open laptop balanced on his knees. A warm breeze carried the scent of pine and decaying leaves through his partially open window, a smell that always reminded him of those final camping trips with Kelly.

On the screen, three icons pulsed softly against the topographical map of the Shenandoah Valley. Each one represented months of work, countless hours of precise engineering, and a promise he'd made to Kelly...after she'd died. His fingers traced the edge of the laptop, remembering how she'd always teased him about his obsession with perfection, with getting every detail exactly right. The memory of her laugh, light and musical, echoed in his mind.

There had been four of those icons up until last night. But the police or FBI or some other government body had apparently moved the pod that had taken Sandra Mitchell's life.

The sunlight revealed one of his fingerprints on the laptop screen. He smiled and wiped it away with his sleeve. Kelly had always chided him about his fingerprints on screens.

The first prototype had failed, of course. But failure had always been part of the engineering process – Kelly had taught him that, too. He remembered the night it had malfunctioned, the acrid smell of burnt wire insulation filling his basement workshop. That setback had cost him three weeks, but it had also taught him valuable lessons about power management and fail-safes. The other four, though... They were flawless

recreations of the EndLight design. His design, really. The one the company had corrupted, rushed to market before it was ready. Before it was safe.

He knew they were functional and, though it pained him to admit it, quite efficient. But they could have been so much better. There were things about the current design that could have been improved. The pods could have been so much more perfect if he'd stayed on the project.

He minimized the tracking program and pulled up his calendar. The methodical movements of the past six months filled the screen: carefully plotted routes, strategic deployments, calculated risks. Each entry was color-coded – green for successful placements, yellow for reconnaissance days, red for near-misses when local police or forest rangers had gotten too close for comfort. He'd moved the pods like a chess master positioning pieces, using a small landscaping trailer hitched to this very truck. Just another contractor doing his job, invisible in plain sight.

A deer emerged from the tree line ahead, causing him to hold his breath. It stood motionless, ears twitching, before delicately picking its way across the dirt road. Nature continued its cycles, oblivious to the technology humming quietly in his carefully placed pods. Kelly would have loved seeing the deer – she'd always insisted on bringing her camera on their drives down these old, dusty lanes...just in case.

The memories brought a small smile to his face. How many times had he passed other vehicles on the paved roads that led to these back roads, exchanging casual waves with locals who never questioned the trailer behind him? The worn Ford F-150 and basic equipment trailer had been perfect camouflage. Just another working man making his way through the day. He'd even added magnetic signs to the truck doors advertising "Bradley's Lawn Care" – a touch of authenticity that had proved unnecessary but satisfied his attention to detail.

But the real achievement – the part that made his chest swell with pride – was the

intricate web of manipulation he'd woven to bring his targets to the pods. That had been the true test of his intelligence, far more challenging than the engineering problems he'd solved in his basement workshop. Each victim required a different approach, a unique combination of pressure points and incentives. He'd spent weeks studying their routines, their weaknesses, their desperate needs for closure.

He closed his eyes, remembering the countless nights spent in his basement workshop, surrounded by tools and components. The space had become a sanctuary after Kelly's death, the empty rooms above him a constant reminder of what he'd lost. But in the basement, with his hands busy and his mind focused, he could almost feel her presence again. The walls still held the pegboard organizer she'd bought him for Christmas three years ago, each tool hanging in its designated spot, labeled with her neat handwriting.

The laptop chimed softly – a proximity alert. Someone had driven past one of his checkpoints on the forest road leading to Pod Three. Christopher opened the tracking program again, watching the icons—the real-time representation of each of the pods move slowly along the winding path. Another lost soul, perhaps, or maybe just a tourist who'd taken a wrong turn.

He reached for the thermos in his cup holder. The coffee inside had gone cold hours ago, but he drank it anyway, grimacing at the bitter taste. These long surveillance sessions required patience and alertness in equal measure.

"You always said I needed a hobby," he murmured, thinking of Kelly again. "Something to keep my mind occupied after work." A bitter laugh escaped him. "Well, I found one, didn't I?"

The sun had shifted, drawing long shadows across the forest floor. Soon it would be time to move again, to send another person to the pods. He had a specific person planned and it was a bit exciting to know that this person had no idea.

Two more pods. Two more lives. The symmetry pleased him – a mathematician's appreciation for balanced equations. Each death would bring him closer to completion, closer to honoring Kelly's memory in the way she deserved. She would understand, he was certain. She had always understood him better than anyone else, even when he struggled to express himself.

In the growing darkness, his face was illuminated only by the blue glow of the laptop screen. The forest pressed closer, a conspiracy of shadows and silence. Somewhere in the distance, a bird called out – a lonely sound that echoed through the trees before fading away to nothing. He checked his watch – three hours until full dark, when he would begin. It would be time.

"Soon," he promised the empty passenger seat beside him, where Kelly had once sat on their weekend drives through these same mountains. His fingers moved across the keyboard, checking systems, verifying locations, ensuring everything was perfect. It had to be perfect...for Kelly.

He knew that his obsession with perfecting machines for suicide had started her downward spiral—had been one of the strange milestones on the way to her own suicide. But he was trying to make that right, to close chapters to the lives of those who had not quite made the same sacrifice Kelly had made. It was the only thing he'd ever thought might bring him a true sense of closure—to finally allow himself to release the memory of Kelly while also paying his respects.

The pods were his tribute to her, his way of reaching out to her, wherever she might be.

The tracking program continued its silent vigil, monitoring the pods he'd placed with such care. He settled back in his seat, patient as a spider in its web. He could afford to wait. After all, he'd already waited six months, building the pods based on EndLight's designs. A few more hours, a few more days – what did it matter? The pods would be

there, ready, when the right moment came.

And somewhere, he was certain, Kelly was watching. Waiting with him. Proud of how far he'd come.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The gravel crunched beneath their tires as Rachel guided the car up the winding driveway. Ancient oaks and towering pines lined both sides of the path, their branches creating a natural archway that filtered the late afternoon sunlight into dappled patterns on the hood of their vehicle. The Shenandoah foothills rolled away in every direction beyond the trees, waves of deep green disappearing into the misty distance.

According to the address Officer Matthews had pulled from the local database, this was the address listed for Christopher Bradley.

"This is... unexpected," Novak said, breaking the contemplative silence that had fallen between them. He gestured toward the house as it came into view around the final bend. "For someone who spent most of his career in tech."

Rachel had to agree. The house was a masterpiece of rustic architecture – a sprawling two-story structure that seemed to have grown organically from the surrounding wilderness. Natural stone and weathered cedar siding blended seamlessly with the landscape. A wraparound porch hugged the entire first floor, its posts made from whole tree trunks that still retained their bark. Floor-to-ceiling windows reflected the dying sunlight like sheets of burnished copper. The driveway was uninterrupted by any vehicles; they were the only ones here.

"Could be a secondary property," Rachel suggested, scanning the empty driveway as they pulled to a stop. "Summer home, maybe. Or..." She let the thought trail off as she took in the profound isolation of the place. No other houses are visible. No other cars. Just wilderness and silence.

"Or the perfect place to retreat to after your wife takes her own life," Novak finished, his voice grim.

Rachel nodded, thinking back to the information Detective Wheeler had sent during their drive over. The local paper's account had been clinical in its brevity: Kelly Bradley, found in an upstairs bathroom eight months ago, wrists slit in the bathtub. A note and red water left behind. Case closed.

They approached the front door, their footsteps hollow on the wooden planks of the porch. Rachel rapped her knuckles against the heavy oak door. The sound echoed inside, met only with silence...which is exactly what she expected, given that there were no other cars in the driveway.

"Nobody home," she said, then added with a hint of gallows humor: "Are you going to get all up in arms again if I suggest breaking in?"

Novak's lips twitched. "No. In fact, I'll go get the pick set." He returned to the car, retrieved the tools, and made quickly returned. He didn't bother handing the set over. He approached the door and went to work on the lock himself. He had it opened in less than ten seconds. Rachel nodded in acknowledgment, slightly impressed.

He opened the door and gestured for her to head inside. "Ladies first."

The interior was a study in contrasts. Traditional cabin aesthetics – exposed beams, stone fireplace, hardwood everything – mixed with sleek modern furnishings and state-of-the-art technology. A massive flat-screen TV dominated one wall. The kitchen gleamed with professional-grade stainless steel appliances.

They started their search in the kitchen, moving with practiced efficiency. Rachel began opening cabinets while Novak checked the pantry. The cabinets were well-stocked with high-end cookware, but it was the trash that caught Rachel's attention

first – fresh garbage, including an empty pasta box, coffee grounds, and an empty milk carton. The date on the carton was just three days old.

A few dishes sat unwashed in the sink, a film of soap still clinging to their surfaces. Rachel touched one of the plates gently – the soap hadn't fully dried yet. Someone had been here very recently.

The dining room is connected to the kitchen through an open archway. A solid oak table dominated the space, its surface dusty except for a single clear spot where someone had recently eaten.

Moving into the living room, Rachel noted more signs of recent habitation. A single pair of black socks lay discarded by the leather sectional, as if their owner had been sitting there recently, comfortable enough to kick his feet up. An iPad on the coffee table still had 42% battery life. The leather of the couch still held a slight depression from someone sitting in the same spot regularly over a lengthy period of time.

"He's been here as recently as today," Novak said quietly. "Maybe even within the last few hours."

A home office off the living room yielded more clues. The desk chair was slightly askew from a desk that harbored nothing more than a laptop. A coffee mug held the remnants of what was once hot coffee, now room temperature; the creamer had changed into a small, white swirl along the surface. The computer was password protected, but Rachel made a note to have a tech team come back for it if necessary. A stack of mail on the corner of the desk showed regular deliveries to this address. If this had once been a retreat, it now seemed to be Bradley's primary residence.

They moved upstairs, the wooden steps creaking under their feet. The second floor opened onto a wide hallway with hardwood floors partially covered by an expensive-looking Oriental runner. Two bedroom doors and a bathroom branched off from the

main hall.

The first bedroom was set up as a home gym, with a treadmill, weights, and a yoga mat. A towel hung over the treadmill's handle.

The master bedroom stopped Rachel in her tracks. Unlike the rest of the house, which showed signs of recent life, this room felt frozen in time. A king-sized bed dominated the space, one side perfectly made, the other rumpled and clearly slept in. On the untouched side, a woman's robe still hung on a hook by the bed. A pair of reading glasses sat on the nightstand, along with a half-finished novel, a bookmark still holding the reader's place.

This was his wife's side of the bed, Rachel thought. Her side of the bed—of the entire room probably—hadn't been touched since her death.

The master bathroom was equally preserved. High-end toiletries lined the double vanity, one side clearly feminine – expensive creams and perfumes arranged just so. Rachel's eyes were drawn to the oversized soaking tub, its porcelain surface gleaming in the afternoon light. She couldn't help but picture Kelly Bradley's final moments, the water turning pink, then red...if this was even the same home where she'd committed the act.

A walk-in closet revealed the same story – Christopher Bradley's clothes showed regular use, while Kelly's remained untouched, like artifacts in a museum dedicated to her memory.

In other words, upstairs revealed nothing of use. They made their way back downstairs and Rachel instantly walked to the hallway, where they'd earlier passed a door that led down to the basement. They went down together, the stairs creaking under their weight. The sound of it was somehow more ominous than the normal settling of an old house. At the bottom, Rachel's hand found the light switch, and

fluorescent tubes buzzed to life overhead, revealing a space that had been converted into a makeshift workshop.

The space was immaculate – almost surgically clean – but that only made the purpose of the room more obvious. Blueprints covered one wall, some printed, others drawn by hand with meticulous attention to detail. They showed cross-sections of what were unmistakably suicide pods, with annotations about materials, circuitry, and construction methods. Right down to the contours of the cushioned surfaces inside, Bradley had gone into meticulous detail.

Curved sections of metal were arranged on storage racks like macabre puzzle pieces. A workbench held an array of circuit boards and spools of wire. Tools hung on pegboard in perfect alignment, each one in its designated spot. A separate table held what appeared to be partially assembled control panels, their switches and displays waiting to be connected to their final destination.

The corner of the room housed a small office area with a desk covered in technical manuals and engineering references. A laptop sat closed on the desk, its power light blinking in sleep mode. A corkboard above the desk held various notes and diagrams, all related to the pods' construction.

"He's not just copying them," Rachel said, moving closer to examine the blueprints. "He's improving on the design. Simplifying it in a way. Look at these modifications to the ventilation system, the backup power supply..."

Her voice trailed off as her eyes caught something in the corner of one blueprint – a list of names. No, not names. Just surnames, written in a hurried hand, as if added as afterthoughts:

- Mitchell

- Walsh

- Parker

- Reynolds

- Chen

"Mitchell and Walsh," Rachel breathed. "Sandra Mitchell...Timothy Walsh. In the order they were killed." Her finger traced down to the next name. "Parker is next. Whoever that might be."

Her brain felt as if it was on fire as she tried to figure out how to pinpoint the name. She was now fairly certain Bradley wasn't going after EndLight employees specifically, but so far, each victim had at least an overall connection to the company.

"Man," Rachel said as she dug her phone out. "Diana Tatum is going to start asking for a salary if I keep calling."

She called Diana Tatum again; the process was much quicker this time because she'd been given her direct extension when she'd called back at the precinct. Diana answered on the second ring, her voice solid and all business.

"Agent Gift?"

"Yeah, it's me again. Look... I may have a huge lead here, but I need to ask you another question. I'm sorry about all of the disturbances, but I assure you, it's necessary."

"I'm happy to help however I can. What do you need?"

"Do you have anyone on staff with the surname Parker?"

"Parker?" A pause as she thought. "Nothing comes to mind immediately, but let me check with HR. I'll call you right back."

The call ended, and Rachel felt anxiety coil in her stomach like a spring wound too tight. They had their killer. They had proof. They even had his next target's name. But until Diana called back with a full name, all they could do was wait.

She looked around the basement again, seeing it with new eyes. This wasn't just a workshop – it was an execution chamber in progress. It appeared that Christopher Bradley had created his suicide pods in this very room. Her only hope was that seeing as how it was mostly clean at the moment, maybe he was done.

It was flimsy, but it did give her a bit of hope. Then again, if he was done...what were the other names for?

The silence stretched on, broken only by the soft hum of the fluorescent lights and the pounding of Rachel's heart in her ears. She checked her phone again. No missed calls. No texts. The phone remained stubbornly silent.

And when it did finally vibrate in her hand, Rachel nearly dropped it out of anticipation. She answered right away, noting that only three minutes had passed since they'd last hung up.

"Did you get a name?" Rachel asked, skipping formalities.

"I did. The only Parker we have on the payroll is actually a freelancer. Her name is Jennifer Parker, and she's our social media manager."

"Freelance...so she probably doesn't even come into the office?"

“No. She does it remotely. But she does live close by.”

“Do you have contact information?” Rachel asked.

“Phone number and address. I’ll text it all to you right away.”

“Thanks again.”

They ended the call and again, Rachel found herself staring at her phone, waiting. But this time, she and Novak were already heading out of the basement and to the front door. Rachel had no idea where Jennifer Parker’s address would take them, and she honestly didn’t care. They were nearing the end now, and the only thing she was concerned about was stopping Christopher Bradley before he got his hands on Jennifer Parker.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

Rachel's phone buzzed with Diana's email just as they reached the top of Christopher Bradley's long, winding driveway. The sun was beginning its descent behind the trees as the afternoon wore on, casting long shadows across the empty road. Rachel wasted no time opening the email and attached file right away, scanning Jennifer Parker's information. She and her husband, CJ, lived in the town of Luray. Forty minutes away. Too far. The distance felt like a physical weight in her stomach.

She remembered similar moments from past cases – the terrifying countdown that started the moment you realized someone was in danger. The way seconds seemed to stretch and compress at the same time. She'd lost people before. It was just part of the job. But now that she'd had some time away, it was easier for her to think otherwise. Maybe loss didn't have to be part of the job. Not this time, anyway, she thought. Not if she could help it.

As she dialed Jennifer's number, she noticed that Novak was literally squirming in his seat, anxious to get moving. She pressed the phone to her ear, listening to Jennifer's phone ring through to voicemail. Her stomach tightened, that familiar surge of adrenaline making her fingers tingle.

"Straight to voicemail," she muttered. Then, thinking quickly, she thumbed through her phone, going to the little bit of information they had on Christopher Bradley—most of which had been accumulated at the Wyler County precinct. She inputted his number from their hastily assembled case notes. Nothing there either. Five rings and then an automated, robotic voicemail prompt. The silence on both ends felt deliberate, orchestrated. She could almost picture Bradley somewhere, watching Jennifer's phone buzz, perhaps already...

The image of Sandra Mitchell's body flashed through her mind, the way she'd looked in that pod, and Rachel forced the thought away.

No. Don't go there.

The road in front of them was empty, the pavement a faded black without yellow or white markings of any kind. It forced its way through dense trees that pressed close on both sides. Perfect isolation. The kind of place where screams wouldn't carry.

"Try the husband," Novak suggested, bringing the car to a stop. The headlights illuminated Bradley's front door, dark and uninviting. "If Jennifer isn't picking up..."

She'd thought the same thing for a moment or two but didn't know if it was worth alarming him just yet. But honestly, what other choices did they have?

Rachel went back to Jennifer's information and found the number for her husband, her mind racing ahead to what she'd say, how much to reveal. The phone rang twice before a man's voice answered, casual, relaxed. Normal. The kind of normal that could shatter in an instant. "Hello?"

"Mr. Parker? CJ Parker?"

"Yeah? Who's asking?" There was nothing confrontational to his voice; there was even a little edge of humor in it.

"Mr. Parker, this is Special Agent Rachel Gift with the FBI. I'm trying to reach Jennifer."

A pause. The background noise of a televised football game filtered through the connection. "Oh. She went out about an hour ago. Having drinks with a friend." His voice carried the distracted tone of someone half-listening, probably still focused on

whatever he'd been doing when she called. Rachel felt a stab of sympathy. He had no idea his world was about to change.

"Do you know which friend? Where they were meeting?"

"Who is this again?"

Rachel took a deep breath, remembering that this man had no idea what had been going on these past two days. "Mr. Parker, I'm with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Special Agent Rachel Gift. I need to be clear – your wife may be in danger. Any information you can give us could be crucial."

The background noise of the football game suddenly died. The silence that followed was deafening. "What do you mean, in danger?" His voice sharpened, fear creeping in at the edges. "She just said she was meeting someone from work. I—" He faltered. "God, I didn't even ask where. The game was on, and I just... I just said 'have fun.'"

The guilt in his voice was palpable. Rachel had heard it before, too many times. Survivors looking back at their last normal moment, trying to understand how they missed the signs. She pressed her free hand against her forehead, eyes closed. "Mr. Parker, we're going to do everything we can to find her. I promise you that. But I need to ask you something, and I know it might seem strange." She hesitated, knowing how the next question would land. "Has Jennifer ever attempted suicide?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?" His voice rose sharply, anger masking fear. "What's going on? Why would you—"

"Please," Rachel cut in, keeping her voice steady. "I know it's difficult, but it's important." More important than you know, she thought.

The silence stretched for several seconds, thick with unspoken fears. When he spoke

again, his voice was thick with emotion. "Once. Three years ago. We'd just gotten married, and... we lost a baby. Miscarriage. It hit her hard. Really hard." He cleared his throat. "But that was a long time ago. She got help. She's better now. I thought she was much better, honestly."

Rachel's heart sank. Another connection...and now it was undeniable. Another piece of Bradley's twisted puzzle. For some skewed reason, he was going after people who had attempted suicide. She wondered if he was doing it as a morbid way to mourn the loss of his wife to suicide or if it was something more complicated. Something....darker.

"Mr. Parker—"

"No, you need to tell me what's happening. Right now." The fear in his voice had hardened into anger. "Why are you asking about—"

Rachel's phone buzzed against her ear. She checked the display and saw that it was an incoming call from Detective Wheeler. She glanced at Novak, who was watching her intently, his face illuminated by a stream of sunlight that was breaking through the trees as it began to properly set.

"Mr. Parker, I'm going to have my partner call you right back with more details," Rachel said. "I have to take an urgent call, but I promise you'll know everything in just a minute."

"Wait—"

"Agent Novak will call you immediately." She switched calls, stepping out of the car into the cool evening air. The temperature had dropped with the sun, and goosebumps rose on her arms. She looked back into the car and saw Novak already dialing to get CJ Parker back on the line.

"Wheeler?" she said into the phone. "What do you have?"

"We found one." Wheeler's voice crackled with excitement. "One of the drones spotted something weird and shiny in the forest, so we routed it back and lowered it down."

"You're certain it's one of the pods?"

"Positive. I'm looking at the imagery right now. It's sort of tucked away in some trees, but yeah...it's one of the suicide pods. I'm sending you coordinates now."

Rachel's phone buzzed with the incoming message. She pulled it away from her ear, quickly copying the coordinates into her mapping app. She felt like an automated machine, having spent the past five minutes or so making calls, inputting data, taking other calls, absorbing new information with what seemed like every breath.

With the coordinates now in her phone, she felt her heart skip a beat. "Wheeler, this is only fifteen minutes from where we are right now."

"Good. Looks like we got lucky. I'll head out that way to meet you in the next few minutes, but you'll get there well before I will. But I'm on the way."

Rachel was already moving back to the car, gesturing urgently to Novak, who was finishing his call with Parker. The gravel shifted under her feet, reminding her of crime scenes, of evidence markers, of body bags. "We'll see you there, Detective. And thanks for this. Damn good work."

"Oh, this has been a team effort all around. See you soon."

Rachel ended the call and slid back into the passenger seat. Novak was looking at her expectantly, his face grim.

"How'd it go with the husband?" she asked.

"About as well as you'd expect." Novak put the car in reverse, the engine rumbling beneath them. "He's scared. Angry. A nervous wreck. Wants to come help look for her."

"You told him no?"

"Strongly. Had to promise to call him every thirty minutes with updates. I told him to call his local PD to ask to have him connected with Wyler County PD for any updates." He glanced at her as they backed down the driveway, trees looming on either side. "How about you? Was that good news?"

"Very. We've got a destination. One of the drones found a pod."

"That is good news. Where are we headed?"

Rachel held up her phone, the map glowing in the gathering dusk. "Fifteen minutes northeast. Looks like it's way off the beaten path like the others."

Novak wasted no time, pulling out of the driveway so quickly that he spit up gravel as he made his way out onto the paved road. As he drove, Rachel ran a quick social media search for Jennifer Parker. Her Instagram account popped up first. She was young...maybe twenty-five. Pretty. The kind of genuine smile that made others want to trust you.

She then went back to her map, not wanting to miss a turn. She studied the map, zooming in. The area was remote, heavily wooded. Perfect for hiding things – or people. And as the darkness continues to gather, the daylight slowly giving up the fight, that thickness of forest on her phone screens seemed more ominous than it had even just five minutes ago.

The car accelerated through the dusk, wheels humming against asphalt with his partially wrecked back-end creating a strange rattling noise. Rachel thought about Jennifer Parker, about her husband watching football, about how quickly ordinary evenings could turn into nightmares. She thought about Christopher Bradley, waiting somewhere ahead of them, playing out his twisted game while dealing with his own heartbreaking loss.

And she thought about the pods again...most notably about how easily Christopher Bradley had managed to transform them into a dark and dangerous tool.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

Novak's face was like a polished sheet of granite as he gripped the steering wheel. His lips tightened a bit as he guided the car around a curve at seventy miles per hour. Rachel braced herself against the dashboard, studying the GPS on her phone. The afternoon sun filtered through the trees in strobing patterns, creating a disorienting light show through the windshield. It was as if it knew it only had another ten minutes or so of life and was trying to show off. Her head throbbed with each flash, a reminder of how long they'd been at this, how many hours they'd spent chasing Bradley and his murderous ghost through both backwoods and office buildings.

"Take a left here!" she called out, spotting the dirt road that had taken on a blue hue on her phone's screen. The turn was almost hidden by overgrown bushes, the kind of place you'd miss if you weren't specifically looking for it. Perfect for Bradley's purposes, she thought grimly.

Novak cranked the wheel hard. The car fishtailed, sending up a spray of gravel that sounded like buckshot against the wheel wells. The backend swung wide before Novak muscled it back in line, his jaw set in concentration. The car's frame groaned in protest, the earlier damage from their run-in with Marcus Kent making itself known with every bump and swerve.

"She holding together?" Rachel asked, eyeing the way Novak had to fight the steering wheel to keep them straight.

"Barely," he replied through gritted teeth. "Kent did us no favors with that little demolition derby earlier."

The dirt road stretched before them like a tunnel through the woods, barely wide

enough for a single vehicle. Ancient oaks and maples created a natural canopy overhead, their branches reaching across the gap like grasping fingers. Loose gravel pinged against the undercarriage in a constant barrage, each impact making Rachel wince. She'd have to write one hell of a vehicle damage report when this was over—assuming they survived long enough to file the paperwork.

A choking cloud of dust billowed in their wake, visible in the rearview mirror like a pursuing spirit. Rachel found herself checking it compulsively, half-expecting to see Bradley's vehicle emerging from the haze. After what he'd done to Sandra Mitchell and Timothy Walsh, after what he planned to do to Jennifer Parker, she wouldn't put anything past him. She kept her mind trained on that possibility—that they were possibly on their way to not only another suicide pod, but perhaps Christopher Bradley as well. Her pulse quickened as they pressed on, feeling a growing certainty that they may be coming to the end of this. She could feel it in Novak too, see it in the way he leaned forward slightly over the steering wheel, in the controlled intensity of his movements.

"Another turn coming up," she said, squinting at her phone through the strobing sunlight. "Should be— there!"

The second road was little more than a glorified trail, rutted and worn by years of sparse traffic and weather. Tire-carved channels ran deep enough to hide a small child, and fallen branches created an obstacle course that would challenge a monster truck, let alone their already-battered sedan.

The car bounced violently as Novak tried to navigate between the worst of the damage. Each impact jarred Rachel's teeth, and she could hear the undercarriage scraping along the ground, churning up dirt and rocks in equal measure. Not good.

"This isn't going to work," Novak growled after a particularly nasty jolt threatened to bottom out the suspension. He swerved to avoid what looked like a fallen tree branch.

"We're going to tear out the undercarriage at this rate."

Rachel was already unbuckling her seatbelt, her mind racing ahead to their target. "According to the coordinates, it's only about half a mile from here. We can make it on foot." She checked her weapon, more out of habit than necessity. "Probably faster at this point anyway."

They abandoned the car on a relatively flat stretch of road—or trail might be a more appropriate description. The moment Rachel's feet hit the ground, she took off at a sprint, Novak falling into step beside her. The forest pressed in around them, thick with late summer growth. Their footfalls crunched on fallen leaves and broken twigs, the sound seeming unnaturally loud in the relative quiet. Had it not been for the knowledge of why they were there, it would have been a rather scenic and peaceful scene.

The air was heavy with the scent of pine and decomposing vegetation, the kind of rich, earthy smell that reminded Rachel of childhood camping trips with her father. Somewhere in the distance, a woodpecker drummed out its territorial challenge, the sound echoing through the trees like morse code. A squirrel chattered angrily at their passage, probably warning every creature within earshot of their presence.

Rachel's lungs burned as they ran, her legs starting to protest the unexpected exercise. She wasn't entirely back to her pre-cancer fitness level—something that frustrated her daily—but determination drove her forward. Each breath felt like inhaling fire, but she pushed through it, focused on the rhythm of her feet hitting the ground.

Novak matched her pace, his breathing steady and controlled. They'd gotten better at working together over the past few weeks, learning to read each other's movements and intentions. Not quite the seamless partnership she'd had with Jack, but getting there. She had to admit, he'd proven himself more capable than she'd initially given him credit for...and that was only after two major cases and a few smaller jobs.

The grumble of an engine cut through the forest sounds behind them, growing louder. Rachel and Novak exchanged glances but didn't break stride. Her hand instinctively moved toward her weapon, wondering if this might be Bradley on his way to use this other pod. But a moment later, a truck with police decals appeared around the bend ahead of them, its white and blue markings visible through the trees. Wheeler was behind the wheel, grinning as he pulled alongside them.

"Need a lift?" he called out through the open window, keeping pace with their run. "Though I suppose at this point, it'd take longer to climb in than to just finish the run." Despite his light tone, Rachel could see the tension in his expression. He knew as well as they did what was at stake.

He pulled ahead slightly, and by the time he'd parked the truck, Rachel and Novak had caught up. Rachel looked to her phone and saw that they'd reached the location where the drone had spotted the pod in the woods. All three of them approached the grove of trees where the GPS coordinates led them, spreading out slightly in an unconscious tactical formation.

The pod sat there like an alien artifact, its sleek metal surface reflecting dappled sunlight. Rachel hitched in a breath when she first saw it—it looked exactly like the ones they'd found Sandra Mitchell and Timothy Walsh in, down to the smallest detail. The sight of it made her stomach turn, knowing what these machines were designed for, how Bradley had perverted their purpose even further.

She approached cautiously, using her foot to trigger the bottom latch, careful not to touch anything with her hands. They'd need to preserve any evidence they could find.

The lid lifted smoothly, revealing the pristine interior...and something else.

"There's power running to it," Rachel said, noting the faint hum of electronics. The sound was barely there, more vibration than noise, but unmistakable. "It's like it's in

standby mode, just waiting for someone to use it." The thought sent a chill down her spine despite the little sprint she'd just endured.

Wheeler nodded, peering inside. "The one we pulled from the Mitchell scene had its own power supply built in. Completely self-contained. No need to plug it into anything." He ran a hand through his hair, frowning. "Makes it pretty convenient to use them out in the middle of nowhere...somewhere like this."

"So what's our play here?" Novak asked, scanning the surrounding forest. His hand rested casually near his weapon, ready but not obvious about it. "Do we pull back, set up surveillance, wait to see if Bradley tries to bring Parker here? Or do we shut it down now?"

Rachel shook her head, thinking of the evidence they'd gathered. "We found five names on that list. This is only the third pod we've located. There could be two more out there somewhere." She didn't need to add what they were all thinking: two more potential death traps waiting to be sprung.

Novak had moved closer to the pod, studying the control panel with a frown. "You know what bothers me? If it's powered up and in standby mode, could Bradley be controlling it remotely? Turn it on or off from wherever he is?"

The question hung in the air for a moment, heavy with implications. Wheeler pulled out his phone, his expression thoughtful. "You know what? Let me check with my guys back at the precinct. They've been working on the pod we confiscated from the Mitchell site. They're not exactly a tech team...just two guys who happen to be good with electronics and wires. That sort of thing." He put the call on speaker. It rang three times before it was answered by a loud man.

"Hello?"

"Ed?" Wheeler said. "You at the station?"

"Sure am."

"Good. I've got Agents Gift and Novak with me. We had some questions about that pod you and Scotty have been looking at."

"Eh, I'll do my best. There's still some stuff I'm not sure about on this death machine." Ed's voice crackled through the speaker, distorted by the poor reception.

"Is there any chance these pods can be controlled remotely?" Wheeler asked.

There was a short laugh on the other end. "Funny you should ask. We accidentally figured out they can be. There's a digital switch that would allow for remote operation. Damn clever design, actually, though I doubt this is what the original engineers had in mind."

Rachel straightened, her mind racing. "Wait a second. If it can be controlled remotely, it has to be on some kind of network, right? If there are more pods out there, could we track them through the one you have?" The possibility made her heart race. Finally, a way to get ahead of Bradley instead of always playing catch-up.

There was another of those snappy laughs from the other line before Ed said: "Holy shit." His voice crackled with excitement. "That's... that's brilliant, actually. Theoretically, we should be able to trace the network connections. It'd be like working backwards through the pod's communication protocols, but..." He paused, and Rachel could practically hear him thinking through the problem. "I mean, I guess it's possible. Give me an hour?"

"Make it thirty minutes," Wheeler said. "Thanks, Ed." He then ended the call, turning back to Rachel and Novak with a slight smile. "I'm going to call for another unit, just

in case we do manage to find more than one of these things. Maybe they can bring you two a replacement vehicle while they're at it."

Rachel leaned against a tree, her mind working through possibilities. They were close—she could feel it. Bradley was out there somewhere, maybe even aware that they were on to him by now. But for the first time since this case began, she felt like they might actually be one step ahead of him.

The forest had grown quieter around them, as if nature itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next. A crow called in the distance, the sound almost like laughter. Rachel checked her watch, not sure why, exactly. The darkening sky and the calling of crickets in the distance told her all she needed to know.

She looked over at Novak and saw the same mixture of tension and anticipation in his stance that she felt herself. Wheeler was on his phone, calling in backup, his voice a low murmur in the background. All they could do now was wait and hope that when Bradley made his move, they'd be ready.

The pod hummed softly behind them, patient as a spider in its web, waiting for its next victim. And Rachel did her best to ignore just how calm and inviting the machine sounded.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:01 am

The forest was growing darker by the minute, shadows lengthening between the trees like fingers pulling in the night. The autumn wind rustled through the canopy overhead, carrying with it the musty scent of decomposing leaves and damp earth. Rachel stood at the hood of Wheeler's truck, studying the paper map spread out before them. Wheeler had gone to the glove compartment of his truck to retrieve it when he'd ended his phone call. There was a slight sliver of daylight remaining, but it was too dark to see by, so Wheeler had also produced a Maglite from his truck as well. They looked over the map by its white glare.

"Look at this pattern," Wheeler said, taking a pen out of the breast pocket of his shirt. He circled each location where they'd found the suicide pods, including the one just a few feet beside them. The sound of his pen scratching against the paper was eerie in the approaching night. "Here, here, and here."

Novak leaned in closer, his breath visible in the cooling air. "That's roughly fifty miles across," he said, measuring with his fingers. "At least he's keeping it contained."

"Makes sense, I suppose," Rachel said. "All this wilderness...it's a gold mine of hiding spots if you know the area well."

"And apparently, this guy does," Wheeler says. "These old roads he's using...some are logging roads that haven't been touched by a tire in ten years or more."

"Maybe he's a hunter?" Novak suggested. "Deer hunters would know these old dirt roads, right?"

“Maybe,” Wheeler said. “We can—”

His phone chirped, interrupting him. The screen illuminated his face in the growing darkness. "It's Ed," he announced, answering the call and tapping the speaker icon. "Damn, Ed... that was less than twenty minutes."

"Keep that in mind when I ask you to put in a good word for me with the captain," Ed's voice crackled through the speaker, tired but satisfied. "You're not going to believe what I found."

Rachel's pulse quickened. "What did you get?"

"These pods are all networked. All of them. Bradley's got them running on some kind of proprietary software system. From what I can tell, it's primarily for location tracking and status monitoring."

Novak straightened up. "Status monitoring?"

"Yeah," Ed continued. "He can see if they're operational, on standby, or if there's been any kind of malfunction. Saves him the trouble of having to check on them all the time. It's sophisticated stuff – definitely not amateur hour."

Rachel's mind raced through the implications. Bradley wasn't just placing death machines in the wilderness; he was maintaining them, monitoring them. It was actually brilliant. Rather than drop one pod off for each murder, he had likely hidden them all away at once and left them there...waiting to be powered up from a remote location.

"Can you see where the other pods are located from that network?" she asked, trying to keep the urgency out of her voice.

There was a pause on the line, filled only by the sound of Ed's typing. "I've got a location on one more pod. Just one."

"Just one?" Rachel exchanged glances with Novak. Based on all they knew, there was supposed to be two more...if the list they'd found had indeed been victims. "You're sure?"

"Positive. It's off a logging road east of State Road 133. Sending the coordinates now."

Rachel's eyes found State Road 133 on Wheeler's map. They were close – which was to be expected, given that Bradley was apparently keeping his spree contained to a fifty-mile radius.

Wheeler's phone chimed with the incoming coordinates. Novak immediately pulled out his own phone, fingers flying over the screen and inputting them. "Twenty-six miles away," he announced. "We could be there in thirty minutes, maybe less."

"Maybe more when you consider the state of these damned roads," Wheeler said. He folded up his map and looked over to the pod. "Take my truck," he said, tossing the keys to Novak. "I'll stay here and secure this pod until backup arrives."

"You're sure?" Rachel said.

"Yeah. And I'll reach out right away if Bradley shows up intending to use this one."

It did make sense to split up; Rachel knew this, but she also hated the idea of being confined to another vehicle, bumping along more back roads while they had no idea where Christopher Bradley was—or Jennifer Parker, for that matter.

She and climbed into the truck as Wheeler made his way over to the pod. Rachel

noticed that his hand was resting in his holstered service weapon at his hip.

The sky had turned a deep purple, the last remnants of daylight eaten by the night. Novak worked to back the truck up a bit at an angle, whipping it back around to head out the way they'd come in. He handled the truck with practiced ease, but she could sense his tension in the way his he was leaning forward, his chest nearly pressed into the steering wheel.

"I think we've got the bastard," Novak said. "Either at this pod or the one we're headed to...we've got him."

"There were five names on the list," she pointed out. "Which makes me think there should be a fifth pod. Maybe...maybe he already used it long ago...long before we even knew there was a case. Maybe he's used it and taken it offline."

"Maybe," Novak said. "Or maybe it malfunctioned somehow. Maybe he was unable to use it."

Rachel nodded. It was a good point, and one that she latched on to, hoping it was true.

The truck's headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating the dirt road ahead. The road seemed to unspool from the earth and was then bordered by the darkness of the trees and the night. To Rachel's surprise, though, the paved road appeared faster than she'd imagined. And when Novak turned the truck onto the asphalt, he gunned the engine, heading east. Now, off of the bumps of the dirt road, he seemed to relax a bit.

Rachel began guiding him through a series of multiple turn-offs, all of which were on paved surfaces. The map showed her that after just a few more, they would be on State Road 133, and they'd have a straight stretch for quite a while.

The truck's radio crackled to life. It made Rachel jump a bit because she hadn't even noticed the typical police band radio bolted to the underside of the truck's dashboard. Wheeler's voice cut through a brief hiss of static. "Gift, Novak, you copy?"

Rachel grabbed the handheld mic and pushed the Send button. "We copy," Rachel responded. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Just wanted you know that the backup unit just arrived at my location," Wheeler said, his voice tight with tension. "But you need to know something. Ed just called again. He's been going through more of Bradley's network data. These pods? They're not just being monitored. They're collecting data. Recording everything."

Rachel felt her blood run cold. "Recording what, exactly?"

"Everything. Video, audio, vital signs – right up until the moment of death. Bradley's not just killing these people. He's studying them. Watching them die."

Rachel closed her eyes, fighting back a wave of nausea. When she opened them again, she could not decide if she was heartbroken for the victims or simply pissed off. Somewhere deep inside her heart, she was starting to understand that her six months or so of avoiding death with experimental treatments and endless rest had changed something inside of her. Now, when dealing with the deaths of victims, it was far harder to separate the end of their lives from the duties of her job. Something like this—what Christopher Bradley was doing to these victims—felt personal to her. It felt like she was being mocked. But she also knew that this case was not about her or the things she'd been through. She cheapened the lives of the victims if she placed herself in the center of the killer's efforts. All in all, it did one thing: it cemented and even empowered her already burning need to bring this bastard down.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:02 am

The truck's headlights carved through the darkness as they came upon the turn-off that would remove them from the paved road they'd been enjoying for the past thirteen minutes. When Rachel saw that the turn would place them on a gravel road that was barely as wide as Wheeler's truck, she was not at all surprised.

Rachel gripped the armrest, her other hand holding her phone steady as she tracked their progress against Ed's coordinates. The screen's blue glow illuminated her face in the darkened cab, casting sharp shadows that made her look almost ghostly.

"Left up ahead," she called out to Novak. "About fifty yards."

The truck's engine roared as Novak downshifted, taking the turn with practiced precision. The tires kicked up gravel, sending it pattering against the wheel wells like artificial rain. Rachel felt the familiar surge of adrenaline course through her body—that electric anticipation that came with closing in on a suspect. She'd felt it countless times before, but something about knifing their way down an old dirt road in the night made it feel even more exhilarating.

"These coordinates are taking us deeper into more old logging territory," she said, squinting at her phone's screen. The blue dot representing their position pulsed steadily as they ventured further from civilization. "Just like the others...way off the beaten path."

The gravel that had greeted them at the turn quickly disappeared and presented dirt, dust, and shallow ruts. Within less than a minute, this forked into two directions. "Veer left," Rachel said.

Novak did as he instructed, and right away, they were once again on what looked like an ancient logging trail. It sprawled before them like a weathered scar in the earth, most of it having been consumed by decades of undergrowth. Novak navigated them expertly, though the truck's suspension groaned in protest as they bounced over exposed roots and deep ruts.

Rachel's mind raced through the possibilities. If Bradley was here, if they'd managed to get ahead of him, that would very likely be the end of it. But what if they were too late? The image of Sandra Mitchell's body flashed through her mind, followed quickly by Timothy Walsh. Would Jennifer Parker be next?

She pushed the thoughts away, forcing herself to focus on the present.

A branch scraped along the side of the truck with a sound like fingernails on metal. The path was growing narrower, the forest pressing in around them like a living thing trying to bar their way. Novak had to slow their pace, picking through the obstacles with increasing care.

"There," Rachel said suddenly, pointing. There was a slight break in the trees to their right. "That's the last turn."

Novak took it, the back tires unable to stay in the little lane and skidding against a small tree. The condition of the road just got worse and worse the deeper into the forest they ventured. The headlights did show twin trails in the forest floor—where tires of some kind had passed through at some point in history—but they were barely there at all. She looked to the sides of the so-called road, looking for evidence that someone had passed through her recently. It was hard to tell in the moving headlights, but she thought she could see disturbances along the edge, the foliage and tall grass disturbed by—

"Rachel...do you see that?"

She napped her attention ahead. The headlights swept across something reflective—another vehicle. A truck, parked haphazardly at the edge of the road, pulled slightly off to the side.

And there, just beyond it...

"The pod," Novak muttered, killing the engine but leaving the lights on. The beams cut through the darkness like searchlights, creating stark shadows that seemed to move with a life of their own.

Rachel's hand was already on her weapon as she pushed the door open. The familiar weight of her Glock provided little comfort as her eyes locked onto a figure darting away from the pod. In the nighttime shadows among the trees, the figure looked like nothing more than a living, breathing darkness. The figure—Christopher Bradley, she assumed—disappeared into the tree line. The movement was quick, purposeful—someone who knew exactly where they were going.

"FBI! Stop right there!" Novak's voice boomed through the clearing as he broke into a sprint after the fleeing suspect. He moved swiftly, without looking back to her. It was technically a bit of a mistake, but she didn't blame him. Rachel watched him disappear into the darkness, chasing after the fleeing suspect.

She started to follow, but a flash of blue light caught her attention. It was a serene shade of calming blue emanating from within the pod. It pulsed with an almost hypnotic rhythm. Rachel's blood ran cold as she spotted movement inside.

A woman was thrashing against the glass, her mouth open in a silent scream. Jennifer Parker.

The young woman's face was pressed against the glass, eyes wide with terror. Her fists pounded against the transparent sheet of glass, but Rachel could barely hear the

impacts over the sound of her own racing heart and the blood rushing in her ears.

She dropped to one knee, searching for the release mechanism she'd seen on the underside of the other pods. Her fingers found the familiar shape of the latch. She pushed, then pulled...but it wouldn't budge. She tried again, using both hands this time, muscles straining with the effort.

"Damn it!" The bastard must have modified it, locked it somehow when he heard them coming.

The pod's soft blue light cast an eerie glow across Jennifer's face, making her look almost otherworldly—like she was floating in a capsule in space rather than trapped in one in these Virginia woods. Rachel could see her lips moving, forming words she couldn't hear through the thick glass; they were little more than muffled complaints. The young woman's eyes were pleading, desperate.

From somewhere in the darkness came the sounds of their struggle—grunts and the distinctive thud of bodies hitting the ground, followed by the crack of breaking branches. Novak had his suspect. Rachel took a step back from the pod, flicking the safety on her weapon. Jennifer's movements were becoming sluggish, her eyes starting to roll back.

No time left...

Rachel reversed her grip on the Glock, slipping the safety on and hefting the gun like a hammer. She brought it down on the glass surface hard and fast. The first strike against the glass sent a spiderweb of cracks racing across the surface, the impact jarring her arms. The second widened the fissures, but still wasn't enough. Her shoulders ached with the effort and her hand thrummed, but she couldn't stop now.

As she drew back again, she heard the voice of Christopher Bradley crying out into

the night as Novak struggled with him. "You understand I'm helping them, right?" Bradley's voice carried from the darkness, twisted with a desperate kind of conviction. "They deserve their peace! They wanted to die...and I'm trying to...trying to..."

The sounds of their struggle drowned out the rest of his words, which had devolved into tear-choked sobs.

Rachel blocked out his words, channeling everything into one final strike. She brought her hand down, still gripping the Glock, putting all of her might and frustration into it. The glass exploded inward, shards raining down into the pod like deadly crystal rain. She reached in without hesitation, ignoring the bite of glass against her palm as she grabbed Jennifer under the arms and carefully started hauling her out.

The younger woman's body was limp, but Rachel could feel her breathing...barely. Rachel stumbled back in a clumsy yet effective manner and gently laid Jennifer on the ground. She quickly looked for the woman's pulse; she found it rapid but weak.

"Okay, I've got you," Rachel said. "Hold on, Jennifer. Hold on..."

She was torn between caring for Jennifer and making her way out into the darkness to assist Novak. But before she could even give the choice much thought, Novak emerged from the darkness, wrestling with a man Rachel still assumed to be Christopher Bradley. His face was scratched, probably from crashing through the undergrowth, and his eyes held the wild light of zealotry. His clothes were covered in dirt and leaves, evidence of the struggle through the woods.

Novak seemed to have the upper hand, but it was clear that Bradley was fighting with more tenacity. Feeling more comfortable now that Jennifer would still be within sight, Rachel got to her feet and moved in next to Novak.

Bradley thrashed between them, surprisingly strong for his unremarkable build. Together, they managed to force his hands behind his back, though he nearly slipped free twice before they could secure him. The click of the handcuffs echoed with finality through the trees.

The sound seemed to flip some sort of switch within Bradley. He stopped resisting, and his shoulders sagged as his words poured out in an almost fevered rush. "I gave them what they wanted. What they needed. They just weren't brave enough...but I helped. I could give them peace...like my Kelly. Like...like Kelly...Alive, they were suffering. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't..."

Rachel left Novak to secure Bradley and rushed back to Jennifer, who was starting to stir. Her breathing was shallow and rapid, but her eyes were focusing again. A series of little raspy moans trickled from between her lips. Relief flooded through Rachel as she pulled out her phone, her blood-slicked fingers leaving smears on the screen as she dialed 9-1-1.

"This is Special Agent Gift, out of the Richmond field office," she said the moment the dispatch operator answered. "I need immediate medical assistance at my location." She rattled off the coordinates, keeping one hand on Jennifer's shoulder to steady her as the young woman tried to sit up.

"Easy," Rachel murmured to her while the dispatcher was still on the line. "Help is coming. You're safe now." She shrugged off her jacket, draping it over Jennifer's shoulders. The night air was cool, and shock would be setting in soon if it hadn't already.

Jennifer's fingers clutched at Rachel's arm. "He... he said he was...was...."

"Later," Rachel said. "Rest for right now, okay? Let's make sure you're really fine before you get into it all."

Behind them, Bradley had started talking again, his voice taking on an almost dreamy quality. "You don't understand what it's like to watch someone you love suffer... to watch them beg for relief that no one will give them. My wife... she found peace...was released from her fears and her...and my work. She..."

But again, he broke down into sobs, literally falling to his knees with his hands cuffed behind his back.

Rachel looked down at her hand, noticing for the first time the full extent of the cuts where the glass had sliced her palm. Blood dripped slowly onto the forest floor, but she barely felt the pain. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but she thought it might be quite deep. She may have a few stitches in her future. But it seemed a small price to pay. They had Bradley. They had saved Jennifer.

In the harsh glare of the truck's headlights, the pod's broken glass glittered like stars scattered across the forest floor. When she was able to accept that it was over, she used that same bloodied hand to call Wheeler.

Minutes later, as the first red and blue lights began to flash through the trees, Rachel stood slowly, her hand throbbing in time with her heartbeat. She shared a knowing look with Novak, and Bradley continued to weep until the sound of approaching sirens drowned him out.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:02 am

The startling glow of emergency lights painted the forest in alternating splashes of color, transforming the quiet logging road into something that looked like a surreal movie set. Jennifer Parker sat on the back step of the ambulance, an oxygen mask pressed to her face, her hands still trembling despite the shock blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Rachel watched as the EMT checked Jennifer's vitals for the third time. They were located roughly fifty feet away from where Rachel had removed Jennifer from the pod because the ambulance had not been able to make it all the way down the rough road.

"Blood pressure's still elevated," the EMT said, her voice professional but kind as she spoke to Jennifer. "But that's to be expected after what you've been through. Just keep taking slow, deep breaths."

The narrow dirt road had become a maze of emergency vehicles. Two patrol cars were angled awkwardly into the brush, their wheels sunk into the soft earth at the road's edge. The ambulance had barely made it down the rutted path, its driver having to navigate between tree stumps and low-hanging branches. Rachel had watched them inch their way in, the massive vehicle swaying dangerously as its tires fought for purchase on the uneven ground.

The scene was organized chaos – radio chatter crackling through the night air, flashlight beams cutting through the darkness, and the constant movement of uniformed officers securing the area. Every few minutes, another vehicle would attempt the treacherous journey down the logging road, adding to the congestion.

Just in front of the ambulance, Detective Wheeler was standing next to a police cruiser, one hand resting on the roof while he spoke into his radio. "Suspect is in

custody, repeating, the suspect is in custody. We're going to need CSU to process this whole area, and someone get hold of the DA's office." In the backseat of the very same cruiser, Christopher Bradley sat in silence, his face illuminated by the strobing lights. Rachel noticed how ordinary he looked – like someone you'd pass in a grocery store without a second glance.

She and Novak both turned their attention to Jennifer now that the paramedic had given her a decent report.

"Ms. Parker," Rachel said, "I know this is difficult, but can you tell us exactly what happened? Every detail could be important."

Jennifer pulled the oxygen mask away from her face. Her mascara had run, leaving dark trails down her cheeks, and Rachel could see the angry red marks on her wrists where a restraint of some kind had been recently.

"I was... I was just going to meet my friend Sarah for drinks." Her voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. "Around five, I think. CJ—my husband—was watching football so I didn't have anything to do. So I met a friend at McLaren's, the bar we go to sometimes. I got there and...and..."

"Take your time," Rachel encouraged, noting how Jennifer's fingers tightened around the oxygen mask.

"We had a few drinks and...yeah, I know...not responsible, but we left to head back home. I'd only had two drinks, you know. So I was fine...but I had just gotten to my car on the other side of the street..." Jennifer paused to take a shaky breath. I started the car when he popped up from the back seat. He'd...he'd broken into my car. I don't even know how. But he was...he had a gun." Her voice cracked. "One of those small ones, a revolver, I think. He pressed it against my ribs from the back seat and said if I screamed or tried to run, he'd kill me right there."

Novak nodded sympathetically. "What happened next?"

"He made me drive. My own car at first. We took back roads I didn't recognize – he kept telling me where to turn. That's where he tied my hands and moved me to his truck. A blue pickup, I think. Just waiting there. Everything after that is..." She shuddered. "It's a blur."

"Did he talk during the drive?" Rachel asked, keeping her voice steady and calm. "Anything he said could help us build our case."

Jennifer nodded, pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders. "He kept talking about someone named Kelly. His wife, I think. And he was talking about EndLight...I work there, remotely. About how he'd worked for them but he was finally using the ideas they had for good. To remember Kelly. I don't know...it all sounded nuts to me. He said...well, he told me he knew about my suicide attempt...that he was going to make that right. That he was going to help me."

A gust of wind rustled through the trees, causing the shadows to dance across the ground. More officers were arriving now, their vehicles creating a bottleneck at the narrow entrance to the logging road. The pod – that terrible machine – was being photographed by the crime scene unit, their camera flashes adding to the disorienting light show.

"Anything else?" Novak prodded.

"I don't...I don't think so. Like I said...after he tied me up...it was all just a blur."

Rachel nodded, reaching out and placing an encouraging hand on Jennifer's shoulder. "Can we call anyone for you?"

"The cop I spoke to earlier already called my husband. He should be on the way."

She smiled weakly and said, "Thank you. Sorry about your hand."

"Oh, I'll live."

Rachel stepped away from the ambulance in the direction of the suicide pod. For a moment, she found herself drawn away from the chaos, recalling that soft, inviting blue light the pod had surrounded Jennifer in... The weight of the night pressed down on her, making her think of all the times she'd stood at similar scenes, all the lives balanced on the edge of darkness.

But that pod...it was an instrument of death no matter how you looked at it. And standing so close to it now, feeling its intent pressed into the night, Rachel felt tears coming on. She thought of her own imminent death. Yes, she'd beaten cancer and ensured so much...but one day, everyone met an end, one way or another.

She pulled out her phone, her fingers hovering over the screen for a moment before calling a saved number. It rang twice before a familiar voice answered.

"Hey, Mom."

"Paige..."

She fought back tears, not quite sure where they were coming from. She tried to speak again, but her throat tightened up.

"Mom, what's up? You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, wiping a tear away from her cheek. "I just wanted to check in. How is everyone?"

"We're good. Just making dinner. Mac and cheese with hotdogs cut up in it."

“Jack’s idea, I take it?” Rachel said, smiling.

“Oh, you know it. Want me to get him?”

"In a minute." Rachel turned to look back at the scene behind her – the lights, the pod, the killer in custody – and felt the weight of what could have been. "I just wanted to hear your voice. Tell me about your day."

"Well, I studied my butt off for that English test, I have tomorrow" Paige said, pride evident in her voice. As Paige launched into the details of her day, Rachel felt more tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. Here she was, standing mere feet from a machine designed to end lives, listening to her daughter talk about her day. Such a vibrant ray of life in the presence of a death machine. It made the night feel both peaceful and sinister at the same time.

"Mom? Are you okay?" Paige's voice cut through her thoughts. "You're being quiet."

Rachel wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm perfect, honey. Just perfect. Put Jack on for a minute?"

There was a shuffling sound, then Jack's warm voice came through the phone. "Hey, you. Rough night?"

"Yeah," Rachel admitted. "But we got him. Case closed."

"That's my girl." She could hear the pride in his voice. "Coming home soon?"

"Soon as I can." She looked to her hand and considered telling him that she may have to take a pitstop by a hospital. But she didn't want to dive into all of that right now. "I love you."

“Love you, too. See you soon.”

Rachel ended the call as she watched Wheeler's cruiser pull away, Bradley secured in the back. The man who had tried to take another life tonight would face justice, while she – who had once been so close to death herself – stood here blessed with a second chance, surrounded by all the reasons to live.

She took a deep breath of the cool night air. Behind her, the organized chaos continued – radios squawking, cameras clicking, voices calling out to each other through the darkness. A tow truck's headlights swept across the scene as it began the careful process of extracting the stuck patrol car.

But Rachel felt centered now, grounded. Tomorrow there would be paperwork and interviews, evidence to process and statements to take. But tonight, she had helped save a life, and she was going home to her family.

That was more than enough.

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Scarlett Kline hummed softly as she knelt in the rich earth of her garden, the morning sun warming her shoulders. Her knees pressed against the grass, cushioned by the gardening pad she'd treated herself to last week—a cheerful yellow thing with little roses printed on it. The weight of the small trowel in her hand felt good—purposeful. She'd always dreamed of having a proper rose garden, but somehow there had never been time before. Funny how a terminal diagnosis could finally give you permission to pursue your dreams.

The backyard wasn't large, but it was hers, every square foot of it. The previous owners had let it go wild, but Scarlett had spent the last few weeks slowly reclaiming it. She'd cleared away the tangle of weeds that had choked out the flower beds along the fence, trimmed back the overgrown butterfly bush that had sprawled across half the yard, and laid fresh mulch around the base of the ancient maple tree that dominated the back corner. Its leaves were just starting to turn, hints of gold appearing among the green.

She sat back on her heels, surveying the neat row of bushes she'd planted. They weren't much to look at now—just woody stems with a few leaves clinging stubbornly to their branches—but in her mind's eye, she could already see them in full bloom. Yellow roses had always been her favorite, their sunny faces turned toward the sky. She'd chosen a variety called "Walking on Sunshine," which seemed appropriate given her surprisingly good morning. The garden center employee had shown her pictures of the mature plants, their petals a warm butter-yellow with edges that blushed slightly orange in the summer heat.

For the first time in weeks, she'd slept through the night without waking in pain. Even better, she'd actually felt hungry at breakfast. Real hunger, not the obligation to eat

that had become her norm. Two eggs and two pieces of toast had disappeared from her plate, and her stomach was already growling again. Rachel would be thrilled when Scarlett told her at their next visit.

Rachel. Scarlett smiled, thinking of the FBI agent who'd become so much more than just another volunteer at the hospice. There was something about Rachel that put everyone at ease, probably because she'd walked this road herself. She'd beaten her cancer, though, and sometimes when Scarlett looked at her friend's healthy glow, she could almost believe in miracles.

She could picture it perfectly. Her roses in bloom next spring, two comfortable chairs and a small round table, just right for afternoon conversations. Her and Rachel could sit out here with tea...or mimosas. She damn well though they'd both earned a mimosa or two."

The autumn breeze picked up, sending a few errant leaves skittering across her lawn. A wind chime she'd hung from the maple's lowest branch tinkled softly, its gentle notes carrying across the yard. Scarlett gathered her gardening tools, knowing she should head inside before she tired herself out. That was one lesson she'd learned the hard way: pace yourself. There would be other days for gardening.

She took one last look at her handiwork before heading in. Beyond the rose bushes, she'd started planning a small herb garden—nothing too ambitious, just some basics like basil and mint. Maybe even some lavender. The fence would need repainting come spring, and she thought a soft sage green would look lovely against the yellow roses. So many plans, so much to look forward to.

As she walked back to the house, she found herself thinking about what else she could do to fill the winter months ahead. The roses wouldn't need much attention until spring, and she needed something to occupy her mind. An idea that had been percolating for years bubbled up again—that romance novel she'd always wanted to write. Not the trashy kind, but something with heart and depth about second chances

and finding love when you least expect it.

And why not? She'd decided that she was done "waiting for someday." She'd seen too many somedays slip away in hospital rooms, watching other patients whose time had run out before they could chase their dreams.

Her stomach rumbled again, and Scarlett headed for the pantry, wondering if she had any of those wheat crackers left. She'd just reached for the handle when a knock at the front door made her jump.

She wasn't expecting anyone. Rachel always texted first, and her sister, Jenny, wasn't due until tomorrow. Scarlett hesitated, suddenly aware of how quiet the house was. She really should get one of those video doorbells—Jenny had been nagging her about it ever since she'd been released from hospice.

Another knock, polite but firm.

"Coming!" she called, smoothing her gardening clothes and hoping she hadn't tracked dirt through the house. She glanced down—her jeans were muddy at the knees, and her old blue t-shirt had seen better days. Not exactly proper for receiving visitors, but whoever it was would have to understand.

When she opened the door, she found a man standing on her porch, holding what looked like a catalog or order form. He was unremarkable in the most pleasant way—the kind of face you'd trust immediately, like a favorite uncle or a longtime neighbor. His smile was apologetic, almost shy. He wore khakis and a light blue button-down shirt, pressed and neat. Everything about him seemed designed to put people at ease.

"Can I help you?" Scarlett asked, finding herself smiling back.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," he said, his voice carrying just the right note of

embarrassment. "This is a bit awkward, actually. I'm selling cookies for my daughter's Girl Scout troop. She's home with the flu, but she's only twenty boxes away from third place in the troop sales competition. I promised her I'd help out. So...here's the humbled dad, going door to door..."

Scarlett's smile widened. "Cookies? Well, as it happens, I'm actually hungry right now." It felt good to say that—to be hungry, to want food again. She thought of all the months when even the thought of eating had made her stomach turn.

"I hate to say you'll have to wait two or three weeks for delivery," the man said with that same apologetic smile.

"Oh, that's fine. Future cookies are almost as good as cookies you can eat right now."

The man chuckled as she opened the door wider, intending to ask about the different varieties on the papers. That's when she saw it—the subtle shift in his expression. His smile didn't move, exactly, but something behind it changed, like a shadow passing behind a window. For a fraction of a second, Scarlett felt a chill.

The man held up his form. "Can I get your name, ma'am? For the order?" His pen hovered over the paper, waiting.

"Scarlett Kline," she said, her voice suddenly feeling too loud in her own ears. A voice in the back of her mind was whispering that something wasn't right, but that was silly. He was just a father helping his daughter. Still, she found herself gripping the doorframe a little tighter. "And what's your name?"

"I'm David," he said, writing on his form. "David Morton."

There it was again—that change in his smile. This time, she was sure of it. The pleasantness was still there, but now it reminded her of a mask, something worn rather than felt. Her heart began to pound, and she started to step back to close the

door. Through the window beside her door, she could see Mrs. Henderson's house across the street, but the older woman's car was gone. The street was empty.

And then, out of nowhere, the man was moving. He was moving lightning fast and coming right at her into her house. Scarlett tried to react, but she wasn't fast enough.

David Morton's hand shot out, catching the edge of the door before she could shut it. The order form fluttered to the ground, forgotten. The force of his push sent her stumbling backward, and she lost her balance, falling hard onto the entryway floor. Her elbow struck the hardwood with a crack that sent pain shooting up her arm.

"What—" she began, but he was already inside, closing the door behind him with a gentle click that seemed obscene in its quietness. The pleasant smile was gone now, replaced by something that made her blood run cold.

"Scarlett Kline..." he said, as if tasting the name. "Rachel's favorite, right?"

She tried to scramble backward, but her body—her treacherous body that had finally started to feel better—betrayed her again. Her arms shook with sudden weakness. The morning's energy drained away, leaving her as helpless as she'd been in her worst days of treatment.

"Rachel?" she managed to gasp.

He nodded, taking a step closer. "Oh yes. We're old friends, Rachel and I."

Scarlett's gaze darted to the front window, where the morning sun still streamed in cheerfully.

"Please," she whispered, though she could tell from his eyes that pleading would make no difference. "Please don't—"

"Shhh," he said softly, moving toward her with the same gentle smile he'd worn on her doorstep.

The last thing Scarlett saw was a ray of sunlight spilling through the window. And in that moment, she realized that she would never share that spring morning tea with Rachel, and she would never see her roses bloom.