



In Her Bed (Jenna Graves #6)

Author: *Blake Pierce*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Sheriff Jenna Graves thought shed heard it all—until a body turns up on the towns defunct radio tower. Now her dreams are picking up frequencies from the past, and Jenna must separate the signal from the noise to solve a string of cold cases before the killer signs off for good.

IN HER BED is the sixth book 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. The series begins with *IN HER SIGHTS* (Book #1).

The Jenna Graves series delivers a pulse-pounding experience for mystery lovers. Follow the complex journey of a brilliant yet troubled female protagonist as she navigates intense investigations filled with unexpected twists, shocking revelations, and relentless suspense. The fast-paced narrative and gripping action sequences will keep you captivated until the very last page. Fans of Kendra Elliot, Rachel Caine, and Teresa Driscoll are sure to fall in love.

Total Pages (Source): 27

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Marcus settled into his chair, his face illuminated by the warm flicker of the tubes. He stretched a bit, cleared his throat, adjusted the headphones over his wild gray hair, then keyed the transmitter with the exaggerated flair of a maestro taking the stage.

Marcus leaned back and surveyed his surroundings, taking in the neat array of older equipment and scattered army surplus.

He found the hum of his new setup comforting, blending perfectly with the solitude of his surroundings.

He could imagine the trees and darkness outside closing in around the trailer, but none of that mattered.

This world was his, and he felt safe here within it.

A crackle came through the speaker. “November Charlie Zero Sierra Echo here, up in Nebraska. Did I catch that right? Is this the same Missouri operator I’m thinking of?” The voice was warm and friendly, laced with a Midwest twang.

“You’ve got him,” Marcus replied. “Sounding a bit different tonight?”

“I thought maybe I’d tuned in the wrong call sign,” Todd said. “I could swear you’re the same guy who was coming in strong on my end just last week. But you’re not the same Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha I’m used to, are you? Come again.”

Marcus paused, reaching over to adjust the gain on the set. “That better?” he asked, expecting Todd to be impressed by the improved clarity.

“No change,” Todd said, almost laughing. “You must be using different equipment.”

Marcus beamed. “You’ve got that right. Same operator, different setup. Brand-new rig. It’s an old rig, just newly bought.”

“Knew it,” Todd replied. “I hardly recognize the sound. Why the switch?”

Marcus felt a thrill of excitement. “Bought it at an estate sale. Pre-transistorized set,” he said. He leaned forward, anticipating Todd’s reaction.

Todd broke in. “You mean it’s an old clunker?”

“More like a piece of history,” Marcus corrected, with an edge of pride in his voice. Vintage vacuum tubes. Circa 1950.”

There was a pause before Todd’s voice came back through. “You’re pulling my leg, right?”

Marcus chuckled, shaking his head. “Nope. It’s exactly what I was after. The old solid-state rigs are on the scrap heap now.”

Todd’s disbelief was palpable. “That’s a mistake, my friend. You’re too good an operator to settle for that junk.”

Marcus was ready for this. “I knew you’d say that, but you haven’t heard why.”

He was about to explain when a sudden, sharp knock at the door halted him mid-sentence. He sat frozen, his body tense, with his eyes darting nervously toward the source of the sound. But now everything was silent. Surely, he thought, it had been just his imagination playing tricks on him.

Then, another knock shattered the stillness, echoing through the room with even greater force, reverberating like a thunderclap in the silence.

“Hold on, Todd,” Marcus said, putting the set on standby. “Be right back.”

Swiftly, he yanked open the desk drawer and retrieved a sleek, cold semiautomatic pistol, its metal glinting under the dim light. He loaded it and stopped to listen again. Whoever was out there, they were about to make a grave error.

Marcus approached the door with caution, his senses heightened, fully expecting to glimpse a form slinking away into the inky night. Steeling himself, he took a deep breath and flung the door wide open, muscles tense in preparation for whatever confrontation awaited him.

Only darkness stretched beyond the weathered wooden deck, an oppressive void that seemed to whisper of hidden dangers. It enveloped him, accentuating the silence with its oppressive presence.

He called out into the night, his voice steady and commanding, concealing the tremors lurking beneath the surface. “You better get away from here! Next time you knock, I’ll shoot for sure!”

His words lingered in the air, a stern warning, before he added with a hint of menace, “I’ve killed trespassers before!”

It was a bluff, of course. But he shouted it with lots of conviction. Marcus scanned the trees, looking for movement, but the night remained silent. He slammed the door shut and returned to his radio, the gun still close at hand.

“Sorry about that,” Marcus said, settling back into his chair. “Where were we?”

“Everything okay?” Todd asked. “You sound a bit spooked.”

“Just someone snooping around,” Marcus replied. “Gets old. People get curious when you live out in the sticks.”

Todd chuckled. “From your call sign, I take it you live in Missouri. Maybe one of these days you’ll give your GPS coordinates. Or even tell me your real name. I might pay a visit.”

“Not a chance,” Marcus said. “For all I know, you’re not even who you say you are.”

“Now you gotta be joking,” Todd said, sounding almost offended.

Marcus’s tone grew more serious. “No more jokes.”

“You’re worrying me, Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha.”

“That’s the idea,” Marcus replied. “I’ve been doing research, looking into some pretty dark nooks and crannies, and what I’ve found out isn’t pretty. State-of-the-art audio technology is a tool for government control. Integrated circuits, transistors, and microchips. All of it.”

“You have gone off the deep end,” Todd said, though there was more curiosity than mockery in his voice.

Marcus leaned closer to the set, determined to make Todd understand. “I’m getting rid of all of it. Keeping free from brainwashing, and giving you and the other operators fair warning.”

“Wait,” Todd said. “You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack,” Marcus replied.

There was a long pause. Then, breaking the silence, Todd erupted into laughter, a hearty, unrestrained sound that echoed around the room.

Marcus’s anger flared. “You’re the perfect example of a puppet to the powers that be. Better throw out that radio of yours before it’s too late.”

“And what? Switch to two tin cans and some string?”

Marcus felt his pulse racing. “If you want to be on the safe side.”

“Now you sound more like the Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha I know,” Todd said. “Just looking out for number one.”

“Damn right,” Marcus replied. “I’d suggest you do the same.”

Another knock echoed through the room, louder and more insistent this time.

Marcus stiffened, his eyes wide with panic as his breath caught in his throat.

“Hang on,” he muttered to Todd, exasperated.

This was no longer a simple matter of curiosity; it felt far more serious.

Perhaps they had sent someone to find him.

He couldn’t afford to expose himself for too long.

He was all too aware of the fate that awaited those who mistakenly believed they were secure.

Marcus snatched up the pistol again and moved toward the door. “Don’t show your face,” he shouted, his voice cracking with intensity. “I’ll shoot on sight.”

He threw the door open. The deck was empty. The night was quiet. Marcus’s breath came heavy as he strained to see movement in the trees. The loudest sound was the blood rushing through his ears.

With mounting frustration, he stepped down from the deck, wishing he’d brought a flashlight instead of a gun. He squinted into the barely moonlit darkness, straining to see. Maybe it was a prank. He was too far from town for kids, but who else would be so brazen?

He fired a shot into the air to prove he meant business.

The crack of the gunshot seemed to reverberate through the woods. Marcus listened to it fade into the stillness. “You got your warning!” he yelled, wheeling around with suspicion in his eyes. “Now clear out!”

The attack came from behind. A figure leaped from the shadows. A cord wrapped tightly around Marcus’s neck.

He clawed at it, gasping, feeling his knees give way. Then darkness engulfed him, pulling him into unconsciousness.

From inside the trailer, a faint voice kept asking, "Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha, are you okay?"

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The long, slow unraveling of drunken arguments and settling of neighbors' noise complaints actually was a relief to Sheriff Jenna Graves today.

After the turmoil of the case she and Jake Hawkins had just solved, which involved dead bodies long since hidden in the walls of a local church, it felt good to return to the ordinary work of a small-town keeper of the law.

It was just past six o'clock now, and she was driving into an older part of her hometown with an unusual visit in mind.

Here, the town had long ago expanded around the site of an abandoned coal mine.

This part of Trentville itself looked as though it might be abandoned, too.

Some of the ancient brick facades seemed to be held together by sheer will and desperation.

This place had seen miners come and go; then the less affluent townspeople had moved in.

When Jenna spotted the place she was looking for, her hand tightened around the steering wheel and she took a deep breath. She parked her cruiser on that long forgotten-block and looked around, thinking that actually nothing out here seemed to have changed in the past twenty years.

Although she'd occasionally driven through these streets, she hadn't set foot in this particular shop since she was sixteen years old—not since she and Piper used to go in

and browse, just for the atmosphere and their curiosity about it all.

The items displayed there had seemed to them like treasures in a museum.

The pawnshop's front window was still cluttered with old tools, musical instruments, vintage radios, all promising a thousand forgotten stories.

Jenna opened her purse and fingered the item she'd found just days ago in an abandoned well.

Mud had been caked so thickly on it that at first Jenna hadn't been sure there was even an object beneath it.

Not until she cleaned it off. The old brooch was ornate and aged, its metalwork fine but tarnished, and its rounded opal face was nestled into the weathered metal in a skillful design.

The oddest thing about that piece of jewelry was that she had dreamed about before she'd found it.

A spirit in a lucid dream had led her to a specific location, but then vanished when the well came into view.

Finding the brooch there when she was wide awake had been enough to convince Jenna that it was a clue worth following—perhaps a clue as to what happened to her twin sister, Piper.

The pawnshop door creaked a protest when Jenna pushed it open.

She recognized the grizzled and gray man behind the counter as Sheldon Tyler, a familiar face from those long-ago visits with her sister and from his infrequent trips

around town.

He was wearing a flannel shirt that had more years on it than some of the wares.

It hung loose on him, like maybe he'd dropped some weight since she saw him last.

His head jerked up, and surprise widened his eyes. "Well, I'll be," he said, leaning his elbows on the glass countertop. "Jenna Graves, in the flesh. I haven't seen you here in my shop for, what, twenty years? It's been that long, at least."

Jenna smiled and crossed to the counter. "Sounds about right, Mr. Tyler. Probably a little longer since I've visited you. I'm surprised you remember me."

"I'm not completely uninformed," he replied, his voice a weathered rasp.

"It's been ages since you or your sister set foot in here, but I did hear you'd grown up and become Sheriff.

And that Piper ..." Mr. Tyler broke off then, waved a hand at the displays around him.

"You tend to develop a memory when you've seen as many things come and go as I have.

Of course, some stick with you more than others. "

"I was hoping you could help me with something," Jenna said, resting the brooch on the counter. "I found something that might have come through here. But even it didn't, you're the best authority around here on old treasures. Do you think you could take a look?"

Mr. Tyler lifted a pair of small glasses from the desk beside him, letting them rest on the tip of his nose. He tilted his head and raised an eyebrow. “Where’d you find it?”

Telling him that the spirit of Patricia Gaines, a teenaged girl who went missing in 2020, had appeared to her in a lucid dream and told her where to find the brooch was, of course, out of the question. So Jenna just said, “An abandoned well. Out in Whispering Pines Forest.”

Mr. Tyler took the piece and turned it over, the lenses of his glasses magnifying the curiosity in his eyes. “Well, I’ll be,” he said again. He paused, pondering. “I won’t lie to you, Jenna. I get a lot of things in here. Something like this could’ve passed through my shop. Might not have.”

“I understand,” Jenna said. She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was so close to something real. “It was just a long shot. Thought you might recognize it.”

“Well, let me think about it,” Mr. Tyler said. “I need to know a little more. Got any more information I could work from?”

“I do,” Jenna said. “At least, a speculation. I was really hoping you could tell me if Piper might have bought it from you back then. She used to come in here without me sometimes.”

“Piper,” Mr. Tyler said, the name drawing out like the pull of a long, frayed rope.

“That sister of yours had the spirit of a collector without the money to buy anything. I remember her coming around to enjoy the ambiance, listening to the old stories I told. But I’m sorry to say, I don’t remember her ever buying a thing.”

Jenna felt the familiar thud of hope slipping away. But if Mr. Tyler remembered Piper

so well, maybe... “You’re sure she never bought this?” Jenna asked. She couldn’t bring herself to let the lead die without a fight. “Not even this one thing?”

“I’m sure,” Mr. Tyler said, gently. “I think I’d remember if she ever came in and put money down on anything. She just loved the shop, loved to browse, same as you. Unusual among youngsters.”

Jenna nodded, swallowing her disappointment.

The brooch had to mean something, perhaps even that Piper was still alive.

“Thanks, Mr. Tyler,” she said, doing her best to keep her voice from sounding as resigned as she felt.

“I thought this might lead me to her. I thought it might be a clue. But apparently not.”

Mr. Tyler placed the brooch back in her hands. “I wish I could be more help to you,” he said. His eyes were deep wells of sympathy. “You ever find out what happened to her?”

“No,” Jenna said. She put the brooch into her purse. “Not yet.”

Jenna thanked the pawnshop owner and left, her feet dragging beneath the weight of old memories. She sat in her car and looked at the brooch again, turning it in the fading light. Her phone rang, startling her into the present. She answered. “Mom?”

“Jenna,” her mother said, her voice unsteady on the line. “Can you come by the house? I need to see you.”

“Sure,” Jenna said, surprised by the call. “Is everything okay?”

“I just need you to come. Please.”

“Of course, I’ll be right there.”

Jenna ended the call, slid the brooch back into her purse, and pulled onto the street, her mind spinning with possibilities.

She drove to her childhood home, worried about the strain in her mother’s voice.

When she got there, she saw that the roses were in full bloom and visibly well-tended.

Jenna wondered if they were saying, Yes, Margaret Graves has kept her promise.

Her mother greeted her at the door, her steps careful and slow. The strain in Mom’s voice was matched by the tremor in her hands. “I need to confess something,” she said.

The words slipped out before Jenna could stop them. “Confess? Mom, you didn’t—?”

“Drink? No, but I came close.” Her mother crossed to a floral-print armchair and lowered herself into it. “Too close. Earlier today, I went by the liquor store when Zeke wasn’t there. I thought maybe one of his employees would sell me a bottle, even if he wouldn’t.”

“Mom.” Jenna’s voice was gentle and surprised.

“I know. I know, it was stupid of me. But Zeke told them not to sell me a single drop, and they didn’t.”

Mom forced a smile. The lines of worry in her face, the thin line of her mouth, made

Jenna think of the despondent way her mother looked after losing her father. But now there was a determination in her mother that she hadn't seen back then.

"That's a good thing, right?" Margaret said. "It's a good thing I was caught?"

"Better than good," Jenna said, pulling a straight-backed chair close. "It means Zeke's got your back, and it means you reached out to me before things got out of hand."

"It was so close," Mom said, and her voice faltered on the last word. "I'm just worried that..."

"Don't be worried," Jenna interrupted, gently. "Just keep being honest. Didn't Zeke offer to take you to AA with him? I think it's time you go with him."

"I'll call him in the morning." Mom twisted the edge of her skirt in her fingers.

Jenna watched the nervous movement and decided to push. "Call him now."

Mom's face turned white. "Now?"

"Right now." Jenna pulled out her cell phone and held it in front of her mother like a challenge. "The liquor store's open for another few hours. Chances are we can catch him there. Let's get this set up."

Mom hesitated, her eyes darting between Jenna and the phone. "I don't know. He sounded so proud of me when I told him I quit on my own. What if he thinks—?"

"Call him, Mom."

Mom took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. But you do it."

Jenna dialed the number and put the phone on speaker when a young voice answered. She asked for Zeke, her tone all business.

His voice came on the line a moment later. “Well, I’ll be. Sheriff Graves. How can I help you?”

Jenna put an arm around her mother and squeezed. “Zeke, I’ve got someone here who wants to take you up on your offer.”

“Margaret?”

“Hi, Zeke,” Mom said, her voice a shy echo of its usual self. “I, uh, I thought maybe it’s time I take you up on the AA meeting.”

A beat of silence made Mom close her eyes, and Jenna squeezed her shoulder again.

“Yeah, it’s time to do that, all right,” Zeke said. “And I’m proud of you for saying so. Can you be ready this weekend? I’ll pick you up in my car, so you won’t have to worry about anything.”

A sigh escaped Mom, like all the fears she’d held in had come rushing out at once. “Yes. This weekend. I’ll be ready.”

They settled the time and ended the call, then Mom rested her head in her hands for a long, silent moment. When she lifted it, her expression was tired but relieved. “Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “You’re a good daughter.”

“You’re strong,” Jenna said. “And brave. You’ve come this far. Reaching out is a big step.”

A silent pause drew out between them, a history of hurt and hope mingling in the

space where words should be. Then Jenna broke the silence. “I have something to ask you. On a different topic.”

Mom looked interested, so Jenna reached into her purse and withdrew the brooch. “I’m wondering if you recognize this. Maybe if it was Piper’s.”

Mom’s eyes focused on the object, turning it in her hands with curiosity and confusion. “Where did you get this?”

Again, Jenna felt that she couldn’t explain the whole truth. “I found it in the forest, an area where Piper loved to go.”

Mom frowned. “It looks expensive. Do you remember her ever wearing it?”

“I’m not sure,” Jenna muttered. She didn’t want to explain that the connection between this piece of jewelry and her sister had been in the dream world.

“I’m sorry, but it doesn’t look familiar,” Mom said with a shake of her head.

“That’s okay. Just thought I’d asked.

She took the brooch back and rose to leave. “I’ll come by again soon,” Jenna said, and Mom’s nod was full of hope.

When she left her mother’s house, the oncoming dark night matched Jenna’s mood. She felt guilty for bringing up the sensitive subject of Piper when Mom had so much to struggle with.

As she drove through town toward her own home, a sense of foreboding crept in with every mile. By the time she reached her street, Jenna recognized the warning her psyche was giving her—she was going to have a very troubling dream this very night.

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A July moon cast its eerie glow over Lola Wigton and Max Riker as they snuck up a hill that overlooked Trentville.

Lola, still giddy from a late-night movie, led the way, her petite frame weaving through the undergrowth like a mischievous pixie.

She was headed for the old radio tower, a sight more sinister than romantic.

The crickets were loud, nearly drowning out the sound of their hushed giggles and the crunch of their footsteps.

Their cellphone flashlights revealed only their closest surroundings as they made their way around trees and through underbrush.

Max kept shooting paranoid glances over his shoulder, as if the very night might give their adventure away.

Lola pulled Max along, her fingers intertwined with his, urging him to keep up.

She let out a breathless laugh as a branch snagged her hair, and she pulled free with a determined tug.

She thought that Max's hesitations were sweet but unnecessary.

Surely they had nothing to fear from these familiar woods where the air was thick with the smell of honeysuckle.

“Why did we even go to that stupid movie if this really what you wanted to do tonight?” Max asked, still trying to keep his voice low. “Were you planning this all along?”

Lola grinned at him over her shoulder, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Can’t a girl want a little adventure now and then?” she replied. “Besides, I thought you might chicken out if you knew ahead of time.”

Max shook his head but couldn’t hide his smile. “You are one crazy girl, Lola Wigton.”

The path grew steeper, and Lola slowed down, feeling the pull of Max’s hand.

The radio tower she was headed toward was already visible against the star-studded sky, its red lights blinking a constant warning.

A warm breeze rustled the leaves, and Lola took a moment to breathe it all in—the scents of summer, the thrill of sneaking out, the boy she loved, who would always rather be safe than sorry.

“Did you hear that?” Max said, freezing mid-step.

Lola strained her ears, hearing nothing out of the ordinary. “Hear what?” she asked, amused.

“I don’t know... something,” Max said, scanning the darkness.

Lola rolled her eyes. “It’s just the night, dummy. Relax.”

As they continued, Max kept constantly glancing back, worried he’d find a police officer on their trail. He knew this whole area was supposed to be closed to the

public.

In just a short time, with no interruptions or signs of anyone else out on that hillside, Max was feeling better. When they reached a bend in the path he decided it was time for payback. He stopped suddenly, his eyes wide with feigned fear.

“Lola, look!” he whispered, pointing into the darkness. “I think I saw something move!”

Lola’s heart leapt, but only for a moment. She saw the grin twitching at the corner of Max’s mouth and let out a laugh that was half relief, half exasperation. She punched him lightly on the arm. “You jerk! You almost gave me a heart attack!”

Max chuckled, enjoying his small victory. “You’re too easy, Wigton.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ll show you easy,” Lola said, pretending to sulk but already forming a plan for revenge.

Max’s laughter echoed through the trees as they moved farther up the path. A screech owl called out in the distance, adding to the eeriness of the night. Then Lola faked a stumble over an exposed root and went down hard, clutching one ankle.

“Ouch!” she cried out, her voice pitched just right. “My ankle!”

Max was at her side in an instant, worry replacing the mirth on his face. He knelt beside her, reaching out a tentative hand. “Are you okay? Can you walk?”

Lola kept her head down, biting her lip to stifle a laugh. Max leaned in closer, trying to see her face in the dim light.

The moment he was within reach, she sprang up, her expression triumphant.

“Gotcha!” she yelled, and before Max could react, she dashed off into the woods, her feet pounding against the forest floor. She switched off her light, disappearing like a shadow.

“Lola!” Max called, torn between amusement and alarm. He stumbled after her, the beam of his flashlight bouncing erratically as he tried to keep up. “Come back! Or at least wait for me.”

But Lola ran, exhilaration driving her faster and farther. She knew these woods better than anyone. She dodged low-hanging branches, her breath coming in happy gasps, the thrill of the chase sparking in her eyes.

Pausing behind a thick oak, she watched Max’s cellphone light dance frantically through the trees behind her.

“Over here, slowpoke!” she called, her voice ringing with laughter.

She flicked her iPhone’s light on and off, sending playful signals that made it easy for him to find her if he only tried.

Max’s voice carried through the night, equal parts affection and annoyance. “I’m going to get you, Wigton!”

Lola grinned, waiting until he was close enough to see the glint of determination in his eyes. She loved how serious he got about things like this—loved how he would always try, even if she always won. At the last second, she bolted again, heading straight for the radio tower.

The game continued, a mix of taunts and laughter filling the summer air.

Max was determined but he had no chance.

She was fast, and she was focused, and she wanted to win more than anything.

As she broke through the last line of trees, the old radio tower loomed large and silent against the night sky.

Lola skidded to a stop, her chest heaving with exertion and triumph. She turned back to the woods, her voice teasing and bright. “Max, you really need to work on your—” Her words died on her lips as she glanced back at the tower.

A chill settled over her, the warm night turning cold in an instant. Something odd was lashed to the framework.

A step closer and she saw that it was a man’s body, its arms and legs spread wide like a grotesque marionette. The victim’s head lolled to the side, eyes staring lifelessly at nothing, mouth open in a frozen scream.

Lola’s cellphone fell from her hand, hitting the ground with a harsh clatter.

The flashlight’s beam wavered, then stilled, casting a stark, accusing light on the horrific scene.

Lola sank to her knees, her scream starting as a choked whimper before exploding into the night.

It was a sound of pure terror, unlike anything she’d ever heard herself make.

Max burst from the tree line, his face a mix of panic and confusion, knowing that this scream had been real. He rushed to her side, eyes following her stricken gaze to the tower. The color drained from his face, and his flashlight slipped from his grip, spinning crazily across the ground.

“Oh my God,” he whispered.

Their carefree adventure shattered like glass, the reality of the dead man’s eyes crashing over them both.

Lola felt Max’s arms around her, pulling her close as if he could shield her from the nightmare they had stumbled into.

The blinking red lights on the tower seemed to mock their horror, as merciless as the summer stars.

Jenna awoke to radio static. As she blinked against the hazy morning light, she turned to see her alarm clock transformed.

Instead of the familiar digital display, an old-time radio now sat on her nightstand.

Its wood casing gleamed in the early morning glow.

Then she felt a familiar prickling awareness and knew she was dreaming.

Fully lucid now, she listened to a hiss of radio static, straining to hear what lay beneath.

There—she detected a voice trying to emerge but couldn’t make out what it was saying.

She reached for the radio, moving with a surreal slowness.

She grasped the knob, turning it in a deliberate attempt to clarify the words.

The radio grew larger as Jenna adjusted the knob, the entire radio expanded until it loomed over her, as large as a house. She strained to control the growing knob, feeling its size resist her grip. Then it suddenly dropped off in her hands, leaving a round hole where it had been.

At this point in her lucid dream, she had a choice whether to investigate this strange space or to turn away.

Jenna leaned forward and peered into the hole.

The space beyond beckoned with a soft, eerie glow, and she knew was looking at the inside of the radio.

As she hesitated, the hum of static more intense now, calling to her like a living thing.

With a final glance behind, she squeezed herself through the round opening.

Inside, she felt dwarfed by the vastness, surrounded by gigantic vacuum tubes that towered like ancient pillars, their light guiding her deeper into a labyrinth. The noise was all around her, a buzz and hum that rattled her mind, but she pressed on.

“Hello?” she called, the word swallowed by static. Jenna’s frustration grew as she strained to hear the voice she’d detected earlier. It was still there, but just as an unintelligible whisper. She stood still, listening with fierce concentration, willing herself to make sense of it.

Then Jenna thought she heard words forming: “...the government... it’s them... they’re pulling the strings...only an idiot can’t see it ...”

It was the spirit of a dead man trying to reach her, she was sure of that now.

“I’m here to help,” she shouted, her voice mingling with the static in a harsh chorus. She called again to the voice, her steps quickening as she made her way through the strange terrain.

The words grew clearer, a rant about technology and powers that be. Jenna knew she needed to understand it. The voice sounded desperate to convey something vital, and she would not let it elude her.

Finally, she saw him.

A bearded man, wild-eyed and frantic, stood at the edge of the jungle of tubes. He turned to face her, as if startled that she’d found him there.

“Get rid of them,” he shouted, his voice cutting through the static with fevered intensity. “Or you’ll end up just like me.” He clawed at his neck, revealing a bruise around his throat.

Jenna didn’t think she’d ever seen him before, but she did understand what he meant. After all, it was only the dead who visited her in lucid dreams like this one.

“How did it happen?” she asked, stepping closer.

He backed away, paranoia clouding his eyes. “You’re part of it,” he accused, his voice edged with panic. “Integrated circuits, microchips. Thought control.”

“I’m not part of anything,” Jenna insisted, her voice urgent. She needed him to keep talking. “Tell me more. Who are you?”

The static engulfed him. The buzzing filling her mind as the man stood his ground. He seemed to rethink his paranoia and his accusation, a sly glint in his eyes. “All I have to tell you is Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha.”

“What does that mean?” Jenna’s question went unanswered as a phone rang.

She jolted awake, the shrill sound of her cellphone jarring her from the dream. She blinked, disoriented. The old-fashioned radio was replaced by the clock radio on her nightstand, looking quite ordinary now. She saw that it was 1:35 a.m.

Jenna grabbed the phone. “Sheriff Graves,” she answered, her voice steadier than she felt.

A young officer’s voice came through. “We’ve got a dead body,” he reported. “It’s a murder. Near the old radio tower on the hill.”

Jenna’s heart skipped. “Call Deputy Hawkins and the Highway Patrol,” she instructed, already swinging her legs out of bed. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She hung up, her mind a whirl of urgency and speculation.

As she dressed quickly, she tried to piece together the connection between the dream and the call.

It was no coincidence. The victim of this new murder was none other than the man who had appeared in her dream. She could feel it in her bones.

The radio tower, she thought, putting it together. Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha.

It sounded like the call sign for a ham radio operator. Had the ghost in her dream been telling her his own call signal when she’d asked for his name?

Gun and badge close at hand, Jenna laced up her boots. The urgency of the phone call and the eerie details of her dream collided in her thoughts: the enigmatic message, the chilling vision, and now a real-world murder.

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Jenna could see red warning lights blinking lazily against the night sky as she drove toward the radio tower.

The local cop on duty at the entrance to the utility road that led there waved her on by.

As she drove through the dark, ignoring the washboard texture of the seldom used road beneath the tires, she kept thinking of the man who had appeared in her dream.

Within minutes she reached the makeshift parking area at the base of the tower.

Several police vehicles were already there, lights still spinning.

She saw that they had set up spotlights around the bottom of the tower.

She swung her cruiser into an open spot, threw it into park, and killed the engine in a series of swift motions.

Jenna stepped out of the car and walked past the assembled officers, catching snippets of hushed conversations and a few glances from her team. She acknowledged them and headed for the area where she could see yellow tape fluttering in the artificial light.

Deputy Jake Hawkins broke away from the cluster of uniforms. His mouth was set in a grim line that did nothing to hide the warmth in his eyes when they met hers.

“Jenna,” he greeted her. “It’s an ugly scene this time. You’re not going to believe this

one.” Then he added with his voice pitched low, “Unless of course ...”

She realized he was wondering if she’d already dreamed about this.

Aside from her friend and mentor, former Sheriff Frank Doyle, Jake was the only person who knew about her gift, and she’d only recently confided in him about it.

When she just nodded in reply, Jake gave her a knowing look that spoke volumes about their shared history and the unconventional nature of some of their cases.

Jenna wondered if he’d guessed how eerily accurate her dream had been this time.

“Any idea how long until Melissa gets here?” she asked, trying to focus on logistics such as the arrival of Melissa Stark, the Genesius County coroner, and her forensics team.

“Shouldn’t be long now. But Jenna—” His gaze held hers, anchoring her even as the whirlwind of thoughts spun faster in her mind.

She swallowed, forcing herself to meet his intensity head-on. “I know. I just—of course I need to see it.”

Jake gave a brief nod, one that said he understood more than she sometimes wanted him to. Before he could respond, approaching footsteps drew their attention.

“Sheriff, Deputy,” said Officer Mike Donovan, jogging towards them with the urgency of a rookie on his first big case.

A stocky young man with a receding hairline and kind eyes, he usually radiated calm.

But his expression told Jenna this was not the kind of scene any officer could

approach lightly.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you around to the scene. ”

“Fill me in, Mike,” Jenna said, falling into step beside him.

“Two teenagers, Lola Wigton and Max Riker, found the body about an hour ago,” Mike said. “They’re pretty shaken up. We’ve put them in one of our patrol cars, and Officer Delgado’s with them now.”

“Did they give a statement yet?” she asked.

“They did.” Mike’s words came out in short bursts. “Said they were climbing up the hill below the tower, just messing around in the woods, having a bit of fun. When they reached the tower, they stumbled upon it.”

Jenna’s mind flashed back to her own teenage years, to secret escapades and midnight adventures, many of them with Piper as her companion—so innocent, by comparison.

Another small cluster of officers stood near the base of the tower, their silhouettes somber against the artificial lights. Jenna’s breath caught in her throat when she spotted the body.

There, bound to the base of the radio tower with a tangle of electronic cables, was the victim.

He was a middle-aged man, his bearded face frozen in a look of sheer terror.

The cables binding him were pulled tight, cutting into his flesh and creating an intricate web of wires and wounds, and his arms and legs were spread wide.

Jenna's gaze lingered on his neck, where a deep ligature mark was visible—consistent with strangulation.

She recognized him, but not from any local community. It was the same man who had haunted her dream just hours ago. Of course she had known he was dead, but hadn't known how or where.

Now he hung limply from the tower structure, his arms outstretched, and the cables coiled around him like a grotesque nest of snakes. This wasn't a random act of violence. This was deliberate. Planned. Personal.

It was one thing to dream of a face, to hear its disembodied voice shouting warnings at her from beyond the veil of sleep. It was another to stand here, to see that person in stark white floodlights, flesh and blood and unmistakably real.

Jake must have seen the shock in her eyes. He touched her arm, a gesture of both solidarity and concern. His unspoken question hung in the air: The dream?

They exchanged a glance that conveyed more than words ever could.

Jenna knew Jake would keep the rest of the officers from learning about this latest supernatural episode.

They'd whispered enough about her as it was, always wondering how it was that she solved so many cases, what information she had access to that no one else did.

“Where are the kids who found him?” Jenna asked.

Jack led her back to a cruiser parked in the lot, where Officer Maria Delgado stood

just outside the open back door.

The two teenagers sat huddled together in the back seat, their youthful faces ghostly pale.

The petite brunette, Lola, sobbed quietly into her boyfriend's shoulder.

Max, a red-haired boy, looked shell-shocked, his arm wrapped protectively around her.

"Let me talk to them," she said to Jake, her voice softening as she approached the distraught pair.

She crouched down to meet them at eye level, her badge gleaming faintly in the muted light.

"Lola, Max," she said gently, "I'm Sheriff Graves.

I know this is difficult, but can you tell me what happened? "

Lola lifted her head, eyes wide and filled with a horror no teenager should have to witness. "We... we were just messing around," she managed between sobs, her voice tremulous. "We weren't hurting anything. We didn't expect to find anything like—like that."

Max took a deep breath, his grip on Lola tightening as he tried to be brave for both of them. "We were playing flashlight tag in the woods," he said, his words shaky but determined to be helpful. "She dashed ahead, and that's when she saw him. She screamed, and then I caught up with her."

Jenna nodded, absorbing their account with a seriousness that told them she believed

every word. “You did the right thing, calling it in,” she assured them, glancing at Maria who moved in to continue comforting the kids. “The officers will make sure you get home soon.”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, pulling her attention back to the immediate task at hand. It was a message from Melissa Stark saying she was in the service road, on the way with her team. Then a sudden commotion at the edge of the parking area indicated that someone else had arrived.

Jenna stood, watching as a tall, imposing figure strode towards them with long, purposeful steps.

The other officers parted like water around a rock, making way for Colonel Chad Spelling from the State Highway Patrol.

He cut a tall and authoritative figure in his pristine uniform, exuding command as he approached the scene with the seasoned confidence of a veteran law enforcement officer.

“Sheriff Graves,” Spelling said, his voice as commanding as the uniform he wore. The man carried himself with an air of authority that left no doubt he was used to being in charge. “What have you got here?”

Jenna gestured towards the tower, meeting Spelling’s gaze with her own steady one. “Just around the side, Colonel. Where you see the tape and the lights.”

She and Jake followed Spelling back to the crime scene. Jake explained, “Looks like he was strangled and then tied to the tower.”

Spelling’s eyes widened with surprise. After a long moment he said, “That’s got to be Marcus Derrick,” he said, as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing. “A ham

radio operator who lived outside of Pinecrest.”

Jenna felt a jolt of clarity and affirmation. This certainly fit with the ghost who had identified himself as Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha.

“You know him, Colonel?” Jenna asked, her curiosity piqued by the man’s reaction.

Spelling nodded, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair as he processed the scene before him.

“Not personally, but we’ve been looking for him since last night, using an old driver’s license photo taken before he went off the grid.

Got a call from a ham operator in Nebraska, said he was mid-conversation with an operator with a Missouri call sign when something happened.

Sounded violent. We traced the call sign to Derrick’s place in Pinecrest, but when we got there, the door was open, signs of a struggle, but no Derrick. ”

Jenna absorbed the new information, her mind racing to connect the dots between her dream and what the Colonel had just told them.

The ranting man in her dream, his paranoia about electronic devices, the call sign he gave her—in its twisted way, and made more and more sense.

Derrick had been trying to alert her to his fate.

That’s why he reached out, why he came to her with that vivid, desperate plea.

Before she could voice her thoughts, the sound of an approaching vehicle cut through the morning air. Melissa Stark had arrived, her team unloading equipment with

clinical efficiency. Melissa herself, a no-nonsense woman in her fifties, made her way towards Jenna with long, brisk strides.

“Well, isn’t this a cozy little party,” Melissa remarked dryly as she reached them. “Hello Colonel. Glad to see you Jenna, Jake. Too bad it’s always this kind of situation.” She didn’t waste time on formalities, diving straight into her work.

“Cause of death appears to be strangulation,” she said after a quick examination, pointing to the deep ligature mark on Derrick’s neck. “Likely with the same type of cable he’s bound with. I’ll know more after the autopsy.”

“How long ago do you think he was killed?” Spelling asked.

“I’d say he’s been dead for some twenty-four hours now,” Melissa said. “His body was probably put here shortly after he was killed.”

Jenna nodded, grateful for Melissa’s efficiency and unwillingness to dance around the grim reality of the situation. She knew the coroner’s findings would corroborate what she already suspected, what she had seen so clearly in her mind’s eye.

“So the corpse has been here since last night,” Spelling mused, looking all around.

“I guess it’s not surprising that nobody found the body until a little while ago.

The base of the tower isn’t visible from the highway, not even from the service road, with all these trees and brush.

If the kids hadn’t found the corpse, I don’t suppose anyone would have until they noticed vultures circling the tower. ”

“Killer must have used that service road to bring the body here,” Jake commented.

“But too many of our cars have driven it now, probably no evidence to be found there.”

As Melissa’s team gathered around the body, recording everything before removing it, Jenna turned her attention back to Colonel Spelling.

“So what do you think, Colonel?” she asked.

“Since Derrick lived in Pinecrest, in Cable County, this’ll be a joint investigation between the State Police and the Pinecrest PD,” Spelling said, glancing at his watch as if he already had a dozen other places to be.

“Since the body was found on your turf, it’s your case as well.

I’ll be heading to Pinecrest first thing in the morning, in just a few hours.

Care to join me at the police station there? ”

Jenna glanced at Jake, who nodded. “My deputy and I can both be there,” she assured Spelling.

“Good,” he said, “Meet me there at 8 AM sharp.”

Jenna thanked him, and she and Jake returned to their cars. The events of the night—the dream, the murder, the strange coincidences—swirled in Jenna’s mind, a storm of questions without answers.

“I’ll pick you up for that meeting,” Jake said. “Meanwhile, try to get a few hours of sleep.”

“Thanks,” she replied.

“You had a dream about this, didn’t you?” he asked, voicing the question he’d kept to himself until he could talk to her alone.

“That’s right,” Jenna said. “And this isn’t an ordinary case, Jake. The way that body was treated—that was a message. I need to figure out what it means and whether more people are in danger.”

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Vacuum tubes towered like skyscrapers, their glass surfaces gleaming with an inner orange glow. Jenna knew she was dreaming—but why was she was back here again?

“Marcus?” Her voice echoed among the giant tubes, bouncing back distorted and strange. “Marcus Derrick?”

“Go away.” The reply came from everywhere and nowhere, disembodied and wary. “I know what you are. You’re one of them.”

Jenna turned slowly, searching the spaces between the towering structures. “I’m not one of anyone, Marcus. I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves. I’m here to help find who did this to you.”

A bitter laugh cut through the humming atmosphere. “Help? That’s what they all say before they slip the knife in. You come any closer, I’ll shoot you on sight.”

“You can’t shoot me, Marcus,” Jenna told him. “This is just a dream.”

“Just a dream?” His voice lowered, taking on a conspiratorial tone. “That’s what they want you to—”

The harsh beeping of her alarm interrupted. She glanced at the clock: 6:00 AM. She’d had less than three hours of sleep since returning from the radio tower crime scene. Her body ached with fatigue as she swung her legs over the side of the bed, her bare feet connecting with the cool wooden floor.

The shower helped, but only marginally. As she brushed her teeth, Jenna studied the

woman staring back at her.

The mirror was not kind in its honesty. Shadows haunted the hollows beneath her once-vibrant green eyes, and strands of short chestnut hair fell haphazardly around her face.

The creases across her forehead and the downturn of her mouth spoke of meetings with the absent, the lost, and the departed.

She was sure she looked older than her mid-thirty years.

Jenna dressed quickly and clipped her badge to her belt, checked her service weapon, and grabbed her phone. Just as she stepped onto her front porch, a patrol car pulled up at the curb. She locked her door and made her way toward it.

Jake Hawkins leaned across the passenger seat to push the door open as she approached.

“You look like you could use this,” he said, offering her a thermos as she slid into the seat beside him. The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the car. “And this.” He placed a granola bar on the console between them.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Jenna said with genuine gratitude. She took a long sip of the coffee. “Literally. I might have fallen asleep standing up.”

As she took the coffee, her fingers brushed against his.

A jolt of electricity shot through her, an unexpected reminder of the unspoken attraction she felt toward him.

She quickly pulled her hand back and focused on the road ahead, pushing aside the

fluttering in her stomach as Jake pulled away from the curb.

“We did have a late night at the tower scene,” Jake said.

She unwrapped the granola bar and took a bite. “And then a visitor.”

“A visitor? You mean...?”

“Marcus Derrick. In my dreams again. He was hostile. Paranoid. Most spirits are confused, sometimes sad. They speak in riddles, don’t understand what’s happened to them. But Marcus... he seemed aware, and extremely distrustful.”

“Can’t blame him, considering.” Jake navigated onto the highway, their route taking them toward Pinecrest. “The man was murdered and left tied to a radio tower.”

“There was something else, though,” Jenna said. “He mentioned ‘them.’ Said I was ‘one of them.’ Like he thought I belonged to some group he was afraid of.”

“Paranoid delusion?”

“Maybe.”

Jenna patted her jacket pocket, feeling the outline of the brooch she’d found at the crime scene. She pulled it out, turning it over in her palm.

“You said you were taking that to the pawnbroker yesterday, right?” Jake observed. “Any luck?”

Jenna shook her head. “No, Mr. Tyler didn’t recognize it. And my mother doesn’t remember it ever belonging to Piper.” She ran her thumb over the opal’s smooth surface.

“You should wear it,” Jake said. “Would look good on you.”

Jenna glanced at him, surprised by the suggestion. “Not exactly standard dress code.”

“Even so,” he said. “Might as well put it to good use, see if anyone recognizes it.”

She considered this, then unfastened the brooch’s clasp and pinned it to her uniform. “Not a bad idea, even though a little odd on a uniform. Though I doubt I’ll run into many antique jewelry experts in Pinecrest.”

Jake chuckled. “You never know. Chief Morgan might have a secret passion for Victorian accessories.”

They drove in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the morning sun climbing higher, burning away the last remnants of night.

“Four violent murders in the last month,” Jake said, breaking the quiet. “Hardly what I expected when I left Kansas City for the ‘quiet life’ in Trentville.” He glanced at her, his expression thoughtful. “What do you think has changed around here?”

Jenna considered his question as they passed the cheerful “Welcome to Pinecrest” sign.

“I’m not sure anything has changed,” she finally said. “Genesius County is still the same place I grew up in. Where Piper disappeared. Maybe the darkness was always there. Maybe we’re just finally seeing it.”

The Pinecrest Police Station was smaller than Trentville’s, a squat brick building that looked like it had been constructed in the 1970s and hadn’t seen much renovation since.

Jenna followed Jake through the glass double doors.

A young officer directed them to the chief's office at the end of a narrow hallway lined with community service award plaques and faded photographs of officers past and present.

The door to the chief's office stood ajar.

Through the gap, Jenna could see Chief Rudy Morgan leaning against the edge of a metal desk, his frame clad in a uniform that seemed too snug across the shoulders.

His hair was cropped close to the scalp, more gray than black, and his eyes were sharp, missing nothing.

Jenna rapped her knuckles against the doorframe. "Chief Morgan?"

Morgan looked up, his expression shifting from intense concentration to professional courtesy. "Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins. Thanks for coming so quickly." He gestured them inside. "You already know Colonel Spelling, I believe."

Spelling, standing across the room from the chief, nodded curtly. "Sheriff. Deputy."

"Colonel." Jenna acknowledged him.

The office was crowded with the four of them inside. Photos were spread across Morgan's desk—crime scene images from the radio tower where Marcus Derrick's body had been discovered.

"Colonel Spelling was just bringing me up to speed," Morgan said, gesturing to the photos.

“Did you know Marcus Derrick?” Jenna asked him.

The chief shook his head. “Only by reputation. Local oddball. Kept to himself. Heard he made some big money in tech years back, then went off the grid. Literally.” He gestured toward the door. “I can take you out to his place now, if you want to see for yourself.”

She replied, “Let’s go.”

With Jenna the passenger seat of Morgan’s SUV and Jake riding in back with Colonel Spelling, they bounced along county roads, then turned onto a narrower highway flanked by dense pine forest. After fifteen minutes, Morgan slowed and pointed to an almost invisible dirt track cutting between the trees.

“Here we go. Not exactly advertising his location, was he?”

The dirt road wound deeper into the woods, branches occasionally scraping against the vehicle’s sides. After nearly a mile, the trees opened into a small clearing where a single-wide mobile home sat on concrete blocks, its once-white exterior now a weathered gray.

What caught Jenna’s attention, however, was not the mobile home itself, but the industrial-sized dumpster sitting nearby, overflowing with what looked like discarded electronics.

They exited the car and took a closer look.

Jenna saw circuit boards, computer monitors, smartphones, and various components she couldn’t identify.

“Wait until you see inside the trailer,” Morgan said.

Yellow police tape cordoned off the area around the mobile home's wooden deck steps. At the base of the steps, Jenna noticed a patch of disturbed earth, the pine needles scraped away to reveal churned soil beneath.

Morgan came to stand beside her, pointing. "This is where we think the struggle happened."

"Did you find the murder weapon?" Jake asked, joining them.

"Maybe," Morgan pulled out his phone, swiped through several images, then showed them a photo of a black cord. "This was found tossed in the bushes over there. Lab says it's consistent with the ligature marks on the victim's neck."

Jenna studied the image—a simple black cable, the kind used for electronics or appliances, and also the same kind that had been used to bind the body to the radio tower.

Then Morgan swiped his phone again and brought up another image—of a semiautomatic pistol lying on the ground.

"The gun was registered to Derrick. And it had been fired recently—the magazine was short just one round. It looks like he might have fired it in self-defense. But judging from the lack of blood, he didn't hit anybody. A lot of good it did him."

"Let's see inside." She nodded toward the mobile home.

Morgan lifted the police tape for them to duck under. The front door had been sealed with evidence tape, which Morgan broke to let them in.

The interior appeared undisturbed by the struggle that had taken place outside. A small living area opened directly into a kitchenette. Beyond that, Jenna could see a

short hallway that presumably led to a bedroom and bathroom.

What dominated the space, however, was the equipment. Modern shortwave receivers, all of them in a curious state of disrepair, sat alongside vintage models, which were perfectly intact. Tools, soldering equipment, and component parts were organized on shelves along one wall.

But it was the centerpiece that drew Jenna's attention like a magnet.

On a sturdy oak table in the middle of the room sat an antique ham radio set.

Unlike the dismantled digital equipment surrounding it, this was a behemoth of another era—its metal casing worn but polished, dials and meters arranged across its face like the controls of a time machine.

And rising from its back were eight vacuum tubes.

A chill ran down Jenna's spine. Was that where she had been? The tubes were smaller, of course, nothing like the towering structures from her dream, but the parallel was undeniable. She moved closer, drawn by the eerie familiarity.

"That's old school," Jake commented, coming to stand beside her. "Must be sixty, seventy years old?"

"Vacuum tube technology," Colonel Spelling noted. "Obsolete by the 1960s when transistors took over."

Jenna barely heard them. In her mind, she was back in that strange dreamscape, Marcus's paranoid voice echoing: "I know what you are. You're one of them."

She reached out, not quite touching the radio's surface. "He was afraid," she

murmured. “Afraid of modern technology.”

Morgan made a sound of agreement. “Look at this place. Every modern device torn apart or discarded. But this old dinosaur—” he gestured to the vacuum tube radio, “—this he kept pristine.”

Jenna moved around the table, studying the radio from all angles. A notebook lay open beside it, pages filled with diagrams and notes in a cramped, urgent hand. She leaned closer, reading a passage circled several times in red ink: “THEY CAN’T TRACK THROUGH TUBES. NO CHIPS, NO SIGNALS.”

“He believed someone was tracking him through microchips,” she said, straightening. “Modern electronic components.”

“Paranoid delusion,” Spelling stated flatly. “Common among hermit types.”

But Jenna wasn’t so sure. Something about Marcus’s terror felt genuine to her, both in her dream and in the frantic notes. She turned to the dumpster visible through the window.

“He was purging his home of all modern electronics,” she said slowly. “Recent purge, based on that dumpster. Something spooked him badly enough to accelerate whatever fears he already had.”

She was silently connecting points. Something frightens Marcus badly enough to purge all modern electronics from his home.

He’s murdered outside his home, then his body is transported to a radio tower miles away and wired up as some kind of message.

Who was he so afraid of? Had he been threatened, or was he just suspicious of

everyone?

Marcus's voice echoed in her memory: "That's what they all say before they slip the knife in."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Jenna's fingers hovered over the vintage ham radio before settling on a worn dial. She turned it, her touch careful—after all she was handling an artifact from a bygone era.

“Does this thing have power?” she asked, her gaze fixed on the intricate array of vacuum tubes and wires.

“Yes,” Morgan replied. “It's connected.”

Spotting what looked like a power switch, with a decisive click, she flipped it on.

The room was instantly filled with the nostalgic hiss of static, like whispers from ghosts of the past. The vacuum tubes flickered to life, casting an amber glow that was eerily similar to the images from her dream - so vivid, so precise that it sent a shiver down her spine.

“Listen to that,” she said softly. “It's like stepping back in time.”

She glanced at Jake, who stood slightly behind Morgan and Spelling, his eyes communicating a silent understanding that the others couldn't share.

How could she possibly explain to Morgan and Spelling that this radio—this specific piece of outdated technology—was significant without revealing the source of her certainty?

The metal casing felt cool beneath her fingertips as she adjusted the frequency dial, watching the needle slide across numbered increments. She realized the others were

waiting for her to say something, to justify her sudden fascination with this relic.

Chief Morgan shifted his weight, clearly impatient. “What exactly are you looking for, Sheriff?”

“I think we need to find out more about this setup,” she said. “It might tell us something about Derrick.”

Colonel Spelling folded his arms across his chest, his uniform creasing with the movement. “You think his choice of radio equipment is relevant to his murder?”

She met his gaze directly. “I do.”

What she couldn't say was that she had seen these tubes, this exact configuration, in her lucid dream. The dead had often shown her fragmented clues that only made sense later. But she knew that explanation wouldn't fly with the Highway Patrol Superintendent or Pinecrest's Chief of Police.

Although Spelling looked doubtful, he didn't argue with her. Jenna realized he was remembering that she had surprised him before with her solutions to cases

Jake cleared his throat. “Old tech is harder to track,” he offered. “No digital footprint.”

Jenna gave him a grateful glance. He'd become adept at providing plausible explanations for her intuitive leaps.

“Exactly,” she said, building on his suggestion. “If Derrick was as eccentric as his home setup suggests, his choice to use outdated equipment matters.”

Morgan's skepticism was evident in the tightening of his mouth, but he nodded.

“What I’d really like,” Jenna continued, “is to talk to the ham operator who reported the incident. The one who was on the line with Derrick when it happened.”

Colonel Spelling’s posture straightened, his attention sharpening. “That would be Todd Lakin, out of Omaha. He’s the one who contacted the Highway Patrol.”

“Do you have his contact information?” Jenna asked, seizing the opportunity.

Spelling nodded. “Got his number right here.” He pulled out his phone, scrolling through contacts. “You think he might have more details than what he told the responding officers?”

“People remember different things when you ask different questions,” Jenna said. “And I have some very specific questions about this radio.”

The colonel found the number and held up his phone. “Want me to put him on speaker?”

“Please,” Jenna said, stepping closer as Spelling placed the call.

The phone rang three times before a male voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Is this Todd Lakin?” Spelling said.

“Speaking.”

“Mr. Lakin, this is Colonel Chadwick Spelling with the Missouri State Highway Patrol. We spoke before about the incident you reported”

“Yes, Colonel. Have you found out anything more?” Lakin’s voice sounded tired but alert.

“I’m sorry to say that we’ve learned that the operator you called us about was murdered,” Chadwick said.

“His name was Marcus Derrick. I’m here at his home with Sheriff Jenna Graves of Genesius County, Deputy Jake Hawkins, and Chief Rudy Morgan of the Pinecrest Police Department.

We’re investigating his death, and Sheriff Graves would like to ask you a few questions. ”

“Of course,” Lakin replied. “Anything I can do to help.”

Jenna stepped closer to the phone. “Mr. Lakin, thank you for taking our call. I understand you were speaking with the victim at the time of the incident that apparently cut off your conversation. Could you walk us through what happened?”

A heavy sigh came through the speaker. “Well, I didn’t know his actual name at the time. We ham operators often use call signs. His was Charlie Tango 4 Caesar Alpha.”

“Did you communicate with him regularly?” Jenna asked.

“Pretty regularly, yeah. We’d talk a few times a week, usually late evenings. He was... interesting to talk to. Knew a lot about radio technology, though he had some, uh, unconventional views.”

Jenna exchanged glances with Jake. “Can you tell us about your conversation on the night of the incident?”

“We’d just started talking. Then there was a knock at his door—I could hear it clearly through the connection.”

The room fell silent as everyone listened intently to Lakin’s account.

“He excused himself. I heard him walk away from the mic. Then I heard him yell something like ‘I’ll shoot’ or ‘I’m armed.’ After a minute or so, he came back and said there was nobody there.”

Jenna leaned forward. “Did he sound frightened?”

“Not frightened exactly. More... agitated. Like this had happened before.”

“Then what happened?” Jenna prompted when Lakin paused.

“We tried to get back to our conversation, but a couple of minutes later, there was another knock. He sounded really annoyed this time, muttered something about ‘them’ not leaving him alone.”

Lakin’s voice became more somber. “He went to answer it, and this time... he didn’t come back to the radio.”

The tension in the room thickened. Jake had taken out a small notebook and was jotting down notes.

“What did you hear?” Jenna asked.

“Him yelling again. There was a gunshot. Clear as day. Then nothing. I kept calling his call sign, but there was no response. That’s when I contacted the Highway Patrol.”

Jenna remembered the image of the handgun Morgan had just shown them. Her guess was that Derrick had fired a warning shot before he was ambushed by his killer.

Colonel Spelling nodded. “You did the right thing, Mr. Lakin.”

Jenna pressed on. “Was there anything unusual about your conversation that night, before the interruptions? Anything different from your usual talks?”

Lakin paused, considering. “Now that you mention it, yes. The signal wasn’t coming through as clearly as usual. When I commented on it, he told me he’d recently gotten rid of his previous radio setup. Said he’d trashed it completely and bought an old vacuum tube model instead.”

Chief Morgan’s eyebrows shot up, and he looked at the radio on the table with renewed interest.

“Did he explain why he made that change?” Jenna asked, her pulse quickening.

“Oh, he explained, all right.” There was a hint of discomfort in Lakin’s voice. “He went on a rant about integrated circuits and transistors. Said they were all compromised. That ‘they’ were using microchips to monitor and influence people.”

“They?” Colonel Spelling interjected.

“He never specified who ‘they’ were. Government, corporations, aliens, I guess—take your pick. He kept telling me I should trash my own radio and go back to vacuum tubes. Said it was the only safe technology.”

Jenna caught Jake’s eye, seeing her own thoughts reflected there. This aligned perfectly with what she’d seen in her dream.

“How did you respond to that?” she asked.

“I told him he sounded crazy, to be honest.” Lakin’s voice carried a note of regret. “That’s when he got defensive, accused me of being a puppet of the ‘powers-that-be.’ His words, not mine.”

“Mr. Lakin,” Jenna said, “did he ever tell you where he lived or give you any identifying information?”

“No. He was extremely secretive. Wouldn’t even tell me his name or exact location. I only knew he was in Missouri from his call sign. That’s why I called the Missouri Highway Patrol when I heard the gunshot.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lakin. You’ve been extremely helpful,” Jenna said, mentally filing away every detail.

“Is there anything else you can think of? Anything at all that might help us understand what happened?” Jake added.

“Just that he seemed genuinely frightened of something. I’d written it off as paranoia, but now...” Lakin’s voice trailed off.

After a few more questions yielded no new information, Jenna thanked Lakin again, and Colonel Spelling ended the call.

The room fell silent for a moment as they all processed what they’d heard.

“Well,” Chief Morgan said finally, “sounds like our victim was as ... odd ... as his radio rig suggested.”

Colonel Spelling nodded. “Conspiracy theorists aren’t uncommon in isolated areas.

They tend to feed their own delusions.”

Jenna stared at the silent radio. The vacuum tubes that had featured so prominently in her dream now seemed to mock her with their significance.

“I need to find out where he got this radio,” she said, more firmly this time.

Morgan frowned. “I don’t see how that’s relevant to finding his killer.”

“Trust me,” Jenna insisted. “It matters.”

She met Morgan’s skeptical gaze without flinching. Years of police work had taught her how to project confidence even when her reasons were unexplainable.

“Actually,” Morgan said after a moment, his frown easing somewhat, “I might have an idea about that.”

Jenna waited, trying not to appear too eager.

“Howard Mitchell,” Morgan continued. “Died about three weeks ago of a heart attack. Owned a chain of electronics stores across the Midwest—Mitch’s Den. Ever heard of it?”

Jenna nodded. The stores were well-known throughout Missouri.

“Mitchell lived here in Pinecrest,” Morgan said.

“Eccentric guy. Had an obsession with vintage audio equipment. His house was practically a museum of the stuff.” Morgan gestured toward the ham radio.

“Vacuum tubes, phonographs, you name it. His daughter Rebecca’s been holding an

estate sale, selling off his collection. ”

Colonel Spelling looked interested now. “You think Derrick might have bought this radio at the estate sale?”

“It’s possible,” Morgan acknowledged. “Rebecca’s a lawyer, lives in Connecticut. She’s been here for the past month, trying to clear out the house.”

Jenna didn’t hesitate. “I want to talk to her. Today, if possible.”

She pulled out her phone and snapped several photos of the setup from different angles. Then she switched off the old radio. The vacuum tubes’ amber glow faded, leaving only their ghost image in her mind.

“Do you know where the Mitchell house is?” she asked Morgan.

“On the north side of town. Big Victorian place on Oakwood Drive. Can’t miss it.”

Colonel Spelling checked his watch. “I can accompany you if you’d like, Sheriff.”

“I appreciate that, Colonel.” Jenna nodded, then turned to Morgan. “Chief, would you mind driving us there?”

Morgan shrugged, clearly still uncertain about the relevance of this lead but unwilling to argue. “Sure thing. I’ll call Rebecca Mitchell on the way and let her know that we’re coming.”

As they filed out of the mobile home, Jenna felt a familiar strain between her professional instincts and her supernatural knowledge. The vacuum tubes weren’t just a random detail; they were also a message from beyond, a clue left for her to follow.

She and Jake fell into step behind Morgan and Spelling as they walked toward the SUV parked on the dirt drive.

“You think there’s really something to Derrick’s conspiracy theories?” Jake whispered, close enough that only she could hear.

Jenna waited until Morgan and Spelling were out of earshot before responding.

“The dream showed me those vacuum tubes for a reason,” she whispered back. “And it’s too much of a coincidence that Derrick was ranting about the same technology that appeared in my vision.”

Jake’s expression remained neutral, but she could see the concern in his eyes. “You think he might have been right? That someone was after him because of what he knew?”

Jenna glanced ahead to ensure Morgan and Spelling couldn’t hear them. “I think,” she said quietly, “that just maybe he was.”

If Derrick’s paranoia had been justified, if some mysterious “them” had come after him, then his murder wasn’t random and other lives could also be at risk.

Suddenly, the old vacuum tube radio seemed less like an eccentric’s toy and more like a key to this case—to finding out why Marcus Derrick had to die.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The gates of Howard Mitchell's estate opened for Chief Morgan's SUV, as though acknowledging their authority.

Jenna watched through the passenger window as the sprawling property unfolded before her—manicured lawns stretching toward a mansion with stone columns flanking the entrance and meticulous hedgerows lining a circular driveway.

“Quite the spread,” Jake murmured from the back seat.

Jenna looked around as she and her colleagues stepped out of the car.

It seemed odd that this place, with its perfected appearance, was connected to the bizarre scene they'd left behind in that lonely trailer.

The men who had lived in such contrasting surroundings had shared a common interest in electronics.

Or was it death that had tied these two worlds together?

“His daughter's managing the estate sale,” Chief Morgan continued as they approached the heavy oak doors. “Been going on for a couple of months now. Mostly specialized collectors. She'll be expecting us.”

Before they reached the entrance, one of the doors swung open. A man in his fifties, dressed in what Jenna recognized as the uniform of household staff for the wealthy, stood in the doorway. His posture was impeccable, and his expression was professionally neutral despite the circumstances.

“Chief Morgan,” he acknowledged. “Ms. Mitchell mentioned you would be stopping by.”

“Franklin,” Morgan nodded. “Sheriff Graves and Deputy Hawkins from Genesius County, and Colonel Spelling from the State Highway Patrol.”

Franklin’s gaze swept over them, betraying no curiosity about why three law enforcement agencies were at his employer’s doorstep. “Please, come in. Ms. Mitchell is in the main gallery.”

The foyer opened into a two-story entryway with a crystal chandelier hanging from a coffered ceiling.

Jenna noted the tasteful art on the walls—original paintings, not prints.

But what caught her attention wasn’t the wealth on display but the voices echoing from deeper in the house—the murmur of multiple conversations and occasional exclamations of appreciation.

Franklin led them through double doors into what could only be described as a museum. Jenna stopped short, momentarily stunned by the display before her.

The room was massive, easily sixty feet long, with vaulted ceilings and track lighting that illuminated hundreds, perhaps thousands, of audio devices arranged by era.

Glass cases held what appeared to be the oldest pieces: wax cylinders, hand-cranked phonographs with massive horns, ancient-looking record players.

Free-standing displays featured radios from every decade, their wooden cases gleaming under the carefully positioned lights.

“My God,” Jake whispered beside her. “It’s like walking through the entire history of sound.”

About twenty people moved through the space, examining pieces with the reverent attention of true enthusiasts. Jenna watched as a man with wire-rimmed glasses bent to study a 1930s radio, hovering over it without touching anything.

“Mr. Mitchell insisted nothing be kept in storage,” Franklin explained, noticing their reactions. “He believed collections were meant to be displayed, not hidden away.”

Jenna’s gaze traveled along the collection, taking in the progression from primitive technology to more sophisticated equipment.

She stopped when she reached a section dedicated to ham radios—equipment similar to what they’d found at Derrick’s.

Several spaces were empty, and tags indicated items had been sold.

“Ah, there’s Rebecca now,” Chief Morgan said, drawing Jenna’s attention to a woman making her way toward them.

Rebecca Mitchell appeared to be in her early forties, dressed in a simple black dress.

Her dark hair was pulled back in a loose knot, and though her makeup was understated, Jenna could see the evidence of sleepless nights around her eyes.

As she drew closer, Jenna felt the weight of grief surrounding the woman, not the raw, new anguish of sudden loss, but the bone-deep exhaustion that comes from dealing with death’s aftermath.

It was a feeling Jenna knew intimately from her father’s passing. The decisions no

one prepares you to make, the constant platitudes from well-meaning acquaintances—all while trying to process your own grief.

“Hello, Chief Morgan,” she said. “How may I help you?”

Morgan made introductions. “This is Sheriff Jenna Graves from Genesius County, her deputy Jake Hawkins, and Colonel Spelling from the Highway Patrol.”

Rebecca shook each of their hands, her grip firm despite her evident fatigue. “Three different agencies? I’m not sure whether to be intrigued or alarmed.”

“It’s a somewhat unusual situation,” Jenna said, offering a smile meant to reassure. “First, though, I want to express my condolences for your loss. Losing a parent is never easy, regardless of the circumstances.”

Something in Jenna’s tone must have conveyed her genuine understanding, because Rebecca’s professional veneer softened momentarily.

“Thank you. It’s been...challenging. Dad’s heart attack was unexpected, and his will is—” She paused, glancing around at the massive collection.

“Let’s just say he was more organized with his radios than his legal affairs.”

“I can only imagine,” Jenna said. “My father passed five years ago. The paperwork alone was overwhelming.”

Rebecca nodded, a flash of recognition passing between them—the shared understanding of those who’ve walked similar paths.

“I’ve taken leave from my practice in Connecticut, but I can only stay another week.

Hence the rushed estate sale.” She gestured at the visitors examining the collection.

“I’m trying to be selective about buyers.

Dad would have wanted his pieces to go to people who appreciate them, not just those with the deepest pockets. ”

“That’s very considerate,” Jake said. “Most would just auction everything off to the highest bidder.”

“I’ve had offers.” Rebecca’s mouth tightened. “But these weren’t just possessions to my father. They were his passion. Each piece has a story.”

Chief Morgan cleared his throat. “Rebecca, we’re here about a specific item that may have been sold recently.”

Jenna pulled out her phone and brought up the photo of the ham radio they’d discovered at Derrick’s trailer. She turned the screen toward Rebecca. “We believe this was part of your father’s collection.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened with immediate recognition. “Yes, that’s from Dad’s collection. A 1950s Hallicrafters S-85 with original tubes.” Her finger hovered over the screen, pointing to a small mark on the side. “That scratch on the casing—Dad said it added character.”

“Do you remember who purchased this particular piece?” Jenna asked, watching Rebecca’s face carefully.

“Of course. It was just a few days ago.” Rebecca frowned slightly.

“A man named Derrick, I believe. He was—” She paused, searching for the right

word.

“Intense. Particularly about the radio having original vacuum tubes, not transistors or microchips. He asked a lot of technical questions I couldn’t answer. ”

Jenna exchanged glances with Jake. “What else can you tell us about him or the purchase?”

Rebecca led all four investigators to a small sitting area at the side of the gallery, away from the other visitors. They settled into leather armchairs as she continued.

“The man you’re asking about, Mr. Derrick, wasn’t what I’d call a typical collector.

Most of Dad’s enthusiasts are either nostalgic older men or young audiophiles who appreciate analog sound.

He seemed...” She frowned, choosing her words carefully.

“He seemed almost desperate to have that specific radio. When I quoted the price, he wasn’t fazed.

Although he looked rather scruffy, I take it that he’s independently well-off.

I’m sure I could have charged him much more for the radio, but I didn’t. ”

“That was generous of you,” Jenna said.

Rebecca shrugged. “He clearly cared about the technology, not just the acquisition. He kept talking about the ‘purity’ of vacuum tubes versus modern circuitry.” She gave a small smile. “Dad would have approved.”

Jenna leaned forward slightly. “Ms. Mitchell, I’m afraid I have some difficult news. Marcus Derrick was found dead yesterday morning.”

Rebecca’s hand went to her throat. “Dead? How? Was it—” She stopped, visibly processing this information, her legal training perhaps kicking in to prevent her from jumping to conclusions.

“It’s being investigated as a homicide,” Jenna confirmed gently.

“And the radio is connected somehow?” Rebecca asked, her gaze sharpening despite her shock.

“We’re exploring all possibilities,” Jake interjected smoothly. “The radio was found at his residence.”

Colonel Spelling, who had been observing silently, spoke up. “Did Mr. Derrick mention feeling threatened or afraid when he was here?”

Rebecca shook her head. “Not explicitly, no. He certainly seemed paranoid about technology in general, made some comments about government surveillance through modern electronics. But he didn’t mention any specific threats.”

“Was there anyone else who seemed particularly interested in that radio?” Jenna asked. “Anyone who might have been upset that Derrick purchased it?”

The question caused a visible change in Rebecca’s demeanor. Her shoulders tensed, and her expression hardened.

“Actually, yes. There was someone.” She smoothed an invisible wrinkle from her skirt. “A man named Harris Lynch was very interested in it. He came by multiple times, making increasingly aggressive offers.”

Chief Morgan made a sound somewhere between a scoff and a growl. “Lynch. I might have known.”

Jenna glanced at Morgan. “You know him?”

“Everyone in Pinecrest knows Harris Lynch,” Morgan said with undisguised contempt. “Owns a shop called Golden Legend Treasures. Sells ‘oddities’ and antiques, though half his merchandise is probably something that fell off the back of a truck.”

“I refused to sell to him,” Rebecca stated firmly. “His reputation preceded him, and the way he spoke about the equipment—it was clear he only saw dollar signs, not historical value.”

“You made the right call,” Morgan assured her. “Lynch is a known sleaze who has been cited for harassment more than once. Follows people, makes threats when he doesn’t get what he wants.”

“What was his reaction when you sold the radio to Derrick instead?” Jenna asked.

Rebecca’s lips pressed into a thin line. “He was furious. Called me—” She paused, glancing at Colonel Spelling. “Well, his language wasn’t suitable for polite company. Said I was out of my mind for selling such a valuable piece to a ‘well-known crank’ for a much lower price than he was offering.”

“He knew Derrick?” Jake asked, leaning forward.

“He seemed to. Called him the ‘conspiracy nut from out in the sticks.’ I got the impression there was history.”

Jenna tilted her head. “Did Lynch interact with Derrick directly while they were

here?”

“Not that I saw. Lynch was here earlier in the day, making another offer I refused. He stormed off but didn’t actually leave the property.

When Derrick arrived later and purchased the radio, Lynch was still lurking near the refreshment table.

” Rebecca hesitated, then added, “Actually, there’s something else.

When Derrick left with his purchase, I saw Lynch go out too.

But we were busy with other customers, and I didn’t think much more about it. ”

The four law enforcement officers exchanged significant looks.

“Ms. Mitchell, is there anything else you can recall about either of them?” Jenna pressed gently. “Anything at all that seemed unusual or noteworthy?”

Rebecca considered for a moment. “Derrick paid in cash—small bills, like he’d been saving up. He was very protective of the radio when he bought it. Insisted on carrying it himself, wouldn’t even let Franklin help him to his car.”

“This has been extremely helpful,” Jenna said, standing and offering her card to Rebecca. “If you remember anything else, no matter how insignificant it might seem, please call me directly.”

Rebecca took the card, studying it before slipping it into her pocket. “Of course. I hope you find whoever did this. No one deserves to die over a radio, no matter how valuable.”

As they prepared to leave, Jenna took one more lingering look at the impressive collection. A lifetime of passion and knowledge, now being dispersed. She wondered how many of these pieces held stories as dire as the one they were uncovering.

Outside, the four huddled together.

“Lynch sounds like our guy,” Chief Morgan stated flatly. “He’s got the temper and the motive.”

“And apparently knew Derrick beforehand,” Jake added. “That’s not a coincidence.”

Colonel Spelling nodded curtly. “I agree. Where’s this shop of his located?”

“Downtown Pinecrest,” Morgan replied. “Golden Legend Treasures. Right off Market Street.”

Jenna was already moving toward the vehicle, her mind rapidly organizing the new information—the valuable radio, Lynch’s rage at losing it, his history of harassment, and the fact that he’d followed Derrick on his way out. It was far from conclusive, but it was the strongest lead they had.

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The SUV rolled through the streets of Pinecrest with Chief Morgan at the wheel, each person inside wrapped in their own thoughts.

This time Colonel Spelling was sitting up front and Jenna sat beside Jake in the back, his thigh occasionally brushing against hers when Morgan took a corner too sharply.

Each time, Jenna felt a momentary distraction that she tried to ignore.

She had to acknowledge that attraction to Jake was growing, but she still had no idea where it could possibly lead.

Aside from the issue of their jobs, she wasn't sure she was ready for the kind of relationship that wouldn't be casual and wasn't likely to be brief.

For so long her personal life had been focused on the loss of her sister, the death of her father, and her mother's problems. Everything else she'd dedicated to being a good sheriff.

Pulling her attention back to being Sheriff, Jenna gazed out the window at the storefronts of Pinecrest sliding past. The town had a quaint charm that belied the darkness they were investigating.

"Mitchell's daughter was certain that Lynch was angry about the radio," Jake said, breaking the silence. "Angry enough to kill over it?"

"People have killed for less," Morgan replied, his tone flat.

“But whoever killed Derrick didn’t take the radio from his home,” Jenna mused. “And Lynch has no record,” she said. “Not even a parking ticket.”

“Sometimes the cleanest records hide the dirtiest deeds,” Colonel Spelling remarked, his voice carrying the weight of decades in law enforcement.

“And there are lots of reasons why he might not have taken the radio. Maybe he harbored some longstanding grudge against Derrick that was more important than the radio. Or maybe he got spooked and ran away before he could grab it.”

The car slowed as they approached a corner building with large display windows. Even from a distance, Jenna could see the cluttered exhibition of oddities in the window—old cameras, tarnished silver pieces, and what appeared to be a stuffed owl with one glass eye missing.

“Welcome to Golden Legend Treasures,” Morgan announced, pulling into a parking space across the street. “Where one man’s trash becomes another man’s overpriced collectible.”

They exited the vehicle and crossed the street toward the shop that stood like a monument to forgotten things, its facade weathered but maintained, a hand-painted sign hanging above the door.

As they neared the entrance, the door swung open. A man stepped out, thin and wiry, with darting eyes that widened at the sight of the approaching group. He wore jeans that hung loose on his frame and a faded t-shirt that had seen better days. His steps faltered when he spotted them.

Chief Morgan’s posture changed instantly, transformed into a strange, almost predatory alertness.

“Well, if it isn’t Mickey Guest,” Morgan called out, his voice carrying a forced joviality that immediately put Jenna on edge. “What a surprise seeing you here.”

The man—Mickey—froze momentarily, then attempted a casual smile that looked more like a grimace.

“Chief Morgan,” he acknowledged, his gaze flicking between the officers. “Just doing some shopping.”

Morgan stepped closer, invading Mickey’s personal space. “Let me introduce my colleagues. This is Sheriff Graves from Genesius County, Deputy Hawkins, and Colonel Spelling from the State Highway Patrol.”

Mickey nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “Nice to meet you all.”

“How long has it been now, Mickey? Two months since you got sprung from the joint?” Morgan asked, in a pose of casual interest that fooled no one.

“Three,” Mickey corrected, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“That’s right. Three months. Any luck finding honest work?” Morgan’s emphasis on “honest” wasn’t subtle.

Jenna observed the exchange closely. Mickey’s body language screamed discomfort—averted eyes, hands that couldn’t decide where to rest, the slight backward lean of someone who wanted to run.

“I’ve got some prospects,” Mickey mumbled, his eyes now fixed on a point beyond Morgan’s shoulder.

“I bet you do,” Morgan replied knowingly.

Something flashed in Mickey's eyes—fear, Jenna thought. Not the generalized anxiety of an ex-con encountering law enforcement, but something specific and immediate.

"I should get going," Mickey said, already edging sideways. "Got an appointment."

"Don't let us keep you." Morgan's smile never reached his eyes. "We should catch up sometime. I'm always interested in your... business ventures."

Mickey gave a jerky nod, then walked away with hurried steps that fell just short of running. Jenna watched him go, noting the way he glanced back twice before turning the corner.

"What was that about?" Spelling asked Morgan once Mickey was out of earshot.

Morgan's eyes remained fixed on the spot where Mickey had disappeared. "Maybe nothing. Maybe everything."

"That's not an answer," Jenna pressed.

Morgan turned to her, his expression unreadable. "Let's just say Mr. Guest has a talent for acquiring items that don't belong to him, and an even greater talent for finding buyers who don't ask questions."

Morgan nodded. "One of the best thieves in three counties. But proving it..." He shrugged. "That's another matter entirely."

The bell above the shop door jingled as the four of them entered Golden Legend Treasures.

The interior was even more chaotic than the windows had suggested.

Every available surface bore some relic of the past—shelves lined with antique books, glass cases filled with jewelry and watches, tables piled with cameras, typewriters, radios, and phonographs.

Mannequin torsos draped in vintage clothing stood between larger furniture pieces.

The air held the distinctive scent of old things—musty paper, aged wood, the metallic tang of tarnished silver.

The room felt small, an effect created by the sheer volume of merchandise crammed into every corner.

Jenna could see that Golden Legend Treasures was a shop with a reputation that matched its name only in the sense that its contents were old.

Whether they were treasures remained to be seen.

Behind a glass counter at the rear stood a short man, with thinning hair combed carefully over a balding crown.

His eyes were sharp and assessing, taking in the four visitors with a shopkeeper's practiced evaluation of potential customers.

His expression shifted when he spotted the local police chief.

“Chief Morgan,” Lynch said, his smile too wide and too quick. “What brings you in today? Looking for a gift for the missus?”

“Not exactly, Harris,” Morgan replied, stepping forward. “I’m here with Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins, and Colonel Spelling. They’re investigating a homicide.”

Lynch's smile dimmed slightly. "A homicide? That's terrible. But I'm not sure how I could help."

Jenna stepped forward, studying Lynch's face. His expression was open, even unconcerned, but there was a calculation behind his eyes, an awareness that didn't match his words.

"We're investigating the murder of Marcus Derrick," she said, watching carefully for his reaction. "His name mean anything to you?"

Lynch's expression remained neutral. "I can't say it does. Should it?"

It was a lie. Jenna felt it with certainty. Rebecca Mitchell had specifically named Lynch as being upset about the radio sale to Derrick, describing him as angry when he learned that a "well-known crank" had purchased it.

"I think I'll browse a bit," Morgan announced suddenly, drawing Jenna's attention. "Our anniversary's coming up. Might find something here after all."

He wandered off toward a display of copper cookware, leaving Jenna momentarily puzzled by his abrupt departure. But then she realized his strategy—Morgan was giving her space to question Lynch while he investigated the shop.

"Mr. Lynch," she continued, "Marcus Derrick was recently found dead from an act of violence. He owned an antique ham radio set, vacuum tube technology from the 1940s. We have reason to believe he purchased it at Howard Mitchell's estate sale."

Lynch tapped once against the glass countertop. "I didn't attend that sale. Too picked over by the time I got wind of it."

It was another lie. "That's interesting," Jenna said, "because Rebecca Mitchell

specifically mentioned you were interested in a particular radio her father owned.”

“She must be mistaken,” Lynch replied, his casual tone now sounding forced.

Jenna reached into her pocket and produced a photograph of the radio found at Derrick’s home. She placed it on the counter between them, watching Lynch’s eyes as they flicked down to the image.

“Ever seen this before?” she asked.

Lynch barely glanced at the photo. “No, never.”

His response came too quickly, without the consideration someone would give if genuinely trying to remember. Jenna noted the slight tightening around his eyes, the way his fingers had stopped their nervous movement and now pressed flat against the counter.

“That’s strange,” Jake commented from just behind Jenna’s shoulder, “because Ms. Mitchell clearly remembered you expressing interest in this exact model. Said you were quite upset when she sold it to Derrick instead.”

“I deal with hundreds of items every month,” Lynch said, a defensive edge creeping into his voice. “Maybe I expressed interest in something similar. I certainly don’t recall this specific radio, and I definitely didn’t know this Derrick person.”

“But now you’re not denying that you went to the sale?” Jake asked.

“Perhaps I did,” Lynch said with a shrug. “I don’t see why it matters.”

Colonel Spelling, who had been silently observing the exchange, stepped forward. “In my experience, Mr. Lynch, people in your profession have exceptional memories for

merchandise. Especially valuable pieces.”

Lynch’s mouth twisted. “With all due respect, Colonel, my ‘profession’ is legitimate business. I buy and sell antiques and collectibles. Everything here is acquired legally.”

“Everything?” Chief Morgan’s voice carried across the shop. He was standing beside an ornate brass and silver samovar displayed on a pedestal near the window. “Even this?”

Lynch’s expression flickered with something Jenna couldn’t quite identify. Annoyance, perhaps. “That’s a nineteenth-century Russian samovar. A fine piece. Museum quality. Probably out of a police chief’s price range.”

Morgan approached the samovar, examining it with exaggerated interest. “You know, it does look familiar.” He pulled out his phone, scrolled for a moment, then held the screen up. “In fact, it looks exactly like this one.”

Jenna moved to see the image on Morgan’s phone—a photograph of the same samovar, but sitting on a mantelpiece in what appeared to be someone’s living room.

“The Schwartz family on Maple Drive reported this stolen,” Morgan continued, his voice now carrying the unmistakable tone of a cop who’d just sprung a trap. “They provided this photo for the report. Same distinctive dent on the left handle. Same engraving on the base.”

Lynch’s face drained of color. “I had no idea it was stolen,” he said quickly. “I buy from various sources. If someone misrepresented—”

“And who did you buy it from, Harris?” Morgan cut in.

Lynch's jaw tightened. "I'm not required to disclose my sources."

"True," Morgan agreed, with a satisfaction that made it clear he'd been waiting for this moment.

"But it doesn't matter, because I already know.

You bought it from Mickey Guest. The same Mickey Guest I just saw leaving your shop.

The same Mickey Guest who's been fencing stolen goods for fifteen years—at least until he did some time in the joint. Maybe he's gone back to work."

Jenna watched the realization spread across Lynch's face. The confident shopkeeper facade crumbled, revealing something desperate underneath. His eyes darted toward the back of the shop, and Jenna tensed, ready to move if he tried to run.

"You can't prove that," Lynch said, but his voice had lost its certainty.

Morgan smiled thinly. "Oh, I'm pretty sure we can. If we lean on Mickey a little, I'm sure he'll talk. Meanwhile, as they say, 'possession is nine tenths of the law.'" He nodded to Colonel Spelling. "Would you do the honors, Colonel?"

Spelling stepped forward, removing handcuffs from his belt. "Harris Lynch, you're under arrest for receiving stolen property."

As Spelling secured the cuffs around Lynch's wrists, Morgan recited the Miranda rights with the practiced cadence of someone who'd done it hundreds of times.

"This is ridiculous," Lynch protested weakly. "I run a legitimate business."

“Tell it to the judge,” Morgan replied, then turned to Spelling, then called for transport for the man they were taking into custody.

Lynch stood rigid between Jenna and Jake, his earlier confidence completely evaporated. His eyes darted between the officers, calculating. A cornered man looking for escape.

“Mr. Lynch,” Jenna said, leaning against the counter. “Now might be a good time to reconsider what you know about Marcus Derrick and that radio.”

Lynch swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing above his buttoned collar. “I want a lawyer.”

Of course he did. Jenna fought back a sigh of frustration. They’d caught him red-handed with stolen goods, but the murder case had just hit another wall.

She glanced around the cluttered shop, at the hundreds of items with uncertain origins and ownership. How many other crimes were hidden among these shelves? How many secrets did Harris Lynch keep behind that calculating gaze?

Lynch’s obvious lies about that radio suggested guilt of some kind. But if he had killed Derrick, wouldn’t he have taken the object that he coveted? Or had he perhaps acted in rage and then realized that he couldn’t risk being caught with that vintage radio in his possession?

Jenna caught Jake’s eye. The same question she was thinking was reflected in his gaze: Had they just arrested Marcus Derrick’s killer? Or was the murderer still on the loose?

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As Chief Morgan's cruiser pulled into a space between two rusted vehicles, Jenna glanced at her watch—just over an hour since they'd left Harris Lynch cooling his heels in a holding cell, waiting for his lawyer.

"That lawyer's sure taking their sweet time showing up." Colonel Spelling grumbled. "And Lynch isn't talking."

"Meanwhile, maybe we can get something useful from Mickey," Jenna replied. "If he took that samovar to our suspect, Lynch had to know it was stolen."

"And if we can connect Lynch to stolen property," Jake added, "we can hold him on that while we work on getting evidence for the murder charge."

"You really think Mickey will cooperate?" Spelling asked, his skepticism evident.

"He won't volunteer anything," Morgan replied flatly. "Mickey's been in the game too long. He knows exactly what to say and what not to say. But I'm pretty sure I can turn him around."

The four officers left the vehicle and approached the building along a cracked concrete walkway. "Third floor, apartment 3C," Morgan said, stepping carefully over a broken beer bottle.

The interior hallway was dimly lit. Graffiti decorated the walls, and the carpet beneath their feet was stained beyond recognition. They climbed the stairs in silence, each step creaking under their weight.

Jake leaned close to Jenna as they reached the second-floor landing. “Reminds me of places I used to patrol in Kansas City. Never good news when we got called to buildings like this.”

When they reached apartment 3C, Morgan stepped forward and knocked firmly. The sound echoed down the empty hallway. Silence followed.

Morgan knocked again, harder. “Mickey Guest. Pinecrest Police. Open up.”

After a moment, they heard movement inside—the scrape of a chair, footsteps approaching the door. A chain slid, a lock turned, and the door opened just wide enough to reveal Mickey Guest’s face.

“Well, well,” he said. “If it isn’t Chief Morgan again. And you brought your friends.” He stood blocking the doorway, hair disheveled, but his eyes alert and calculating.

“Can we come in, Mickey?” Morgan asked, though his tone made it clear it wasn’t really a question.

Mickey’s lips twitched into something resembling a smile. “You got a warrant, Chief?”

“We’re just here to talk,” Jenna said. “About Harris Lynch.”

“Lynch?” Mickey’s expression remained unchanged. “What about him?”

“We’ve got him in a cell,” Morgan said. “We suspect him of murder. But we need something to hold him on until we get proof. We’d like you to come down to the station, answer some questions.”

Mickey leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms. “I don’t think so. I’ve got

rights, and unless you're arresting me for something, I'm not going anywhere."

Jenna caught Jake's eye. They both knew Mickey was right—they had no grounds for an arrest, no warrant for entering his apartment.

"Then we'll talk here," Morgan said, undeterred. "You were at Golden Legend Treasures earlier today."

Mickey shrugged. "So? Last I checked, browsing antique shops wasn't illegal."

"What were you doing there?" Jake asked.

"Just looking at stuff. That's what a lot of people do in shops. Lynch has some interesting items. I like to keep an eye on what's available."

Jenna stepped forward. "We saw a very nice samovar at Lynch's shop. Did you sell it to him?"

Mickey's eyes narrowed slightly, but his composure held. "What's a samovar? Whatever it is, I don't know anything about it."

"You expect us to believe that?" Morgan pressed. "You have a history."

"Only ancient history," Mickey corrected. "I've already served my time for all that, and I'm clean now. Any deals with Lynch—and I'm not saying there ever were any—were before I got sent up."

Jenna studied Mickey's face, noting the ease with which he deflected their questions. His responses were measured, his body language controlled. He'd been through this kind of routine many times before.

“Mickey,” she tried one last time, “a man is dead and Lynch could be connected. If you know something—”

“I don’t,” he cut her off. “And even if I did, talking to cops has never done me any favors.” He stepped back from the door. “Now, unless you’re here to arrest me, I’ve got things to do.”

“Tell you what, Mickey,” Morgan said. “I’m going to get that warrant to search your place right now. I know a judge who owes me a favor.”

“See you later, then,” Mickey said, about to close the door.

“But I’m going to ask my friends to wait for me here, outside your door.

That way we’ll be sure that nothing comes out of your place that we don’t know about.

In fact, a couple of them can watch the outside, just in case something happens to fall out a window.

Of course if you’re not holding any stolen goods now, you’ve got nothing to worry about. ”

Mickey’s gaze hardened, locked onto the stern expression of Chief Morgan in a silent standoff.

Suddenly, Mickey’s lips curled into a smirk. “How ‘bout we make this interesting?” He suggested, his voice carrying an undercurrent of defiance. “I give you some info...you keep me outta cuffs.”

He crossed his arms defensively over his nondescript clothing, his posture suggesting

a man accustomed to bargaining for his freedom. And Morgan's expression indicated his willingness to go along.

A deal? Jenna glanced sideways at Jake. This whole encounter was beginning to sound a little shady to her.

Jake leaned towards Jenna, lowering his voice so only she could hear him. "I don't like it either. But this is Chief Morgan's jurisdiction."

The Pineville Police Chief's gaze never wavered from Mickey's face, his stern expression unchanging. "Maybe we'll cut a deal," he suggested, his voice low, "but only if I can be certain you won't be caught peddling stolen goods again."

Mickey's eyes flickered to Jenna before returning to Morgan. "Deal," he grunted in agreement. "Exactly what's your question?"

"Did Lynch know the things you sold to him were stolen goods?"

"Of course he knew. I even told him exactly where they came from." With a grin, he added, "Even that samovar. And yeah, I know what a samovar is."

"And you'll attest to that in writing? In court if necessary?"

"Just as long as we're clear. No more charges against me?"

"You got it—at least as long as you keep your nose clean."

Inside, Jenna felt a flare of protest at the arrangement. The words were on the tip of her tongue to challenge it, but she swallowed them down. Jake was right, this was Morgan's call; his authority held sway here.

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you, Mickey,” Morgan warned.

Mickey’s smile was thin. “You always do, Chief. You always do. I take comfort in that. Really.”

With that, he closed the door. The sound of multiple locks engaging followed.

The drive back to the Pinecrest Police Department was quick and quiet. When they arrived at the station, a young officer met them at the entrance, practically vibrating with news.

“Lynch’s lawyer just got here, Chief. They’re waiting in Interview Room One.”

“About time,” Spelling muttered.

Jenna nodded her thanks to the officer and led the way through the station. The familiar bustle of police work—phones ringing, keyboards clicking, muted conversations—was oddly comforting after the tense scene at Mickey’s apartment.

Outside the interview room, they paused for a brief strategy session.

“Let me take point,” Morgan suggested. “I’ve known Lynch for years.”

“I’ll support,” Jenna agreed. “Jake, you observe. Note any reactions, inconsistencies.”

Jake nodded, his eyes meeting hers with quiet understanding.

“And you, Colonel?” Morgan asked Spelling.

“I’ll let you handle it,” Spelling replied. “I’ll observe from the adjoining room.”

With roles established, they entered the interview room.

Harris Lynch sat with perfect posture at the metal table, his expression neutral.

Beside him sat a woman Jenna instantly recognized as Eleanor Winters, one of the most formidable defense attorneys in the area.

Her charcoal suit was impeccable, her silver hair pulled back in a severe bun, and her piercing eyes followed each officer as they entered.

“Chief Morgan, Sheriff Graves,” Ms. Winters acknowledged with a crisp nod. “I understand you’re holding my client with insufficient support for your charges.”

Morgan took a seat across from Lynch. “Counselor, we have some questions about a murder.”

“My client has no knowledge of any murder,” Ms. Winters replied smoothly.

Jenna fought to keep her frustration from showing.

“Mr. Lynch,” she tried again, “where were you the night before last between midnight and four in the morning?”

“My client will not answer questions regarding his whereabouts,” Ms. Winters interjected. “Unless you have evidence linking him to Mr. Derrick’s death, these questions are inappropriate.”

Jenna caught Jake’s eye across the table. His slight frown mirrored her own thoughts. Their case against Lynch for murder was circumstantial at best, based on his attitude and his reported desire for an object he didn’t possess.

The interview continued for another forty minutes, a verbal chess match with Ms. Winters blocking every attempt to extract useful information from Lynch.

Chief Morgan finally said, “Okay, but I can hold Mr. Lynch on another matter.”

The lawyer looked at him inquisitively.

“Dealing in stolen property,” Morgan told her. “I’m referring to one item in particular, a samovar we saw in your shop, Mr. Lynch.”

Lynch remained silent, deferring to his lawyer with a glance. The two of them went into a huddle, whispering together. Then Ms. Winters announced, “My client admits he acquired a samovar. He purchased it from a customer who claimed it was a family heirloom.”

“And I have a witness who will swear, in court if necessary, that your client knew it was stolen. And I will hold him on that charge.”

Although the lawyer argued valiantly, the police chief gave no ground. Ms. Winters finally marched away, making threats of a lawsuit.

By the time Lynch was returned to his cell and the four officers regrouped, Jenna’s temples were throbbing with tension.

“We didn’t get what we needed on the murder charge,” Jake observed, loosening his collar slightly.

Morgan countered. “We’ve got enough to hold him on the stolen goods charge. And Judge Peterson owes me a favor—we’ll have a warrant to search his shop and financial records in no time at all.”

Jenna leaned against the wall, a frown creasing her forehead. “I’m not convinced Lynch is our killer.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to her in surprise.

“What do you mean?” Morgan demanded.

“It’s just...” Jenna struggled to articulate the feeling gnawing at her. “The connection feels tenuous.”

Jake studied her face with interest. “You thinking Mickey’s our guy instead?”

Jenna shook her head. “No. I just think we’re missing something.”

“Look,” Morgan said more gently, “we’ve got Lynch in custody. That’s a win. Let’s get the warrant, search his shop thoroughly, and see what else turns up.”

Jenna nodded reluctantly. “Alright. But I want to keep all options open. This case isn’t as straightforward as it might seem.”

The subtle exchange of glances between Morgan and Spelling didn’t escape her notice—concern, perhaps, or doubt about her judgment. She’d seen that look before when her intuition led her down paths others found questionable.

Morgan sighed in frustration. “Sheriff, I’ve known Lynch for years. He’s got a temper. He’s threatened people before.”

“I know,” Jenna acknowledged. “But—”

“But what?” Spelling challenged. “What other leads do we have? Mickey Guest? He’s a thief, not a killer. And we have nothing connecting him directly to Derrick.”

Jenna fell silent. She couldn't deny the logic of their arguments, yet something felt off about the whole scenario. The pieces fit too neatly in some ways, and not at all in others.

"We should head back to Trentville," Jake suggested, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "We can start fresh tomorrow."

Jenna checked her watch. The day had slipped away faster than she'd realized. "Agreed. There's nothing more we can do here today."

As they prepared to leave, Jenna couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something vital. Lynch might be guilty of receiving stolen goods, and he might well be a public nuisance, but a murderer?

Jake unlocked the cruiser with a beep that seemed too cheerful for their mood. They pulled out of the parking lot in silence. Traffic was light as they headed toward the highway that would take them back to Trentville, the county seat and their home jurisdiction.

After several minutes of quiet, Jake cleared his throat. "You know, if you're not convinced about Lynch, I trust your intuition."

The simple statement warmed Jenna more than she expected. In a profession that valued concrete evidence and logical deduction, having someone trust her instincts meant more than she could express.

Before she could respond, the car's radio crackled to life.

"Sheriff Graves, come in. This is Officer Delgado."

Jenna reached for the radio. "Go ahead, Maria. What's up?"

“We’ve got a bad situation at the Derrick crime scene, Sheriff.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

“I don’t like this,” Jenna said, checking her phone for updates. “Dispatch says we’ve got at least thirty civilians up there already.”

Jake nodded, taking the next curve faster than comfort allowed. “So much for securing the perimeter.”

The hill loomed before them, crowned by the skeletal silhouette of the radio tower against the sky.

Almost there, she thought.

Her phone rang, the harsh electronic tone cutting through the tense silence. She glanced at the screen and suppressed a sigh.

“It’s the mayor,” she said, hitting the speaker button. “Sheriff Graves here.”

“Sheriff.” Mayor Claire Simmons’ voice filled the car, sharp and clipped even through the tiny speaker. “I needed you in my office at least thirty minutes ago. The press is crawling all over this, and I must be briefed immediately.”

Jake shot Jenna a look that spoke volumes. Their silent communication had developed over years of working together. This particular glance asked, is she serious...right now?

Jenna gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. “Mayor Simmons, I understand your concern, but we’re heading back to the crime scene at the moment. The situation has escalated, and I need to ensure it’s properly contained before—”

“This is precisely the kind of thing we’ve discussed before,” Claire interrupted, her voice dropping to a dangerous octave.

“Public perception is everything, Sheriff. In a situation like this, every minute you spend out there without coordinating with my office is a minute the narrative slips from our control.”

Jenna took a deep breath, then spoke firmly. “Claire, I appreciate the urgency. Jake and I will come to your office once the scene is secure. Right now, my priority has to be public safety and evidence preservation.”

A loaded silence followed, filled only by the hum of the engine.

“Fine,” Claire finally said, the single word tight with barely contained frustration. “But I expect you here within the hour. No excuses.”

The call ended with an abrupt click.

“She always did have a flair for the dramatic exit,” Jake commented

“I guess she’s just doing her job,” Jenna remarked, tucking her phone away. “But the mayor finds it inconvenient to remember that I was elected to my position, just as she was. And mine is a county appointment, while hers is the town. She can’t actually give me orders.”

“But she can make both our lives miserable,” Jake reminded her.

“And sometimes she does,” Jenna replied with a grim smile.

They rounded a curve and the smile faded from Jenna’s face.

As they approached the turnoff to the service road that led to the tower, they spotted a disturbing number of civilian cars parked haphazardly just outside the approach.

When they got nearer, they could see police cruiser parked askew, blocking the road.

“This is a mess,” Jake muttered, as he carefully maneuvered their vehicle through the impromptu parking lot that the area had become,

Officer Mike Donovan, guarding the service road, looked very relieved to see them. He pulled his cruiser ahead just enough to let Jake squeeze their car past, then blocked access to the road again.

Shouting their thanks to Mike, Jake followed the service road toward the radio tower.

As they progressed, Jenna’s keen eyes caught movement between some trees near the road.

She realized that more onlookers were skirting around the official barriers, drawn by the irresistible lure of tragedy and mystery.

When they reached the tower, the full extent of the chaos unfolded before them.

A crowd of at least forty people had gathered now, gawking at the place where Marcus Derrick’s body had been found hanging.

Three officers stood just inside the taped area, arms crossed, expressions tense, as they formed a fragile barrier between the onlookers and the crime scene.

Officer Maria Delgado spotted them and hurried over, relief evident on her young face. “Sheriff, thank God. We’ve been trying to keep them back, but they just keep coming. Word spread fast.”

Before Jenna could respond, her attention was drawn to a large white van parked prominently at the edge of the cleared area.

The Channel 8 News logo gleamed on its side, and a satellite dish extended skyward from its roof.

A reporter in a crisp blazer stood before a camera, microphone in hand, the tower eerily framed behind her.

“When did the press arrive?” Jenna asked, unbuckling her seatbelt. “How did they get past Mike?”

Delgado shifted uncomfortably. “They just drove right in before he had his car in place to block the road. They went live before we could do anything about it. We couldn’t spare anyone to go and arrest them. And that would have opened a whole new can of worms.”

Jake swore softly, then caught himself. “Sorry, Sheriff.”

The cool evening air rushed in as Jenna opened the door, listening to the murmur of the crowd and the mechanical whirl of the news camera.

She stepped out of the car, ignoring the press van and heading for the group of onlookers.

The crowd’s chatter dimmed slightly as she came into view, ripples of recognition spreading outward.

“Folks,” she called out, her voice firm and carrying across the open space. “I need everyone who isn’t law enforcement to clear the area immediately. This is an active crime scene, and your presence is hampering our investigation.”

A few people at the edges of the crowd began to shuffle away, but others held their ground, faces alight with curiosity.

“Sheriff Graves!” The reporter from Channel 8 had spotted her and was now hurrying in her direction, microphone extended like a jousting lance, cameraman in tow. “Isabel Chen, Channel 8 News. Can you confirm the rumors that a body was found here last night?”

Some of the dispersing crowd turned back to watch and listen. Jenna could see the glint of mobile screens lifted high, their owners eager to capture her words along with the scene.

“Ms. Chen,” Jenna greeted, acknowledging the reporter with a curt nod that was both professional and slightly aloof. Her voice carried an authoritative undertone that demanded respect.

“At present,” she began, choosing her words carefully, “I can confirm that we are indeed investigating what appears to be a suspicious death.” She paused for effect, allowing her words to sink in before continuing.

“We’re still in the preliminary stages of our investigation and out of respect for the victim’s family; we won’t be releasing further details until proper notifications have been made.”

The reporter wasn’t deterred by Jenna’s succinct response. She leaned forward slightly, her eyes gleaming with determination. “Sources tell us that it was a couple of local kids who discovered the body. What can you share about that?”

Jenna held up a hand, halting any further questions momentarily. “You know as well as I do that we don’t disclose information about minors involved in active investigations,” she replied firmly.

“But is there an ongoing danger? Should Trentville residents be worried?” Ms. Chen persisted, skillfully steering her line of questioning towards public safety concerns.

Despite the camera lens zooming closer on her face, Jenna kept her expression steady and composed. “At this point in time,” she stated clearly while maintaining eye contact with Ms. Chen, “we have no evidence suggesting an ongoing threat to public safety.”

She let this statement hang in the air for a moment before adding: “However, we urge all residents to remain vigilant and report any unusual or suspicious activity. Now, I must insist that everyone leave the immediate area to allow our team to conduct their work effectively.”

Her firm directive echoed through the crowd, leaving no room for further questions. It was time for them to step back and let law enforcement do its job.

She turned back to the crowd, raising her voice slightly. “My order for you to leave is not a request, folks. Anyone still on this property in five minutes will be cited for obstruction of justice.”

She turned to the news reporter and added, “That includes you and your crew. You know better than to enter a crime scene that’s still under investigation.”

The authority in her tone had its intended effect. The reporter and cameraman retreated to their van and the crowd began to disperse, though not without reluctance. Jenna caught fragments of disappointed murmurs as people trudged back to their vehicles.

“Always when things get interesting...”

“...bet it was that drifter they found at the Sundown Motel last week...”

“...never had this kind of trouble when Frank Doyle was sheriff...”

That last comment stung more than Jenna would ever admit. She pushed it aside, focusing on the task at hand as she approached her deputies.

“Miller, Anderson, I want this perimeter extended another fifty yards in all directions. No exceptions, no matter who they claim to know or be related to. You can cuff any who refuse to go.”

The officers nodded, immediately moving to expand the police line.

As the crowd thinned and the immediate crisis abated, Jenna and Jake returned to their vehicle. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving Jenna feeling the full weight of the day’s events. She flopped into the passenger seat and leaned her head back.

Jake slid into the driver’s seat and looked over at her with the kind of personal concern that had become more frequent between them in recent months, crossing the line from professional to something neither of them had fully defined.

“You look exhausted, Jenna. When was the last time you slept?”

“I’m fine,” she said automatically, then softened at his skeptical look. “But it has been a while.”

The truth was, she’d barely slept four hours in the last two days. The case had her mind spinning with possibilities, theories, connections—not to mention the dreams that had been more intense lately.

“But we’re not finished yet,” she added.

“Where to first? The mayor’s or the station?”

Before Jenna could answer, her phone rang again. She glanced at the screen, a small smile forming despite her fatigue.

“Frank,” she said by way of greeting as she answered.

“Just saw you on the Channel 8 live feed,” Frank Doyle’s familiar gruff voice came through, warm with a hint of amusement. “Looking sharp, Sheriff. Handled that reporter like a pro.”

Despite everything, Jenna felt a flush of pleasure at her mentor’s praise. “You’re watching the local news? I thought you said it was ‘nothing but fear-mongering and fluff pieces.’”

“Had to make sure my protégé wasn’t making me look bad,” he chuckled. “Seriously though, good job up there. Firm but not aggressive, informative without giving away the store.”

“Thanks, Frank.” She met Jake’s eyes briefly, sharing the moment with him. “That means a lot.”

“You two look dead on your feet, even through my ancient TV,” Frank continued. “I could fix you both a nice cup of herbal tea, take some of the edge off. How about it?”

The invitation was tempting—a moment of calm in Frank’s comfortable living room, where they could discuss the case without the pressures of City Hall or the station.

“We’ll head over as soon as we can,” Jenna promised. “Might be late. We have to go calm down the mayor.”

“Door’s always open to you,” Frank replied simply. “Just show up whenever you’re done playing politics with Claire. You know where the key is if I nod off waiting.”

The call ended, and Jenna told Jake. “Mayor first, then Frank’s,” she decided. “Let’s get the hard part over with.”

They drove in companionable silence through the now-quiet streets of Trentville. Storefronts were dark, and streetlights were coming on. The small town felt peaceful, at odds with the chaos they’d just left behind and the grim reality of a life cut short.

City Hall soon loomed ahead, an imposing granite building. Jake pulled into a space near the front entrance and cut the engine. For a moment, neither of them moved, the silence in the car a brief respite before the storm they knew awaited them inside.

“She’s going to push for details we don’t have yet,” Jake said finally.

“And criticize our handling of the scene,” Jenna added.

“And make thinly veiled comments about election year crime statistics.”

A small smile tugged at Jenna’s lips. “We both know the drill.”

Jake’s hand briefly covered hers where it rested on the console between them—a quick, warm pressure that was gone almost before she registered it. “We’ve got this,” he said simply.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

“You ready for this?” Jake asked, his voice low, as they made their way through the quiet corridors of Trentville’s City Hall. Most of the building had emptied for the day, and the only sound was the distant rumble of a janitor’s vacuum.

“As ready as anyone can be for Claire when she’s in one of her moods,” Jenna replied, straightening her sheriff’s badge with an unconscious gesture.

“Just remember,” he reminded her, “we’re doing our jobs. Her political aspirations aren’t our problem.”

Jenna nodded, appreciating his solidarity as they reached the heavy oak door with its brass nameplate: MAYOR CLAIRE SIMMONS. She took a breath, knocked twice, and entered without waiting for a response—a small assertion of authority that she knew would irritate Claire.

Mayor Simmons sat behind her imposing desk, her tailored suit as crisp as her expression was cold. Her computer screen glowed in the dimming light of her office, and Jenna caught a glimpse of her own image on what appeared to be a replay of the afternoon’s press conference.

“Sheriff Graves. Deputy Hawkins.” Claire’s voice cut through the room. She clicked the pause button with a manicured nail, her hawk-like gaze fixed on Jenna. “Please, have a seat.”

Jenna settled into one of the stiff chairs across from Claire, while Jake took the other. The office smelled faintly of lemon polish and Claire’s signature expensive perfume.

“I watched your statement to the media.” Claire gestured to the screen where Jenna’s face remained paused, her expression serious and professional. “Enlightening, to say the least, considering I hadn’t been fully briefed on the situation myself.”

“I was planning to come by after—” Jenna began.

“After you’d already informed the entire county?” Claire’s fingers drummed once on the polished surface of her desk. “I’m the mayor of this town, Jenna. I shouldn’t be learning about murder investigations in my jurisdiction from Channel 12 News.”

Jenna met Claire’s gaze without flinching. “The press was already at the scene when we got there. I made a brief statement to prevent speculation, nothing more.”

“The public,” Claire repeated, the words sharp with disapproval. “What the public needs is reassurance, not alarm.”

“I said we’re investigating all possibilities. That’s standard procedure.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “Standard procedure. Of course.” She sighed, the sound heavy with exasperation. “Walk me through it, then. All of it. From the beginning.”

Jake shifted in his chair, his shoulder almost touching Jenna’s in silent support. The gesture wasn’t lost on Claire, whose gaze flicked briefly between them before settling back on Jenna. Jenna hoped Claire wouldn’t make too much of the moment.

Jenna kept her voice even and professional.

“Marcus Derrick’s body was discovered by two teenagers who had been playing around in the woods near the radio tower.

That location is actually just outside the boundary of Trentville, by the way.

The deceased was male, mid-fifties, who lived in a mobile home in the woods outside Pinecrest in Cable County.

Cause of death appears to be strangulation. ”

She continued methodically, describing the crime scene and the peculiar arrangement of the body as it was attached to the tower.

“The victim was obsessed with old technology—specifically vacuum tube equipment. He was positively paranoid about transistors and integrated circuits and such, thought the government was using them to monitor people’s thoughts.

He was a recluse, but we’ve learned he recently purchased items at Howard Mitchell’s estate sale in Pinecrest.”

Claire’s expression remained neutral, but her posture had stiffened, her back straight against the high-backed leather chair.

“Mitchell—he was the electronics collector who died recently?” she asked.

Jenna nodded. “Heart attack, according to Pinecrest PD. His daughter, Rebecca Mitchell, came from Connecticut to handle the estate. When we visited the estate sale, we learned that Marcus Derrick had bought a vintage radio there.”

“My contacts in Pineville tell me you’ve taken a man into custody. Why didn’t you announce that you already have a suspect in jail?”

“His name is Harris Lynch. He’d been very interested in the radio that Derrick bought and apparently he has a temper.”

“So you’re saying he had a motive?”

“Maybe. Lynch owns Golden Legend Treasures in Pinecrest—deals in antiques and oddities. And he was upset about Rebecca Mitchell selling the radio to Derrick instead of him. We have reason to believe he’s been selling stolen goods.

Chief Morgan and Colonel Spelling assisted us in obtaining a warrant.

Lynch is currently in custody, though only for possession of stolen property at this point.

We haven’t been able to tie him to the murder. ”

Throughout Jenna’s account, Claire’s demeanor shifted, alternating between attentive listening and visible agitation. Her focus seemed less on the details of the investigation and more on their implications.

“So, to summarize,” Claire said, standing abruptly and walking to the window that overlooked the town square, “we have a reclusive individual from Pinecrest who was murdered and discovered in our county, a suspect held in Pinecrest on a lesser charge, and an investigation that is currently going nowhere. Did I overlook anything?”

“We’re exploring all angles,” Jenna said carefully. “The unusual nature of the crime scene—”

“What I’m concerned with,” Claire interrupted, turning back to face them, “is the narrative that’s forming. ‘Trentville: Where Bodies Turn Up in the Woods.’ It’s hardly the image we’ve been working to cultivate.”

Jake cleared his throat. “With respect, Mayor, I don’t think any town cultivates a murder-friendly image. This isn’t about marketing.”

Claire’s gaze snapped to him, her expression cooling further. “Everything is about

marketing, Deputy Hawkins. Perception influences tourism, business investment, property values. When people hear ‘Trentville,’ I want them to think ‘charming midwestern town,’ not ‘murder investigation.’”

Jenna resisted the urge to sigh. Claire’s priorities had always been transparent—her political ambitions took precedence over practical realities.

“Perhaps,” Claire continued, returning to her seat and folding her hands on the desk, “this is a case better left to Pinecrest PD and the State Highway Patrol. After all, the victim was a Pinecrest resident. The stolen goods connection is in Pinecrest. It seems logical that they should take the lead.”

Jenna felt a flicker of irritation. “The body was found in Genesius County. That makes it my jurisdiction, Claire.”

“Technically, yes,” Claire conceded, her tone suggesting she found the technicality inconvenient. “But in the interest of efficient resource allocation...”

“I’m not stepping back from this investigation,” Jenna stated firmly. “The crime occurred in my county. The evidence was found in my county. And per state law, that makes it my case.”

Claire’s frustration manifested in the tightening of her jaw. “You always have an answer for everything, don’t you, Jenna?”

Jenna recognized the true nature of Claire’s irritation—not her handling of the case, but her unwillingness to be managed.

“I’m doing my job,” Jenna said simply. “And my job is to investigate crimes in Genesius County, regardless of where the victim lived or where additional evidence might lead.”

“Your job,” Claire countered, leaning forward, “includes considering the welfare of this community.”

“Which is exactly what I’m doing by thoroughly investigating a murder. Public safety isn’t achieved by passing the buck to another department.”

Claire’s expression darkened. “That’s not what I’m suggesting, and you know it.”

“What exactly are you suggesting, Claire?” Jenna asked, her voice level despite the growing tension. “Because it sounds like you’re asking me to prioritize the town’s image over finding a killer.”

The mayor’s mouth opened, then closed abruptly. For a moment, the only sound in the office was the gentle hum of the air conditioning.

“Let me be clear about something,” Jenna continued, her emerald eyes focused intently on Claire.

“You are not my boss. We are both elected officials with different responsibilities to the people of this town and this county. My responsibility is to uphold the law and keep them safe—not to manage public relations.”

The words struck with precision. Claire sat back, her expression shifting from anger to something more complex—perhaps respect, perhaps resignation.

After a long moment, she sighed, the sound weary and unexpectedly human. “You’re right.” She rubbed her temple. “I’m sorry, Jenna. That was... unprofessional of me.”

The apology surprised Jenna, who had braced for further confrontation. Claire rarely backed down. She responded with a nod.

“It’s been a difficult month,” Claire continued, some of her usual steel giving way to vulnerability. “These recent murder cases bring out my worst tendencies.” She glanced between Jenna and Jake. “My tendency to control everything, I mean.”

Then the mayor added, her voice softer now. “I do appreciate what you both do,” “Especially after what you did for Clyde. I haven’t forgotten that.”

The mention of Claire’s brother—whose murder Jenna had solved—shifted the atmosphere in the room. It was a reminder of their shared history, of the complex web that connected them beyond their professional roles.

“I was doing my job,” Jenna said simply, but without the edge that had colored her earlier statements.

“Yes, well.” Claire straightened a pen on her desk. “You do it well, even when it complicates my life.”

It was as close to a compliment as Claire was likely to offer, and Jenna accepted it with a nod.

“Keep me informed,” Claire said, her tone returning to its usual efficiency. “Properly informed, not through the evening news. And if there’s anything the mayor’s office can do to assist the investigation, let me know.”

“We will,” Jenna assured her, rising from her chair. Jake followed suit.

As they moved toward the door, Claire called after them. “And Jenna? Be careful with this one. Something about it feels... different.”

Jenna paused, struck by the genuine concern in Claire’s voice. “We always are.”

The door closed behind them with a soft click, and the tension that had filled the office didn't follow them into the corridor. Jake exhaled slowly as they walked toward the exit.

"That went better than expected," he observed quietly.

"Surprisingly so," Jenna agreed. "Though I'm not sure what prompted the change of heart."

"Maybe she's finally recognizing that we're on the same side." Jake's voice held a hint of optimism that Jenna couldn't quite share.

They stepped outside into the cool evening air. The town square was quiet, storefronts closing for the night, a few pedestrians making their way home.

"Frank's expecting us," Jenna said, checking her watch.

The thought of visiting Frank Doyle offered a welcome respite. Frank's steady presence and experienced perspective had guided Jenna through countless difficult cases. Tonight, she needed that guidance more than usual.

As they settled into the patrol car, Jake behind the wheel, Jenna's phone rang. The caller ID displayed Chief Morgan's name.

"Sheriff Graves," she answered, putting the call on speaker for Jake to hear.

"Sheriff, glad I caught you." Morgan's voice crackled through the speaker, vibrating with excitement.

"We've got developments. That warrant paid off big time—Lynch's inventory is full of stolen merchandise.

And we just picked up Mickey Guest toting around a backpack full of electronics.

Guest just got out three months ago, and he's already back to his old tricks. ”

Jake raised an eyebrow, exchanging a glance with Jenna.

“That’s good work, Chief,” Jenna said. “What’s Guest saying?”

“Nothing yet—lawyered up immediately. But we’ve got him dead to rights on the stolen goods. I’m telling you, we’re closing in on this murder. Lynch and Guest are up to their necks in this.”

Jenna noted the chief’s enthusiasm with caution. “What’s Colonel Spelling’s take?”

A brief hesitation. “Spelling thinks we need more,” Morgan admitted reluctantly. “Says the connection to the murder is still circumstantial. But I can feel it—we’re on the right track.”

“Keep us posted,” Jenna said. “We’ll swing by first thing tomorrow.”

After ending the call, Jenna sat in silence for a moment, processing the information. Jake started the engine but didn’t immediately put the car in drive.

“Spelling’s right,” he said finally, voicing what they both were thinking. “It’s still circumstantial.”

Jenna nodded. “Morgan wants a neat solution. Criminals dealing in stolen goods, dispute over merchandise, murder follows. Simple.”

“But you don’t think it’s simple.”

“Do you?”

Jake’s hands flexed on the steering wheel. “No. There’s still something we’re missing.”

The shared understanding passed between them, a silent acknowledgment of the complexities that lay beneath the surface of this case. Jake pulled away from the curb, heading toward Frank’s house on the outskirts of town.

As they drove through the quiet streets of Trentville, Jenna’s mind sorted through the pieces of the puzzle—the murdered recluse with his vacuum tube obsession, the stolen electronics, Lynch’s involvement in the stolen goods operation, and beneath it all, the nagging sense that they hadn’t seen the end of it.

The road ahead disappeared beneath their headlights, one segment at a time, much like the investigation itself—revealing only what lay directly before them, the greater path still shrouded in darkness.

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Jake guided the patrol car through Trentville's quiet streets toward Frank Doyle's modest house at the edge of town.

Next to him, Jenna sat in contemplative silence, her profile illuminated by the occasional streetlights.

He found her attractive in a way that defied easy description—her sharp mind, her honesty, the mystery of her odd gifts, even the lines on her face that showed she had lived a complex and challenging life.

“You think Frank will have any insight on the case?” Jake asked, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between them.

Jenna turned slightly toward him. “Frank always has insight. Whether it's what we want to hear is another matter entirely.”

Jake grinned. In the two years since he'd moved to Trentville from Kansas City, he'd come to respect the former sheriff's straightforward approach.

Frank Doyle didn't sugarcoat, didn't equivocate.

He cut straight to the heart of matters with a precision born from decades of experience.

Frank had a way of seeing through pretense, of reading people with an accuracy that was almost unsettling.

Jake couldn't help but wonder what Frank saw when he looked at him.

When Jake pulled into the driveway of the modest one-story house, a warm glow emanated from the windows, spilling onto the well-kept lawn.

"He's expecting us," Jenna said, nodding toward the porch light that had just flickered on.

They made their way up the path to the porch and before they could knock, the door swung open, revealing Frank Doyle's tall frame.

"Come on in," Frank said, his weathered face breaking into a warm smile that softened the deep lines etched by years under the Missouri sun.

Jake followed Jenna into the simple but comfortable home—furniture that invited you to sit, bookshelves lined with volumes on law enforcement and local history, and walls adorned with photographs and commendations that told the story of a life well-lived.

Frank gestured toward the kitchen. "I was just about to make that tea."

The kitchen, like the rest of the house, was a testament to practicality. Clean countertops, a sturdy oak table with four chairs, and cookware that showed regular use. It wasn't stylish, but it was undeniably homey.

Jake took a seat at the table, watching as Frank filled a kettle and set it on the stove.

"Mayor giving you grief about the TV interview?" Frank asked, his back to them as he reached for mugs from a cabinet.

Jenna sighed. "Claire's concerned about public perception. She thinks a quick

resolution will put minds at ease.”

“Got any viable suspects?” Frank asked.

“We’ve actually got one in custody in Pinecrest, but ...” Jenna’s voice faded.

“I get the feeling you don’t think he’s good for it,” Frank said, finishing her thought.

“The evidence is circumstantial at best,” Jake offered.

Frank nodded, his gray eyes thoughtful as he gathered tea bags from a wooden box on the counter. “Sometimes circumstantial is all you get. But rushing to judgment rarely serves justice.”

The kettle began to whistle, its high-pitched sound cutting through the quiet kitchen. Frank moved it off the burner and poured steaming water into three mugs. The comforting aroma of chamomile and mint filled the air as he brought the mugs to the table.

Frank’s voice broke through the quiet, a gentle admonishment in his tone.

“Let these steep a bit,” he suggested, placing a steaming mug in front of both Jake and Jenna.

Then with a slight grunt, he bent down to pull out a dish from the refrigerator, its contents hidden by an opaque lid.

From one of the overhead cupboards that had seen better days, he pulled out a loaf of bread.

“From the looks of you two,” Frank said as he placed the items on the table, “You’ve

forgotten to eat.”

Jake hadn't realized how much his body craved sustenance until Frank pointed it out. The day had been long and arduous; food had been far from their minds.

Frank revealed what was in the dish - remains of a meatloaf that looked delicious. He also set out condiments along with plates and knives – an invitation to help themselves.

“You're right,” Jake admitted quietly as he reached for a slice of bread. He layered on some meatloaf, added mustard and ketchup before capping it off with another slice of bread—a simple sandwich but one that promised to fill him up adequately.

He glanced over at Jenna who seemed to be following suit, albeit more slowly, her sandwich smaller.

Her movements were mechanical as if she was only eating because she knew she should rather than because she wanted to.

He wondered if this was how it would always be - them grabbing meals in between cases.

But as he took a bite of his sandwich, he realized that it had been worth waiting for. Frank's meatloaf was excellent.

Frank sat down at the table, looking satisfied as they plunged in.

“That's new,” he said, nodding toward the brooch pinned to Jenna's uniform shirt. “Is that an opal?”

Her fingers moved to touch the brooch, a gesture that seemed almost unconscious. “It

is. I found it in an abandoned well in Whispering Pines.”

“The result of a dream?” Frank asked.

Jenna nodded. “The ghost of a teen named Patricia Gaines led me to it. I’m still not sure why or what it means, but...”

“But you’re hoping it might be connected to Piper,” Frank finished for her, his voice gentle.

Jake observed the subtle shift in Jenna’s expression – the flicker of hope in her emerald eyes, quickly tempered by years of disappointment. He knew how deeply her twin sister’s disappearance had affected her, how it had shaped her entire life since that day twenty years ago.

“I took it to Mr. Tyler’s pawnshop,” Jenna continued. “First time I’d been there in ages. He couldn’t tell me anything about it. He doesn’t remember Piper buying it from him.”

“Did you show it to your mother?” Frank asked, lifting his mug to blow softly across the surface of the hot tea.

“Yes. She didn’t recognize it.”

The disappointment in her voice was subtle but unmistakable. Jake resisted the urge to reach out, to offer some physical comfort. Instead, he took a sip of his tea, letting the warm liquid soothe his throat.

“Frank, does it look familiar to you at all?” Jenna asked, her tone carefully neutral.

Frank studied the brooch for a long moment, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Finally, he shook his head. "I can't say that I've ever seen it before. But that doesn't mean it's not significant. Let's put a pin in that for now. Tell me more about this body that was strapped to the radio tower."

Jake watched as Jenna visibly shifted gears, her posture straightening as she slipped back into sheriff mode.

"Marcus Derrick, 42, lived in a mobile home outside of Pinecrest," Jenna began. "Reclusive, paranoid about modern technology."

"He'd recently purchased an old vacuum-tube ham radio set at Howard Mitchell's estate sale," Jake added.

"Which brings us to Harris Lynch," Jenna said.

"Owner of Golden Legend Treasures in Pinecrest. Specializes in oddities and antiques, including old electronics. He had tried to buy that same ham-radio set from the estate sale. Lynch was angry about how Mitchell's daughter sold the radio to Derrick instead of to him.

Colonel Spelling and the Pinecrest police chief consider him a likely suspect. "

"But you don't share their opinion," Frank asked, a skeptical edge to his voice.

Jake exchanged a glance with Jenna. "The evidence is thin. "

"Doesn't sound like much of a motive," Frank said.

"No, and if the killer was Lynch," Jenna replied, "it seems odd that he didn't take the radio. It was still right there in Derrick's mobile home."

Frank took a long sip of his tea, his eyes thoughtful. “So you’ve got a paranoid recluse, a shopkeeper with a tenuous connection, and a body displayed in a way that suggests something more than a simple dispute over merchandise.”

“That about sums it up,” Jake said.

The conversation flowed smoothly between Jenna and Frank, years of shared experience creating a shorthand that Jake sometimes found himself envying.

They bounced theories back and forth, dissecting the case from every angle, challenging each other’s assumptions in a way that was both respectful and rigorous.

Jake contributed where he could, offering observations from their time in Pinecrest, but he found himself just quietly watching Jenna. In the warm light of Frank’s kitchen, with her guard lowered, she seemed different – not softer, exactly, but more accessible.

The determined sheriff was still there, but so was the woman who carried the weight of her sister’s absence, who sought connection and understanding in a world that had taken so much from her.

“The positioning of the body troubles me,” Frank said, pulling Jake’s attention back to the conversation. “Binding someone to a radio tower takes time, effort. It’s exposing yourself to potential discovery. Why take that risk?”

“Unless the display itself is the point,” Jenna suggested. “A statement of some kind.”

Frank nodded slowly. “Which raises the question – what statement could the killer be trying to make? And to whom? You think this could be the first of multiple killings?” It wasn’t really a question, and Frank didn’t treat it as one.

“Ritual displays like this are rarely one-and-done. There’s purpose behind them, a narrative the killer is trying to tell, a message to get out. ”

He looked directly at Jenna. “You need to be prepared for the possibility that Derrick is just the opening chapter.”

Jake watched as Jenna absorbed this, saw the subtle tightening around her eyes that betrayed her concern.

“Harris Lynch is the type that might get rough in a fit of passion,” she said finally. “But he doesn’t fit the profile of someone planning a series of murders.”

“No,” Frank agreed. “He doesn’t sound like it.”

They fell into silence for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts.

“If we’re dealing with a potential serial killer,” Jake said, breaking the silence, “what’s our next move?”

“Re-examine everything,” Frank advised. “Look deeper into Derrick’s background, his connections. Serial killers choose their victims for a reason, even if that reason only makes sense to them. It could even be impersonal in an important sense—someone who just happens to fulfill a purpose.”

Jenna nodded, reaching for her mug. “We’ll need to go back through his ham radio logs, see who he was communicating with. Maybe there’s something there we missed.”

As the conversation continued, Jake became increasingly aware of Frank’s gaze occasionally shifting to him.

There was something knowing in the older man's eyes, a hint of recognition that made Jake uncomfortable.

Was he that transparent? Could Frank see right through him to the feelings he harbored for Jenna – feelings he'd tried to keep professional, appropriate?

The realization brought a flush of warmth to Jake's face. He reached for his mug, using the action to break eye contact with Frank, who had the decency to suppress what might have been a smile.

As their meeting wound down, Jake saw the change in Jenna's demeanor. The tension that had been evident after their confrontation with Mayor Simmons had eased. Frank's steady presence, his practical wisdom, had centered her in a way that Jake recognized but couldn't quite replicate himself.

"It's getting late," Jenna finally said, glancing at her watch. "We should head out."

She got up and helped Frank clear the table. Jake offered to wash dishes, but Frank waved them away.

"Go home," he ordered. "Rest." He walked them to the door, his tall frame still straight despite his years. "Keep me posted," he said. "And Jenna—" he hesitated, then continued, "—sometimes what we're looking for isn't where we expect to find it."

Jake wasn't sure if Frank was referring to the case or to something more personal, but he saw Jenna nod in apparent understanding.

The drive back to Jenna's house was quiet, both of them processing the evening's discussion. The streets of Trentville were nearly deserted, most of the town already settled in for the night. Streetlights cast pools of yellow light at regular intervals,

creating a rhythm as they drove.

“Do you feel another dream coming on?” Jake asked finally, breaking the silence.

He’d initially been disturbed when Jenna first told him about her unusual gift – her ability to communicate with the dead through lucid dreams. But over time, he’d come to understand the burden it placed on her, the responsibility she felt toward those who sought her out.

Jenna didn’t answer immediately. When she did, her voice was thoughtful. “I’m not sure. They don’t exactly work on a schedule.”

“But if you could,” Jake pressed gently, “would you want to speak with Derrick again?”

She turned to look at him, her eyes shaded in the dim light of the car.

“Part of me hopes I can. Maybe I could get him to trust me enough to tell me more about who did this to him.” She paused.

“But another part dreads the possibility that the next dead person to visit me might be another victim we haven’t found yet. ”

“We’ll find whoever did this,” Jake said, the promise in his voice firm and sincere. “Before they can hurt anyone else.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Sandra Reeves moved through the darkened hallway of Melody Forge Studios, enjoying the stillness of the late hour.

This was her favorite time—when the day’s sessions had ended, when the musicians and technicians had departed, and the building belonged to her alone.

She paused at the threshold of Studio A, breathing in the lingering scent of coffee and the subtle electrical warmth of equipment that had been running all day.

The recording room was dim, moonlight spilling through the high windows and catching on the brass hardware of instruments left in stands.

A guitar gleamed in the corner, patient and waiting for tomorrow’s session.

Sandra flipped a single switch, bathing the space in soft amber light from the recessed fixtures.

“Goodnight, old friend,” she whispered to the empty room.

Melody Forge Studios sat on the outskirts of Pinecrest, nestled between aging warehouses that provided both privacy and the acoustics she prized.

What had once been a forgotten industrial space she’d transformed into a haven for musicians, both established and aspiring.

The exterior remained deliberately understated, but inside, behind sound-dampening walls and specialized doors, she’d created something magical.

Sandra's routine never varied. She moved from studio to studio, carefully powering down mixing boards, checking that microphones were properly stored, and ensuring instruments were secure.

Each step was performed with precision born from years of practice.

The gradual diminishing of electrical hums—the studio's heartbeat—marked her progress through the building.

In the control room, she ran her hand over the gleaming console one last time, pressing buttons in careful sequence.

One by one, the indicator lights faded, leaving only the faint red glow of standby mode.

She gathered scattered coffee mugs left by the day's clients and stacked them by the small kitchenette sink.

Washing them would be tomorrow's first task.

As Sandra entered the lobby, her gaze settled on her newest acquisition—an antique phonograph she'd purchased from Howard Mitchell's estate sale just a few days ago.

Unlike the sleek, modern equipment that dominated her studio, the phonograph stood proudly anachronistic with its large wooden base and gleaming brass horn speaker curving elegantly upward like a morning glory blossom opening to the sun.

She approached it reverently, reaching out to feel the smooth wooden edge polished by hands from another era. Howard had kept it in immaculate condition. The cylinder-playing mechanism looked as though it could have been manufactured yesterday rather than over a century ago.

“Worth every penny,” she murmured, remembering the raised eyebrows and gentle ribbing from her sound engineers when she’d had it delivered.

“What’s next, Sandra? Wax tablets and a stylus?” Tony had joked, while Melissa had simply shaken her head. “You and your vintage toys.”

But they didn’t understand. This wasn’t just an antique; it was a piece of musical history—a direct connection to the pioneers who had first captured sound and preserved it for future generations.

For Sandra, who had dedicated her life to recording and producing music, these early devices held an almost sacred significance.

From the collection of cylinders she’d also purchased at the estate sale, Sandra selected one labeled in faded script: “In the Good Old Summer Time — Collins & Harlan, 1911.” She’d been saving this one for a quiet moment like this, when she could fully appreciate it without interruption.

Carefully, she wound the mechanism, feeling the spring tighten under her touch. The mechanical resistance felt satisfying, physical in a way digital technology never could be. She placed the wax cylinder onto its mount and gently lowered the needle.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a scratchy hiss emerged from the brass horn, followed by the tinny, distant voices of men long dead.

The melody stuttered into existence, imperfect and magical.

Despite the primitive recording technology, the joy in the performers’ voices traveled clearly across the century, which separated them from Sandra.

She closed her eyes, swaying gently to the rhythm. Almost unconsciously, her own

voice rose to harmonize with the recording, filling in the gaps where time had degraded the cylinder's surface. Her rich alto wrapped around the scratchy tenor voices, complementing without overpowering them.

For a brief, perfect moment, Sandra sang with ghosts:

“In the good old summer time,

In the good old summer time,

Strolling through the shady lanes

With your baby mine ...”

When was the last time she'd really sung? Not the absent-minded humming while adjusting levels or the demonstration phrases to show a nervous young vocalist what she wanted, but truly singing with her whole self? The realization made her throat tighten. Years. It had been years.

The phonograph's scratchy rendition continued as memories washed over her.

Spotlights so bright they turned the audience into a sea of darkness.

The weight of sequined gowns. The electric anticipation before stepping onto stages in cities whose names now blurred together.

The power of holding a thousand strangers captive with nothing but her voice.

And then, the gradual faltering. Notes that once came effortlessly, requiring more and more effort. The specialist in Chicago with his concerned frown. “Vocal cord nodules. Not uncommon in performers who push too hard for too long.”

Sandra's hand drifted unconsciously to her throat as the memory of that diagnosis resurfaced.

The treatments had helped, but her range had never fully returned.

Rather than cling to a diminished version of her former glory, she'd chosen to step back, to channel her passion into helping others achieve what she once had.

The cylinder recording reached its conclusion, the final notes fading into a soft scratching sound before silence reclaimed the lobby. Sandra opened her eyes, the spell broken. She carefully lifted the needle and removed the cylinder, returning it to its protective sleeve.

"Thank you, gentlemen," she said softly to the long-dead performers, feeling oddly comforted by their brief company across time.

The wall clock read 11:42 PM. Later than she'd realized. Sandra gathered her shoulder bag and keys, making a final sweep of the lobby. She adjusted the thermostat, checked that the alarm system was ready to arm, and switched off all but the security lights.

At the main entrance, she punched in the alarm code, which gave her sixty seconds to exit before activating. The familiar beeping began its countdown as she stepped outside into the cool night air, locking the door behind her.

The parking lot sat in dim half-light. The single lamppost near the entrance cast more shadows than illumination, its reach not extending to the far corner where her car waited. The neighboring warehouses loomed like sleeping giants, their darkened windows reflecting nothing.

Sandra started toward her car, her footsteps crunching loudly on the gravel. The

sound seemed to amplify in the stillness, punctuating the cricket song that rose from the grassy areas beyond the lot.

Halfway to her vehicle, a prickling sensation crawled up her spine—a feeling that she wasn't alone. She slowed, suddenly aware of how isolated she was. She slowed, feeling her isolation. At this hour, the industrial area was deserted.

Had that shadow by the dumpster moved? Sandra squinted, trying to pierce the darkness.

“Hello?” she called, immediately regretting drawing attention to herself. Her voice sounded small against the vastness of the night.

She quickened her pace, fumbling in her bag for her keys. The electronic fob felt reassuringly solid in her palm. Just thirty more steps to the car. Twenty.

A scuffing sound behind her made Sandra whirl around. A figure detached itself from the dark near the building, moving toward her with purposeful strides.

“Sorry, we're closed,” she called, trying to keep her voice steady. “If you need to book studio time, you can call during business hours tomorrow.”

The figure didn't respond but continued advancing. As he stepped into a patch of ambient light, Sandra's mouth went dry. She thought she recognized him, but couldn't remember from where or when.

Before she could process this recognition, he lunged forward with startling speed, reaching out, bearing held some kind of cord toward her throat. In the brief moment their gazes locked, she saw something cold and determined in his eyes that sent ice through her veins.

Sandra's body reacted before her mind could catch up. She twisted sideways, swinging her heavy shoulder bag in a wild arc. It connected with the side of his face, throwing him off balance.

She didn't waste her advantage. Sandra turned and ran, her heart hammering against her ribs. Her car was still too far. The studio was locked and alarmed. The open area of the parking lot offered no protection.

Sandra darted between two buildings into a narrow alley barely wider than her shoulders.

Rough brick scraped her arms as she squeezed through.

The passage opened into a small, dimly lit courtyard that appeared forgotten by all except the occasional graffiti artist whose work faintly glowed on several walls.

On the far end of the courtyard stood a warehouse that had been abandoned for years.

She risked a glance backward. The man had paused at the alley entrance, seemingly evaluating whether to follow her through the tight space or go around. The brief reprieve wouldn't last long.

Then Sandra spotted a partially open loading dock door ahead, its bottom edge tilted up about three feet from the ground. Without hesitation, she dropped to her knees and rolled beneath it, scraping her back on the rough metal edge.

Inside, darkness enveloped her. She pushed on the loading dock door, hoping to close it behind her, but it was frozen in place.

As her eyes adjusted to the faint light coming through high windows, Sandra made out looming shapes of old machinery and stacked crates among dense clusters of

cobwebs.

She crouched behind a large wooden crate, trying to control her ragged breathing. The exertion and fear made her heart pound so loudly she worried he might hear it. Who was this man? What did he want from her?

Got to get help, she thought, pulling out her phone to dial 911. But her heart sank when she saw that there was no signal. The metallic walls of the warehouse blocked out any communication with the outside.

Where was the man who had followed her now?

A scraping sound from the loading dock door answered her unspoken question. He had found her entry point. Then silence. Sandra knew he was inside, listening just as intently as she was.

Sandra scanned the dimness for an exit. Emergency door, another loading dock, anything. Near the far wall, she glimpsed a long-unlit exit sign. If she could reach it...

A stack of boxes crashed nearby, making her jump. He was systematically searching the area, getting closer. She couldn't stay hidden forever.

Taking a deep breath, Sandra removed her shoes, holding them in one hand to silence her movements. She began creeping along the perimeter of crates, using them as shields between herself and where she thought the man was searching.

When she reached a clear stretch of floor between her position and the exit, Sandra hesitated. The open space offered no cover. She'd be completely exposed for at least ten seconds—more than enough time for him to spot her.

She had no choice. Gathering her courage, Sandra sprinted toward the exit.

Heavy footsteps pounded behind her. The exit door was just ahead, its push bar promising safety on the other side. She reached for it—

Something hard struck her back, sending her sprawling.

Sandra's chin hit the concrete floor, pain exploding through her jaw as her shoes flew out of her hand. Before she could recover, a weight pressed down on her, knees digging into her spine.

In one fluid motion, her attacker wrapped something thin and tight around her neck. That cord. Sandra clawed at it, but he pulled it tighter, cutting off her air.

Her vision began to swim, dark patches appearing at the edges. Her lungs burned, desperate for oxygen. She thrashed wildly, but her strength was fading quickly.

As consciousness began to slip away, strange thoughts floated through Sandra's mind. Who was this man? What was worth killing her for?

Her hands fell limply to her sides. The warehouse ceiling above her blurred, darkness closing in from all directions. Her last conscious thought was of the century-old voices on the cylinder recording—how they had continued to exist long after their bodies had returned to dust.

Then everything went black.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The transition happened like it always did—Jenna’s consciousness slipping sideways into that peculiar state where dream and awareness merged. Her breathing slowed, her body went still, but her mind sharpened to a crystalline clarity that only came in these lucid moments.

Jenna recognized the sensation immediately. She was dreaming, yet fully aware—the state in which the dead sometimes found her.

The bedroom faded away, replaced by something strange and vast that stretched before her: a jungle of audio equipment extending as far as her eyes could see, devices from every era arranged in towering columns and precarious stacks that defied the laws of physics.

Moving ahead, she came across a colossal reel-to-reel tape recorder.

Its metallic spools shimmered in the spectral radiance that seemed to come from nowhere, yet bathed everything in a subtle glow tinged with blue.

Then she became aware of other objects around her, a collection that reminded her of Howard Mitchell’s estate.

Radios from the 1920s leaned against modern amplifiers.

Ancient phonographs with enormous horns stood beside sleek digital mixing boards.

Vacuum tubes glowed with amber light next to LED displays blinking patterns of red and green.

Cables snaked along the ground like dormant serpents, connecting impossibly matched technologies across decades of innovation.

“Marcus?” Jenna called softly, her voice absorbed by the walls of equipment.

She had hoped to encounter him here—the murder victim who had been too frantic and paranoid to talk to her when she’d met him in that earlier dream. Perhaps in this electronic wilderness, a reflection of his passion, he might finally be willing to offer clues about his killer.

But no response came. Just the faint electrical hum of dormant equipment.

Then, cutting through the silence, a voice began to sing. A woman’s voice, clear and melodious, without accompaniment:

“In the quiet of the night, we find our way,

Through the shadows, love lights up our day.

With every tear and smile, we gather strength,

Our hearts beating as one, across any length.”

Jenna froze, the lyrics washing over her like a physical wave. A visceral recognition jolted through her body, followed by a surge of emotion so strong it nearly knocked her backward.

“Whispers of Forever.”

She whispered the title aloud, her throat tightening. Piper’s favorite song. Her sister had played it endlessly, singing along in their shared bedroom, insisting that someday

she would perform it at her wedding.

For one dizzying, hope-filled moment, Jenna thought the voice might be Piper's.

But as quickly as the thought formed, it dissolved. No, she knew this voice. The timbre, the control, the subtle vibrato. This was Sandra Reeves, the once-famous singer who had recorded the original.

Complex feelings flooded through Jenna—disappointment that it wasn't her sister, curiosity about Sandra's presence in her dream space, and an underlying current of dread. If Sandra was here, in this place where Jenna communed with the dead...

She pushed the thought away, focusing instead on following the music.

Jenna began to navigate through the maze of equipment, drawn toward the voice like a sailor to a siren's call. She squeezed between towering speakers taller than houses. She stepped over tangled cables thick as her wrist. She ducked beneath suspended microphones that hung like strange metal fruit.

The journey felt both physical and impossible at the same time. Her feet moved, one in front of the other, yet distances stretched and compressed in the way that only happened in dreams. A step might carry her inches or yards, with no logic to the difference.

As she moved, the voice grew stronger. The melody seemed to guide her, pulling her forward through the electronic wilderness. The voice swelled, drawing Jenna around a corner formed by a wall of vintage amplifiers stacked higher than seemed safe.

And there she was.

Sandra Reeves sat before an antique Edison cylinder phonograph, its large brass horn

gleaming in the dream-light.

Her eyes were closed in concentration as she leaned toward the horn, singing directly into it as if recording.

The wooden case of the machine had the deep, rich patina that came only from decades of careful handling, and the cylinder inside whirred steadily, capturing her voice just as it would have done in 1900.

Jenna paused, not wanting to interrupt. Sandra's profile was lit from some unseen source, highlighting the elegant curve of her neck as she sang. Though older than in her publicity photos, she retained the presence of a performer, her posture perfect even in this intimate, solitary moment.

Sandra continued, unaware of her audience.

“And we'll rise, with the whispers of forever,

Through the storms, we'll stand together.

In the echoes of our dreams, we'll carry on,

Side by side, our love will be strong.”

The final notes lingered in the air, almost visible in the strange light of the dream. Sandra reached forward and switched off the machine with a decisive click. The abrupt silence felt almost physical.

“That was beautiful,” Jenna said quietly.

Sandra turned, showing no surprise at Jenna's sudden appearance—the dream logic

making such things unremarkable.

“Thank you,” she replied, her smile tinged with melancholy. “It’s not what it once was, of course. That’s why I retired. The voice is the first thing to go, you know.”

“I remember your songs,” Jenna said, stepping closer. “I used to hear them all the time when I was younger. My sister especially loved ‘Whispers of Forever.’”

“Did she?” Sandra’s smile warmed. “That’s lovely to hear. Would you like to see something magical?”

Without waiting for an answer, she reset the phonograph, cranking the handle to wind its spring mechanism. Then she positioned the needle and started it again.

The scratchy, ethereal sound of Sandra’s own voice—the recording she had just made—emerged from the horn. The quality was primitive compared to modern recordings, yet it possessed a haunting authenticity that digital perfection often lacked.

“Isn’t that marvelous?” Sandra’s face lit with wonder and joy. “Just think—in 1899, this would have seemed like sorcery. A human voice, captured like a bird in a cage, ready to sing again and again long after the moment has passed.”

Her eyes gleamed with an almost childlike delight.

“We take it for granted now, don’t we? The preservation of sound. But imagine hearing your own voice played back to you for the very first time in human history. The miracle of it.”

Jenna nodded, caught up in Sandra’s enthusiasm despite the strange circumstances.

Sandra reached beneath the table and produced a wooden box containing dozens of wax cylinders, each in its own small container.

“This one is from 1904,” she said, selecting a cylinder and carefully placing it on the machine. “Listen.”

She cranked the handle once more and set the needle. A tinny, distant-sounding orchestral introduction crackled to life, followed by a male tenor singing “In the Good Old Summer Time.” The voice emerged from a century past, preserved in wax and now released into Jenna’s dream.

As the old recording played, Sandra began to sing along, her voice harmonizing with the long-dead tenor. The juxtaposition created an eerie duet across time—one voice present and vibrant in the dream world, one a ghostly echo from the more distant past.

“In the good old summer time,

In the good old summer time,

Strolling thro’ the shady lanes

With your baby mine ...”

The hairs on Jenna’s arms rose as she watched. The dreamlike quality of their interaction, Sandra’s presence in this strange environment, the focus on preserved voices from the past—it all suddenly clicked into a disturbing conclusion.

If Sandra Reeves was here, in this dream space where Jenna had previously encountered the spirits of the deceased, it could only mean one thing.

Sandra must be dead.

The realization settled over Jenna like a cold shroud. She looked at the singer with new eyes, noting now the strange quality of light that seemed to emanate from within her rather than fall upon her from outside.

“Sandra,” Jenna said gently, interrupting the singing. “What happened to you?”

The singer stopped, looking puzzled by the question. Her brow furrowed slightly.

“What do you mean?”

“How did you get here?” Jenna pressed, her voice soft but insistent.

Sandra looked around at the endless jungle of audio equipment, seeming to truly notice it for the first time.

“I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “I woke up from a nightmare a little while ago—an awful nightmare.” Her voice grew distant, her eyes unrousing. “I remember only impressions now.”

“Tell me about the nightmare,” Jenna urged, her sheriff’s instincts fully engaged despite the surreal setting.

Sandra wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly looking smaller, vulnerable.

“I was being pursued through the street at night,” she said, her voice dropping to just above a whisper. “I ran through a narrow passage between two buildings. I remember trying to hide in a warehouse.”

Jenna’s heart began to beat faster. “What else do you remember?”

Sandra seemed to consider the question for a moment. “I tried to call for help.”

“You screamed?” Jenna asked.

“No. On my phone. But it didn’t work ... I think it was because of the warehouse walls.”

Sandra paused for a moment, as if struggling to remember.

“I took off my shoes,” Sandra continued, looking down at her bare feet as if noticing them for the first time. “I thought I could move more quietly that way. But he found me anyway.”

“He?” Jenna asked.

Sandra’s hand went unconsciously to her throat. “He seized me from behind. I felt something around my neck—a cord of some kind. I couldn’t breathe.”

Jenna fought to keep her expression neutral, to not show the horror rising within her as Sandra described what was clearly not a nightmare but her actual murder.

“I remember going limp,” Sandra continued, her voice becoming mechanical, as if reading from a script.

“While he bound my hands and feet to something hard and metallic. I couldn’t move.

And while he tied me up, he kept babbling, saying crazy things.

Something about astral voices. And a midnight voice.

Also something maybe having to lure the midnight voice ‘to where it all started,’ the

place where she ‘spoke to the world.’ None of it made sense to me. ”

“Did you see his face?” Jenna asked, the question urgent now. “Sandra, did you see who attacked you?”

Sandra looked at Jenna with confusion, as if the question made no sense.

“What does it matter?” she asked. “It was just a dream.”

“It matters,” Jenna insisted, stepping closer. “It matters very much. Please try to remember.”

Sandra’s gaze drifted past Jenna to some point in the distance.

“I only glimpsed his face,” she said absently. “It seemed familiar somehow, but I couldn’t remember from where or when.” She shook her head. “It’s slipping away from me now, like dreams do.”

“Think harder,” Jenna urged. “Was there anything distinctive about him? His voice, his clothes, anything at all?”

But Sandra didn’t seem to hear the questions anymore. Her attention had returned to the phonograph, which continued to play the century-old recording. She began to sing along once more, her voice blending with the ghostly tenor as if Jenna had ceased to exist.

“In the good old summer time, in the good old summer time...”

The edges of the scene began to blur. The towering stacks of equipment seemed to lose their solidity, becoming transparent, then fading altogether. Sandra’s voice grew fainter, though her lips continued to move in song.

“Sandra!” Jenna called, reaching out, but her hand passed through the singer’s shoulder like smoke. “Sandra, where are you? How can I find you?”

But the dream was collapsing now, the entire setting constructed of the dead woman’s memory dissolving into darkness. Sandra’s form became indistinct, then vanished entirely, her voice the last thing to fade away.

Jenna’s eyes snapped open. She lay in her bed, early morning light pouring through the window. Her heart hammered in her chest, and a thin film of sweat covered her skin. She sat up abruptly, pushing her short chestnut hair away from her face, struggling to clear her mind.

She had received a visitation.

Sandra Reeves was dead, murdered in the same manner as Marcus Derrick.

Although Jenna now had a name for the killer’s latest victim, she knew almost nothing else. No location, no time frame, not even a clear description of the killer—just the certainty that a serial killer was at work and would not stop with the two she had seen in the dreamworld.

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Jenna's hands trembled slightly as she pulled her uniform shirt over her head, the fabric catching on her damp skin.

The images from her lucid dream clung to her consciousness like cobwebs—Sandra Reeves singing into that antique phonograph, unaware she was dead, describing what had happened to her in what she believed was her own dream.

“Jenna?” Jake's voice was rough with sleep but instantly alert. “Everything okay?”

“I need to see you. And Frank. It's important.” She tried to keep her voice calm, professional, but the urgency bled through.

“Another dream?” he asked quietly.

“Yes. I'll explain when I see you. Can you pick me up in twenty? I'll call Frank.”

“On my way.”

Jenna ended the call and immediately dialed Frank. He answered on the fourth ring, his voice carrying the gravel of early morning.

“Frank, it's Jenna. I need to talk to you. Can Jake and I come over?”

“Is this about the same murder case?” Frank asked. “Something new?”

“Yes, but it's complicated. I can't explain over the phone.”

A beat of silence, then Frank's voice softened. "I'll put on coffee."

"Thanks. We'll be there soon."

She set the phone down and finished dressing, her movements automatic while her mind replayed fragments of the dream. Sandra's voice, hauntingly beautiful as it filled that strange dreamscape packed with audio equipment. And the song—Piper's favorite.

Jenna splashed cold water on her face, the shock of it momentarily clearing the fog of fatigue. She hadn't slept well even before the dream invaded her night, and she'd gotten very little sleep the night before. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, showing the toll this case was taking.

Soon the familiar rumble of Jake's squad car sounded outside her window. She grabbed her badge, gun, and jacket, locking the front door behind her.

Jake waited in the driver's seat, his face betraying concern beneath his professional demeanor. The interior smelled of coffee—he'd brought a thermos, and he'd already poured two cups. Steam rose from the travel mugs wedged in the console.

"Thought you might need this," he said, nodding toward the coffee as she slid into the passenger seat.

"You're a lifesaver. Frank's making a pot for us, but I need to wake up before we get there."

Jake pulled away from the curb, navigating the quiet streets of early morning Trentville. "So, another lucid dream?"

Jenna took a long sip of coffee before answering. "Yes, and it's got me in a real

quandary. I need to talk to both you and Frank about it. Need your help figuring out what to do.”

“That bad?”

“That complicated.”

She stared out the window at the town slowly coming to life—a newspaper carrier tossing papers onto porches, a few dedicated joggers braving the crisp morning air. “I think we have another victim. Actually, I’m sure of it.”

“I was afraid of that,” Jake replied, but he didn’t press her for details. They drove the rest of the way to Frank’s house in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

They parked in Frank’s driveway and hurried toward the house, where the front door swung open just before they reached it. As they greeted Frank and stepped inside, the savory aromas of coffee and something else cooking greeted them.

“Come on in,” Frank said as he headed back to the kitchen. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

They followed him to the warm oasis where they had sat and talked and eaten sandwiches just last night. Frank moved with surprising agility between the stove and counter, spatula in hand, dressed in worn jeans and a faded Trentville Sheriff’s Department sweatshirt that predated Jenna’s career.

“Figured you two probably haven’t eaten this morning,” Frank said, expertly flipping an omelet. “Can’t solve murders on empty stomachs. It’s time the two of you learned the importance of regular meals.”

The domestic normalcy provided a stark contrast to the reason for their visit. Jenna

felt the tension in her shoulders ease slightly as she slipped into one of the familiar wooden chairs at his kitchen table.

“You didn’t have to cook for us, Frank,” she protested weakly.

“Sure I did.” He slid perfectly folded omelets onto three mismatched plates. “Besides, gives me something to do while you tell me what’s got you showing up at my door at the crack of dawn.”

Jake settled beside Jenna, accepting the plate Frank handed him with a nod of thanks. “Smells amazing.”

Frank poured coffee into three mugs—one advertising a fishing tackle shop, another from the Trentville Fire Department fundraiser, and the third bearing a faded Missouri State University logo. The coffee was dark and rich, steam carrying its robust aroma across the table.

“Now,” Frank said, setting the coffee pot back on its warmer and taking his seat, “what was this latest dream all about? Who visited you?”

Jenna took a fortifying sip of coffee before setting her mug down. “Sandra Reeves.”

Frank’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. “Sandra Reeves? The singer?”

Jenna nodded, pushing her omelet around her plate. “It was strange, even for these dreams. I was surrounded by audio equipment—phonographs, radios, recording devices. Like I was standing in the middle of Howard Mitchell’s collection.”

“So this was related to the dream about Marcus Derrick?”

“Well, yes,” she replied. “I mean, that one was radio parts, and the equipment in this

one was different, but both included a lot of old stuff.”

“Some kind of connection,” Jake muttered. “But go on, what happened?”

“Then I heard singing—a woman’s voice performing ‘Whispers of Forever.’“

Frank’s eyes widened slightly. “That was Piper’s favorite song.”

“You remember that?” Jenna asked, surprised.

“Course I do. You two would play that record until your father threatened to throw the turntable out the window.” Frank’s smile was tinged with sadness. “Beautiful song.”

“It is,” Jake agreed. “My mother was a fan too.”

Jenna continued, describing how she had found Sandra among the equipment, singing into the horn of an antique phonograph. “She played her recording back to me, then put on a different cylinder with ‘In the Good Old Summer Time’ and sang along with it too.”

“Was she...” Jake searched for the right words. “Did she know she was dead?”

Jenna shook her head. “No. Like Marcus, she didn’t seem to know where she was.

Although she wasn’t alarmed like he was.

” She paused, gathering her thoughts. “But she told me something important. She described being attacked by someone she couldn’t identify and choked with a cord.

Said she was bound with cords to something hard. ”

“Bound?” Frank repeated, his brow furrowing.

“Yes. She thought it was a dream she’d had—waking up tied to something. But the way she described it...” Jenna pushed her plate away, her appetite vanishing. “I think she was describing her own murder and what happened right after she was dead.”

The kitchen fell silent except for the gentle ticking of the old wall clock and the distant singing of birds outside the window. Morning sunlight streamed through the curtains.

“The dream ended before I could get any more details,” Jenna added. “But I’m certain of what it means. Sandra Reeves has been killed and her body tied up somewhere, just like Marcus Derrick.”

Jake set his fork down, his omelet half-eaten. “When was the last time either of you heard anything about Sandra Reeves? I haven’t seen her name in years.”

“That’s because she pretty much disappeared from public view,” Frank said, leaning back in his chair. “She was big in the 90s, had a couple of hits. But her voice started failing her—a problem with her vocal cords, I think. She moved back to Pinecrest about five years ago.”

“Pinecrest?” Jenna asked sharply. “You’re sure she’s in Pinecrest?”

Frank nodded. “Born and raised there. After her singing career ended, she opened a recording studio. Melody Forge, I think it’s called. She works with local musicians, helps them record demos. Keeps a low profile these days.”

Jenna’s mind raced. “Her body is somewhere, bound to something solid. Given what happened the first time, possibly a radio tower or something similar.”

“Damn it,” Jake muttered.

“We need to contact Pinecrest PD,” Frank said. “Let them know—” He stopped, realization dawning. “Except we can’t tell them how we know.”

“Exactly.” Jenna ran a hand through her short hair. “How do I explain this? ‘Check your radio towers because a dead woman told me in a dream that’s where she might be?’”

“What about Colonel Spelling?” Jake suggested. “If another body’s been discovered, he’d be looped in.”

Jenna nodded, reaching for her phone. “If Sandra’s body has been found, that’s the first thing he’ll mention.”

She dialed Spelling’s number, putting the call on speaker so Jake and Frank could hear.

“Sheriff Graves,” Spelling answered crisply. “I was about to call you.”

Jenna’s pulse quickened. “Colonel. Any developments I should know about?”

“Indeed. Chief Morgan and I will be spending the day building our case against Harris Lynch. The evidence is compelling.”

Jenna’s eyes met Jake’s across the table. “So nothing new has come to your attention? No other... incidents?”

“Nothing beyond what we discussed yesterday. Morgan is confident Lynch is our man. I’m yet to be convinced, but I’m open to the possibility.”

Jenna knew that, if her dream was accurate, Harris Lynch wasn't the killer. But she couldn't say that.

"I see," she managed. "Keep me updated."

"Will do, Sheriff."

The call ended, leaving the kitchen in uncomfortable silence.

"Lynch couldn't have killed Sandra," Jake said, voicing what they were all thinking. "He's been in a cell since soon after Marcus Derrick's body was found."

"But we can't tell Spelling that because we can't explain how we know Sandra's dead," Frank added, his expression grim.

The ticking of the clock seemed to grow louder, punctuating the gravity of their situation. Frank, usually ready with advice, looked as perplexed as Jenna felt.

"So what's our next step?" Jake asked, pushing his plate away.

"We need to go to Pinecrest," Jenna decided. "If Sandra's body is anywhere in that area, bound to something like she described, there is a serial killer at work. We need to figure this out before he strikes again."

"Jurisdictional nightmare," Frank warned. "Pinecrest PD won't take kindly to Genesius County Sheriff poking around without cause."

"I know." Jenna rubbed her temples, feeling the beginning of a headache. "But what choice do we have? We can't sit on this information."

"Could call in an anonymous tip," Jake suggested. "Get them searching without

revealing how we know.”

“And if they don’t take it seriously?” Jenna countered. “Or worse, if they do and find her body but miss crucial evidence because they’re not looking for the right things?”

The three of them fell silent, each weighing the impossible situation.

“We check it out ourselves,” Jenna finally said. “Quietly. If we find something, then we figure out a plausible way to explain our presence and the discovery.”

Frank nodded slowly. “Not by the book, but neither is this whole situation.”

They finished their coffee, the remainder of their breakfast forgotten. As Jenna and Jake prepared to leave, Frank walked them to the door.

“Be careful out there,” he said, his voice carrying the weight of years of similar warnings. “Whatever’s happening in Pinecrest, it could be bigger than anything we’ve seen before.”

“We will,” Jenna assured him, squeezing his arm gently.

As they stepped onto the porch, the morning sun cast a different light on the day. Jake walked on ahead, giving Jenna a moment with Frank.

“You remember what I said about you two?” Frank asked quietly, his eyes flicking toward Jake.

Jenna felt heat rise to her cheeks. “This isn’t the time, Frank.”

“Yeah, well don’t drag things out with excuses, Jenna.” Frank’s expression softened. “Life’s short. Don’t waste it pretending not to feel what you feel.”

She didn't respond, but Frank's words followed her down the steps to where Jake waited by the patrol car.

For a moment, as Jake held the passenger door open for her, their eyes met.

Something unspoken passed between them—concern, partnership, and something deeper that Jenna wasn't ready to think about yet.

The moment broke as Jenna slid into the seat.

Jake closed her door and circled to the driver's side.

As they pulled away from Frank's house, Jenna pushed aside the complicated emotions stirred by Frank's words.

The case demanded her full attention. The truth about Sandra Reeves—and whoever was responsible for her death—was waiting in Pinecrest.

The patrol car headed down the quiet county road, carrying them toward an investigation they couldn't officially conduct, searching for a victim they couldn't explain knowing about, racing against a killer they couldn't identify ... hoping to save the life of a target as yet unknown.

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The county line passed beneath their wheels with nothing but a small green sign to mark it. Now Jenna and Jake were now officially out of their jurisdiction, pursuing a hunch based solely on her dream—something that wouldn't hold up in any court or official report.

“We’re stepping on thin ice here,” Jake said, breaking the silence that had lingered since they’d left Trentville. “If Morgan finds out we’re poking around Cable County without telling him...”

“I know,” Jenna said, her eyes fixed on the approaching town. “But if we’re right, if Sandra Reeves is—” She couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence.

Jake nodded, understanding the unspoken. “And if we’re wrong, we make some casual excuse for being here? Or apologize for overstepping and go home with our tails between our legs?”

“I’m not wrong.” The certainty in her voice surprised even her. The dream had been too vivid, too detailed—Sandra’s terror, her flight through the darkness, the phonograph playing that old-time song. “I just can’t explain why I feel so sure about this one.”

The GPS directed them toward the outskirts of town, where warehouses and industrial buildings replaced the quaint storefronts of downtown Pinecrest. Melody Forge Studios stood between two larger structures, a converted warehouse with a modern glass entrance added to its brick facade.

“Not exactly what I pictured for a recording studio,” Jake observed as he pulled into

the small parking lot where several cars were already parked.

They approached the glass doors, which slid open automatically.

The lobby was modestly furnished with vintage-inspired music posters and comfortable seating.

A man paced near the reception desk, phone pressed to his ear.

He looked up at their entrance, his expression shifting from hope to disappointment.

“I’ll call you back,” he said into the phone before pocketing it. “Can I help you?”

Jenna stepped forward, extending her hand. “Sheriff Jenna Graves, Genesius County. This is Deputy Hawkins.”

The man extended his hand towards them, an inquisitive look in his eyes. “I’m Tony Silke,” he said.

Tony was in his early forties, with thinning hair. His casual attire—jeans and a faded band t-shirt—contrasted with the anxious energy radiating from him.

“We’re looking for Sandra Reeves,” Jenna said, watching his reaction carefully. “Is she around?”

Tony seemed to wilt at the question, his shoulders drooping noticeably. “No,” he said, a note of worry creeping into his voice. “What’s this about? Did you two have a meeting scheduled with her?”

“No, we had just hoped to find her here,” Jenna replied.

“Uh, you said Sheriff? Genesius County? Has something happened?”

“We’re just following up on a case from our jurisdiction,” Jake said hastily. “We’d hoped to talk with Ms. Reeves about it.”

“You seem worried,” Jenna observed. “When was the last time you saw her?”

Tony sighed heavily, raking a hand through his hair in frustration. “The last time I saw Sandra was yesterday evening around seven,” he admitted. “She stayed behind to finish mixing a track. She was supposed to be here this morning for a session with a local band at nine.”

He paused, shaking his head slightly. “She’s never missed an appointment in the five years I’ve known her. I tried calling her phone—more times than I can count. It keeps going straight to voicemail.”

“And all of this is out of character for Sandra?” Jake asked gently.

Tony nodded emphatically. “Completely,” he confirmed. “Sandra’s always been reliable – it’s what she’s known for around here.” He paused before adding quietly, “She once came in sick as a dog because she didn’t want to let down a client who’d driven three hours for their session.”

Jenna offered Tony an encouraging nod and motioned for him to go on.

“I called the Pinecrest Police Department,” he confessed, frustration seeping into his tone. “But they didn’t seem too concerned. Told me adults go off-grid all the time, maybe she had a date, all that crap.”

His eyes darted towards the parking lot visible through the studio window. “But her car...the little blue sedan, it’s still out there in the lot.” His voice cracked slightly,

“Something’s not right, I just know it.”

As Tony was explaining his concern, something across the lobby caught Jenna’s attention. Her breath caught in her throat. Sitting on a vintage table in the corner was an antique phonograph, its brass horn gleaming under the recessed lighting.

Tony gave Jenna and Jake a curious look. “But you said you’re from Genesis County? Why are you looking for Sandra? Do you know something about ...?”

Barely registering that Tony was still speaking, Jenna moved toward the phonograph.

It was definitely the phonograph from her dream, she realized when she got closer. The polished wood base, the intricate floral pattern etched into the horn—every detail matched what she’d seen when Sandra visited her in her dream.

“Sheriff?” Jake’s voice sounded distant.

She turned back to find both men watching her, Jake with understanding, Tony looking confused.

“This phonograph,” she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. “Is it Sandra’s?”

Tony looked surprised by the question. “Yes, she bought it a few days ago. Bit of an impulse purchase, but she collects vintage audio equipment. Said it was too beautiful to pass up.”

Jenna carefully examined the device, noting the cylinder installed in the mechanism. “Does it work?”

“Surprisingly well for its age. Sandra had it playing yesterday before she left.” A small, sad smile crossed Tony’s face. “She was thrilled that it came with a few

original cylinders.”

“What song is this?” Jenna asked, though she was sure she already knew the answer.

Tony stepped closer. “‘In the Good Old Summer Time,’ I think. One of those old standards. Sandra was particularly excited about that one—said it was in remarkable condition for something from the early 1900s.”

The confirmation sent ice through Jenna’s veins. There was no way she could have known that detail—she’d never even heard the song before the dream. Yet she could hear it now, playing in her memory, Sandra’s voice singing along to the crackling melody.

“Where did she get the phonograph?” Jake asked, picking up the investigative thread as Jenna composed herself.

“From an estate sale last weekend. Howard Mitchell’s collection. He started the Mitch’s Den chain of electronics stores, quite the collector of audio equipment through the ages. Passed away a while back, and his daughter finally got around to selling off his collection.”

Estate sale. The words resonated in Jenna’s mind.

“Do you know a ham radio operator named Marcus Derrick? He also bought something at that estate sale.”

Tony looked surprised. “I don’t know him personally, but Sandra mentioned running into him there. Said he was acting weird, all paranoid about modern technology. He bought some old radio set. I think she actually said vacuum tubes. What does this have to do with ...?”

The connection solidified in Jenna's mind. Two victims who had attended the same estate sale, both purchasing antique audio equipment. It wasn't a coincidence. Surely the killer had been at that sale, watching, selecting.

Alarm spread across Tony's face. "But didn't I hear that Marcus Derrick was found dead somewhere?"

Jake stepped in smoothly. "We're just following up on possible connections in an ongoing investigation, Mr. Silke. We can't release any details yet."

Tony wasn't convinced. "This has something to do with Sandra disappearing, doesn't it? Please—she's not just my boss, she's my friend."

Jenna met his gaze, seeing the genuine concern there. "We're going to do everything we can to find her. I promise you that." The hollow reassurance tasted bitter on her tongue.

"Call us immediately if you hear from her," Jake added, handing Tony a business card.

Tony nodded, clutching the card as if it was a lifeline. "Please find her. Please."

Once they were out of earshot, Jake turned to Jenna.

"The phonograph from your dream," he said quietly. "Exactly as you described it."

"And the song." Jenna shook her head, still processing. "I had never heard 'In the Good Old Summer Time' before the dream, Jake. I couldn't have guessed that."

They approached the blue sedan in the parking lot. Through the windows, Jenna could see a jacket thrown in the back but no keys, no handbag or other personal

items.

“Looks like she never made it into her car,” Jenna said, mentally reconstructing the scene. “He must have been waiting for her when she left the building last night.”

Jake scanned the area. “If your dream was accurate about the rest, he accosted her and she tried to escape.”

“Yes, she remembered being chased.” Jenna closed her eyes briefly, recalling Sandra’s frantic description. A narrow passage. Darkness. The killer’s footsteps echoing behind her.

“That must be it,” she said, moving toward a tight passage between two buildings that fit the description, barely wide enough for a person to pass through.

Jenna and Jake found themselves hemmed in by towering brick walls on either side.

It was dim even in daylight, the high walls blocking most of the sun.

When they reached the other side, they found themselves standing in a small neglected courtyard.

Overgrown weeds pushed up through cracks in the concrete while graffiti adorned many of the walls.

Where could a fleeing woman hide in a place like this? Jenna struggled to remember what else Sandra had told her.

“That’s it,” Jenna said. Dominating this desolate space was an abandoned warehouse, its once vibrant brickwork now weathered and worn with age. “She said something about a warehouse.”

They hurried closer to the building, then Jenna saw it, a loading dock door that hung slightly open; suspended in an eternal state of partial welcome or farewell. It was raised enough for someone to slip under.

“That’s where she went,” Jenna said with certainty. “She made it this far, thought she’d found safety in there. Or more likely, she had no other choice. But that’s where he caught up with her ...”

She stared at the open loading dock door, imagining Sandra’s final moments with painful clarity: running through the darkness, heart pounding, the sound of pursuit behind her.

The small opening under the loading dock door—a chance, a hope.

Ducking underneath, finding herself in the cavernous space of the abandoned warehouse.

Trying to hide among crates and discarded machinery, breath coming in gasps, straining to hear over the hammering of her own pulse.

But the killer had followed, methodical, unhurried. The final confrontation, the struggle. The cord tightening around her throat.

Jenna’s hand unconsciously rose to her own neck, feeling phantom pressure there.

Jake touched her arm, returning her to the present reality. “Jenna,” he said, “we can’t go in there. Not without Morgan. We’re already way over the line, and if this is a crime scene...”

“He secured her to something,” she said softly. “She said he tied her up to something hard and metallic, like he did with Marcus and the radio tower. I think that was after

she was dead. Her spirit was confused, as they often are.”

“There could be something like that inside a warehouse. Do you think her body is still in there?”

“No. I don’t think that’s where he left her body. The symbolism of the radio tower mattered to him. But there are likely to be signs of her having been in that warehouse, something to show what happened.”

“All the more reason to call Morgan now, before we contaminate a potential crime scene.”

He was right, and Jenna knew it. The professional part of her—the sheriff, not the woman with inexplicable dreams—understood the protocols all too well. They’d already crossed numerous lines, operating outside their jurisdiction on the strength of her vision.

With a reluctant nod, she pulled out her phone and found Morgan’s number. She put the call on speaker, meeting Jake’s eyes as it rang.

“How do we explain this?” she whispered.

Jake gave a small, grim smile. “We don’t. We just tell him what he needs to know.”

Chief Morgan answered on the fourth ring, his gruff voice filling the courtyard. “Morgan here.”

Jenna took a deep breath. “Chief, it’s Sheriff Graves from Genesius County.”

“Sheriff.” There was a note of surprise in his voice. “What can I do for you this morning?”

There was no turning back now.

Jenna told him, “We have reason to believe that Marcus Derrick’s killer has claimed another victim here in Pinecrest.”

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“Another murder?” Chief Morgan’s voice on the phone sounded irritated. “What do you mean, Sheriff Graves?”

Jenna knew she couldn’t possibly explain that her words were based on nothing more than a dream.

But she also couldn’t just walk away and let the local police discover the new tragedy for themselves, leaving Sandra Reeves’ friends and family in a state of anxiety for whatever time that might take.

And now that it was looking like they had a serial killer at large, other lives could be in danger.

She swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry, and told Morgan, “We have reason to believe that Sandra Reeves was attacked and killed last night in a warehouse near her recording studio.”

“Sandra Reeves?” Morgan’s voice crackled through the speaker “The singer? What do you mean, you have ‘reason to believe’? Sheriff Graves, what the hell are you talking about?”

Jake shifted closer to her, his shoulder brushing against hers in silent support.

“I understand your concern,” Jenna said, struggling to find words that wouldn’t sound completely insane. “We received information that brought my deputy and I here, and—”

“And how exactly did you come by this... information?” Morgan demanded.

Jake gently took the phone from Jenna’s hand and held it out so they both could hear and speak into it. “Chief, we received a tip from a source that has been accurate before. It pointed us to a particular location. We’re following up on it now.”

“What kind of source?”

“The exact identity is unknown. But the source, as I said, has been helpful.”

Jenna winced at the half-truth. She hated putting Jake in this position, forcing him to bend the truth because of her inexplicable abilities. But what choice did they have?

“An unknown source,” Morgan repeated flatly. “I see. Does this mean Harris Lynch isn’t your suspect anymore?” Morgan cut in. “Because last I checked, he was in custody and we were looking for something solid to tie him to Derrick’s murder.”

“That’s right,” Jake said, his voice steady and professional. “Lynch was in custody when this... when we believe this new murder happened.”

The line went quiet for a moment. Jenna could almost see Morgan pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

“Exactly where are you?” Morgan finally asked.

“We’re at the location that was given to us,” Jake continued. “It’s an abandoned warehouse not far from the recording studio.”

“You’re already there?” Morgan’s voice rose in pitch. “Without backup or proper—?”

“We haven’t entered the premises,” Jake interjected smoothly. “We’re waiting for you and your team.”

“And why exactly are you two there without my knowledge?”

“As I mentioned before,” Jake replied smoothly, “our informant has been useful, even though unnamed. But since the source has not always been completely accurate, we needed to verify the existence of the place and to see if there was any merit to the claim.”

“And this claim involves Sandra Reeves? Our local star is supposedly a victim?” The incredulity in Morgan’s voice was palpable.

“Yes,” Jenna affirmed. “We did confirm that possibility before contacting you. We spoke with Tony Silke at Melody Forge Studios.”

She paused for a moment before continuing.

“Tony informed us that Sandra didn’t come into work today which is highly unusual for her.

Her car was left untouched in the parking lot since yesterday, and when he reached out to your dispatcher earlier today voicing his concerns, they were brushed aside. ”

A heavy silence fell. “I’ll be looking into that,” Morgan finally muttered after what felt like an eternity to Jenna. “Where exactly is this warehouse?”

Leaning toward the phone, she said. “It’s just north of Melody Forge Studios. The address is 1782 Industrial Park Way. It’s an area that looks like it hasn’t been in use for some time.”

A heavy sigh filtered through the speaker. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Don't do anything until I arrive. Clear?"

"Crystal," Jake replied.

The call ended with an abrupt click, leaving them standing in uncomfortable silence.

"That went well," Jenna muttered ironically.

"Could've been worse," Jake offered, handing her phone back. "He's coming to check things out, at least."

"Thank you for covering for me," she said quietly.

Jake's expression softened. "You and I look out for each other. Always have, always will."

"But I put you in an impossible position. Lying to another officer."

"It wasn't a lie," he said, his voice firm. "We did receive information that led us here. The source is just too ... complicated ... to try to explain."

Jenna smiled weakly. "That's one way to put it."

For a long moment she just stared at the warehouse that stood silent and imposing against the clear blue sky, its windows dark and empty like dead eyes. But her mind was at work, still trying to connect the pieces of this increasingly complex puzzle.

"I've been thinking about the victims," she said. "Marcus Derrick and now Sandra Reeves."

Jake nodded. “Both Pineville residents, both well-known in their own circles. What’s the connection?”

“Howard Mitchell’s estate sale,” Jenna said, the realization crystallizing in her mind. “Marcus bought that ham radio set there. And Sandra purchased that antique phonograph from the same sale.”

Jake’s eyes widened slightly. “So you think our killer might be targeting people who bought items from Mitchell’s collection?”

“It’s the only link I can see between them so far,” Jenna confirmed. “We need to talk to Rebecca Mitchell again, find out more about her buyers.”

“That’s good thinking,” Jake said, a hint of pride in his voice. “But that sale has been going on for weeks now. There must have been a lot of buyers, though I guess it should be possible to get a list of them. Do you think they’re all at risk?”

“I don’t know. Maybe there’s also some other connection that we’re not seeing.”

They both fell silent as a patrol car pulled into the gravel lot, followed by an unmarked sedan. Two uniformed officers exited the patrol car, nodding respectfully toward Jenna and Jake. Chief Morgan emerged from the sedan, looking less friendly. He approached them with a frown on his face.

“Sheriff Graves. Deputy Hawkins.” His greeting was curt, his sharp eyes assessing them both.

“Chief Morgan,” Jenna replied. “Thank you for coming.”

“Let’s get down to business,” Morgan said, adjusting his belt. “Tell me again why you’re here.”

“Given the timing and the... well, some similarities to the Derrick case,” Jenna said, “we felt that our tip warranted immediate investigation.”

Morgan’s gaze shifted from Jenna to Jake and back again. “And your ‘unknown source’ led you here specifically? To this warehouse?”

Jenna answered simply, “Yes.”

After a skeptical glare, Morgan said, “Let’s take a look, then.”

Jenna led the way toward the building, stopping at the loading dock where a large metal roll-up door was slightly open. Her skin prickled with déjà vu as she remembered Sandra’s description of the attack.

Jenna gestured towards the slightly raised door. “I think Sandra was chased into the building here.”

Morgan’s brows lifted slightly at her words, but he remained silent.

He scanned the ominous gap before he motioned to his officers with a curt nod, instructing them wordlessly to prepare their firearms. Jake moved instinctively closer to Jenna.

His hand hovered protectively over his holstered weapon.

“Stay behind us,” Morgan commanded, his tone cold as steel as he unholstered his own gun.

One of the officers crouched low and slipped under the partly-raised loading dock door, disappearing inside. A few moments later he called out in a hushed tone, “All clear so far.”

Jake joined the other two men, and they managed to pull the sliding door upward another two feet, the metal groaning in protest. The darkness inside seemed to swallow the morning light, leaving only shadows and silhouettes.

Jenna ducked through the opening and followed the officers into the warehouse, her eyes adjusting slowly to the dim interior.

Dust particles danced in the few shafts of sunlight that managed to penetrate the high windows.

The air was stale and cold, with a metallic undertone that made her skin crawl.

“Lights don’t work,” one officer reported. “I guess the power is off.”

“The place has been abandoned for a long time,” Morgan said. “Spread out. But stay within sight of each other.”

Their footsteps echoed in the cavernous space as they moved forward, flashlight beams cutting through the dimness. Rows of shelving units and abandoned machinery created a maze of hidden corners.

Jenna’s gaze swept the concrete floor, searching for any sign of disturbance in the thick layer of dust. Twenty feet in, she spotted it – a series of scuff marks and footprints, some large and deliberate, others smaller and chaotic.

“Here,” she called out, crouching down to examine the marks.

Morgan joined her, his flashlight beam tracing the path of the footprints. “Looks like someone was here—recently, maybe.”

“This also looks recent,” Jake added, pointing to where a stack of wooden crates had

toppled over, disturbing the dust.

“She probably tried to reach that fire exit,” Jenna observed, pointing to a door with an unlit exit sign.

They moved that way carefully, weapons ready, tension building with each step. Jenna’s mind flashed to her dream – Sandra’s terror, her desperate flight through the darkness.

“Look,” one of the officers said, the beam of his flashlight illuminating a pair of women’s dress shoes, one tipped onto its side, the other standing upright a few feet away.

Jenna’s breath caught in her throat. In her dream, Sandra had mentioned taking off her shoes to run more quietly. But she couldn’t say that aloud.

“She must have been in a hurry,” she commented instead.

Morgan knelt to examine the shoes, his expression grim. “Expensive. Definitely not work boots for a place like this.”

Then Jake’s flashlight beam caught something else on the floor – a cellphone with a cracked screen, its shiny case incongruous against the grimy concrete. Beside it lay a heavy leather shoulder bag, its contents partially spilled across the floor.

Morgan crouched down and carefully opened the bag wider, using a pen to move items aside. He withdrew a wallet, flipping it open to reveal a driver’s license.

“Sandra Reeves,” he confirmed, his voice tight. He gave Jenna a hard look.

She scanned the area, noting the signs of a struggle but seeing no body.

“Where is she?” one of the officers asked quietly.

“That’s what we need to find out,” Morgan replied, standing up. He turned to Jenna, eyes narrowed with suspicion. “I’m going to ask you one more time, Sheriff. How did you know to come here?”

Jenna met his gaze steadily, despite the knot in her stomach. “Our investigation led us here.”

“That’s not an answer,” Morgan pressed. “You show up at a warehouse we didn’t even know was connected to a missing person, find evidence of foul play that nobody reported, and expect me to believe it’s just good police work?”

Jake took half a step forward. “Chief, with all due respect—”

“I’m not talking to you, Deputy,” Morgan said sharply, his eyes never leaving Jenna’s face. “I’m talking to the Sheriff, who seems to have information she’s not sharing.”

The tension in the warehouse thickened like the dust in the air, making it harder to breathe. Jenna opened her mouth, still uncertain what she could possibly say, when Morgan’s phone rang, cutting through the silence.

He glanced at the screen, his brow furrowing. “It’s Colonel Spelling.” He answered the call, turning slightly away from the group. “Morgan here.”

Jenna watched as Morgan’s expression shifted from irritation to shock. His shoulders stiffened, and he turned back toward them, his face pale in the dim light.

“When?” he asked into the phone. “Where exactly?” A pause. “We’ll be right there.”

He ended the call, his eyes finding Jenna’s immediately.

“They found another body,” he said, his voice hollow. “Bound to a radio tower right near the county line. We need to get over there right away.”

The blood drained from Jenna’s face. “Just like Marcus Derrick.”

Morgan nodded grimly. “Except this time, it’s a woman.” The lines around his mouth deepened with shock, frustration, and something darker—suspicion, aimed squarely at Jenna and Jake.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

“A woman,” Jenna repeated Chief Morgan’s words about another body bound to a radio tower. “Then it was ...”

Morgan’s face hardened as he pocketed his phone. “Colonel Spelling reported that they’ve found Sandra Reeves’s body at the Ridgeline Radio Tower in Cable County. Just like you predicted, Sheriff Graves.”

“The killer’s repeating his pattern,” she said, keeping her voice professional, stripped of emotion.

Morgan’s eyes narrowed, the gray in them hardening to slate. “What I can’t figure out is how you knew that something had happened to her in this warehouse. She had barely been reported missing and her body was just found fifteen miles northeast of here.”

The question they’d all been avoiding now lay exposed between them, raw and demanding.

“It’s called good police work, Chief,” Jake said, stepping slightly forward, as if to physically shield Jenna from Morgan’s scrutiny. “Sometimes you follow the evidence, sometimes you follow your gut.”

Morgan’s skeptical gaze flicked between them. “That’s one hell of a gut, Deputy.” He turned to stare at the warehouse entrance, where shafts of morning light cut through the gloom.

He turned back, his expression now all business. “Ridgeline Tower is on an access

road off Highway 23. I'm heading there now. Spelling wants all hands on this."

He raised his voice, addressing the officers still documenting the warehouse scene. "Peterson, you're in charge here. I want everything photographed, bagged, and tagged. Full inventory. Nothing leaves this building without my say-so."

A young officer nodded sharply. "Yes, sir."

Morgan's gaze returned to Jenna, lingered for a beat too long. "I'll see you both at the tower."

He strode out, his departure stirring the dust into lazy spirals.

Jenna exhaled slowly, tension ebbing from her shoulders.

She and Jake also walked outside, squinting in the brightness of late morning.

The sun was well up now, the sky a clear, indifferent blue.

She glanced back at the warehouse, a squat, unremarkable building that now held the record of a nightmare.

They made their way between buildings, back to the parking lot in front of the music studio. Jake unlocked their cruiser, the beep of the remote unnaturally cheerful.

"I'll drive," he said, a statement rather than an offer.

Jenna slid into the passenger seat without protest. Her mind was already racing ahead to the tower, to the body she knew would be there, posed like Marcus Derrick's had been.

“Morgan’s not going to let this go,” Jake said as he pulled away from the parking lot.

“No, he’s not.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

She almost laughed at the impossibility of it. “That I dream about dead people? That Sandra Reeves came to me last night and told me how to find the place where she was attacked?”

Jake glanced at her, then back at the road. “When you put it that way...”

“Exactly.” She sighed, rubbing her temples where a headache threatened. “I think we stick with intuition and good detective work for now.”

“And if he pushes?”

“Then I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

They fell silent as the town gave way to scattered houses, then woodland.

Jake turned onto Highway 23. After a mile, a small green sign indicated the turnoff for Ridgeline Tower.

The access road wound upward through dense pine forest, the asphalt cracked and patched from years of freeze-thaw cycles.

As they climbed higher, the trees thinned, revealing glimpses of the valley below.

The tower came into view gradually—first the blinking red lights at its apex, then the latticed red-and-white structure itself, stark against the blue sky.

Something cold settled in Jenna's stomach as she looked at it.

"You okay?" Jake asked, noticing her sudden stillness.

"Fine," she replied automatically, then amended: "No. Not really."

The road widened as they neared the summit, revealing a small plateau cleared of trees. It was already crowded with vehicles—State Police cruisers, the medical examiner's van, forensic units, and several unmarked cars that likely belonged to senior officers.

A large white evidence tent had been erected at the base of the tower. Officers in various uniforms moved purposefully around the site, their expressions grim.

Jake parked behind Morgan's SUV and cut the engine. "Here we go," he said quietly.

The air was cooler here in the forest at this elevation, with a breeze that carried the scent of pine and, underneath it, something clinical—the smell of crime scene chemicals already at work.

An officer Jenna didn't recognize approached, clipboard in hand. "Sheriff Graves? Colonel Spelling said to expect you."

He lifted the yellow crime scene tape for them to duck under, then led them toward the tent. "The medical examiner's still working. It's... it's not pretty in there."

As they approached the tent, Colonel Spelling emerged, his tall figure blocking the entrance momentarily. His uniform was impeccable as always, but his face showed the strain of the morning.

"Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins," he acknowledged them with a nod. "Glad you

could make it quickly.”

“What do we know so far, Colonel?” Jenna asked, slipping easily into the professional rapport they’d established over previous cases.

“Female victim, preliminary ID confirms it’s Sandra Reeves, 48, owner of Melody Forge Studios.

” Spelling’s voice was measured, clinical.

“Discovered at 0745 by a maintenance worker conducting routine checks on the tower’s warning lights.

Cause of death appears to be strangulation, consistent with your first victim. ”

“And the positioning?” Jake asked.

“See for yourself.” Spelling held open the tent flap. “But brace yourselves.”

Inside, portable floodlights created harsh islands of brightness in the otherwise dim space. The air was tinged with the copper scent of blood and the sharper notes of disinfectant and latex.

Sandra Reeves’s body was suspended from the tower’s framework, just off the ground.

Her arms were splayed wide, bound at the wrists with copper wire that glinted dully in the artificial light.

Her legs were similarly bound, stretched downward in a grotesque parody of a star.

Her head hung forward, dark auburn hair obscuring her face.

Jenna's breath caught.

The Cable County coroner and his assistant were carefully cutting through the bindings, while a third person photographed each step of the process.

"Time of death?" Jenna asked, her voice steadier than she felt.

The coroner, a thin man with wire-rimmed glasses, glanced over his shoulder. "Preliminary estimate puts it between midnight and 3 AM. I'll know more after the autopsy."

As the assistant shifted position, Sandra's face became visible. Despite the discoloration and the vacant stare, she was recognizable as the vibrant woman whose photograph had hung in her studio—the woman who had visited Jenna's dream with urgent, fragmentary messages.

"We knew her," the coroner said softly, pausing in his work. "My wife used to buy her records, back when she was touring. Said she had the voice of an angel."

The simple humanity of the comment hit Jenna harder than the clinical details had. Sandra Reeves was not just a victim, a body, a case. She had been a person with a life, with fans, with a voice that had touched others.

They watched in respectful silence as Sandra's body was finally freed from its macabre display and gently lowered onto a waiting gurney. The coroner covered her with a white sheet, the fabric settling with a soft finality.

Colonel Spelling gestured toward the exit. "Let's continue outside."

The sunshine felt almost obscene after the grim tableau within the tent. Jenna blinked against the brightness, momentarily disoriented by the transition.

Chief Morgan was waiting a few yards away, deep in conversation with a State Police detective. When he spotted them emerging, he broke off mid-sentence and strode over.

“I need a word,” he said, his voice tight with barely contained frustration. His gaze locked on Jenna. “Now.”

Then Morgan turned toward Spelling.

“With all due respect, Colonel, there’s something not right here.

” Morgan’s neck had flushed red above his collar.

“Sheriff Graves somehow knew about this victim before the body was discovered. Somehow knew exactly where to find the place where she was taken. I’m supposed to just accept that it’s all coincidence and good police work? ”

His words cut through the ambient noise of the crime scene, drawing the attention of nearby officers who tried to appear busy while clearly listening.

Jenna felt exposed, pinned by Morgan’s accusation and the curious glances now directed their way. The moment she had dreaded had arrived, and she found herself without a plausible explanation.

“Chief Morgan,” she began, not knowing how she would finish the sentence.

To her surprise, Colonel Spelling stepped forward, physically positioning himself between her and Morgan. “Chief, I’ve worked with Sheriff Graves on multiple cases

over the past several years. Her methods may be unconventional, but her results speak for themselves.”

Morgan wasn’t mollified. “Unconventional is one thing. But don’t try to tell me she’s a psychic or something. We all know that psychic is a fake, a cover.”

“I never claimed to be psychic,” Jenna said, finding her voice. “I follow leads, make connections. Sometimes I see patterns before they’re obvious to others.”

“Bullshit,” Morgan said flatly. “You knew things no one could know without either being involved or—”

“That’s enough,” Spelling interrupted, his voice carrying the unmistakable command of his rank. “We have two murders with identical signatures. We have a killer targeting people connected to vintage audio equipment. That’s where our focus needs to be right now.”

The authority in his tone seemed to penetrate Morgan’s anger. The Chief’s shoulders lowered slightly, though the suspicion remained clear in his eyes.

“What’s this about audio equipment?” he asked after a moment.

Jenna seized the opening to shift the conversation. “Sandra Reeves recently purchased an antique phonograph from Howard Mitchell’s estate sale. Marcus Derrick bought a vacuum-tube ham radio from the same source.”

“How do you know that about Sandra Reeves?” Morgan asked, still skeptical.

“We interviewed Tony Silke at Melody Forge,” Jake supplied. “He mentioned the purchase. Said Sandra was excited about it, wanted to record the pure analog sound.”

Spelling nodded thoughtfully. “So we have a clear connection between the victims—both purchased vintage audio equipment from the same source.”

“Howard Mitchell’s collection,” Jenna confirmed. “His daughter Rebecca is handling the estate sale. She may have records of other purchases that could help us identify potential targets ... or even the perpetrator. We need to go back there and find out.”

The practical focus on evidence and connections seemed to restore some normalcy to the interaction. Morgan’s posture relaxed further, though his gaze remained wary when it rested on Jenna.

“Alright,” Spelling said, taking charge with his usual assumption of authority. “Chief Morgan and I will head to Melody Forge Studios to interview staff and look for anything that might help establish a timeline or motive.”

He turned to Jenna and Jake. “You two should do what you’ve suggested, revisit Rebecca Mitchell. Find out who else purchased items from the estate, particularly anything related to audio equipment or broadcasting. We need to get ahead of this killer before he chooses a third victim.”

The clear division of tasks dispersed some of the tension that had built up during Morgan’s confrontation. Officers returned to their duties, the buzz of activity resuming around the crime scene.

Jenna felt a curious mixture of relief and unease.

Spelling’s intervention had deflected Morgan’s questions, but the Colonel’s defense of her “unconventional methods” suggested he might have his own suspicions about her abilities.

Whether that made him an ally or another potential problem remained to be seen.

As they prepared to leave, the medical examiner's team wheeled Sandra's gurney toward the waiting ambulance. The white sheet covering her body glowed in the sunlight, an unnaturally pure spot against the earthy tones of the clearing.

Jenna watched them load the gurney into the ambulance, a profound sense of failure washing over her. Sandra had come to her in the dream, had shown her the warehouse, had tried to communicate something vital—but too late to save her life.

"Why do they only reach out after they're gone?" she murmured, not realizing she'd spoken aloud until Jake answered.

"Maybe that's just how it works," he said quietly, standing close enough that only she could hear. "Or maybe they're trying to help stop the next one."

The ambulance doors closed with a soft thud. Inside was a woman who had once filled venues with her voice, who had nurtured local talent, who had, in death, reached across some unfathomable divide to connect with Jenna.

"We'd better not let her down," Jenna said.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Jenna stared out at the passing landscape as the patrol car hummed along winding roads. Her mind circled back to Chief Morgan's barely veiled accusations and Colonel Spelling's unexpected defense of her.

Jake had called to inform Rebecca Mitchell that they were on their way to seek her help before he started to drive. "You're quiet," he commented, eyes on the road as he navigated a particularly sharp curve. "Still thinking about Spelling?"

"I'm not used to having someone at his level defend me like that," she replied.

"It was unexpected," Jake agreed, his hands relaxed on the steering wheel. "But not unwelcome."

"What do you think he makes of it?" she asked. "My methods, I mean."

Jake considered this for a moment. "Honestly? I think that Spelling respects results. And you get them, regardless of how."

"But he must wonder. Everyone does." Jenna turned to look at Jake's profile. "What's your theory on what he's assuming?"

Jake gave a small, thoughtful smile. "Well, he definitely doesn't imagine you're communing with the dead. That would be last on his list of explanations."

"Agreed," Jenna said, unable to suppress a chuckle despite the gravity of the question.

“More likely, he believes you’ve got some kind of real-world network. Informants, maybe. Sources you’ve cultivated that you don’t disclose.” Jake shrugged. “Or maybe he just thinks you’re that good at reading a scene.”

Jenna nodded slowly. “Either of those would be easy for him to accept.”

“The important thing is,” Jake continued, “he’s keeping his theories to himself. And he shut Morgan down before he could start digging in directions none of us wants him going.”

The car rounded another bend, revealing the first glimpse of the Mitchell estate through a break in the trees. They pulled into the circular driveway and parked in front of the old mansion.

“I appreciate Spelling’s discretion,” Jenna said quietly. “Whatever he might think.”

They had reached the double-door entry and were just about to push the bell when the doors swung open, revealing Franklin. The household manager stood with perfect posture, his uniform as impeccable as before.

“Sheriff Graves, Deputy Hawkins,” he greeted them, his voice measured. “Ms. Mitchell is expecting you. Please, follow me.”

Jenna caught the subtle curiosity in his gaze as he led them through the house. She wondered what questions were forming behind that professional mask and what theories he might have about a second visit in such a short time.

The room where Rebecca awaited them was the same as before—an elegant space filled with Howard Mitchell’s prized audio equipment.

Rebecca rose from her seat as they entered. She wore another black dress, similar to

the one from their previous visit, her dark hair still pulled back. The shadows beneath her eyes had deepened, a testament to sleepless nights spent dealing with her father's affairs.

"Sheriff Graves," she said, extending her hand. "Deputy Hawkins. I must admit I was surprised by your call."

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Ms. Mitchell," Jenna replied, taking the offered hand.

Rebecca gestured toward the seating area. "Please, sit. Can Franklin bring you anything? Coffee, perhaps?"

"No, thank you," Jenna said, settling into one of the armchairs. Jake took a position slightly behind her, standing with his hands clasped behind his back.

Rebecca sat across from them, her posture straight but tense. "You mentioned there have been developments in the case."

Jenna nodded, choosing her words carefully. "I'm afraid I have some difficult news, Ms. Mitchell. There's been another death that seems to be connected to your father's collection."

Rebecca's eyes widened, her hand rising instinctively to her throat. "Another...? Who?"

"Sandra Reeves," Jenna said, watching Rebecca's face closely. "She owned Melody Forge Studios here in Pinecrest."

The color drained from Rebecca's face. Recognition flashed in her eyes, followed swiftly by horror.

“Sandra Reeves? The singer?” Her voice cracked slightly. “I—I know who she is. Was.”

Rebecca’s hands trembled more visibly now. She clasped them together in her lap. “This can’t be happening. First that man who bought the old radio, and now...”

“I understand this is shocking,” Jenna said gently. “But there’s something else you should know. Ms. Reeves had also recently purchased an item from your father’s estate. A phonograph, I believe.”

“Yes. Yes, she did. Just a few days ago.” Rebecca paused, realization dawning in her eyes. “She came to the estate sale personally. I was actually quite honored to meet her, even briefly. I told her I was a fan.”

Jenna leaned forward slightly. “We believe the items purchased from your father’s collection may be the key link between the victims.”

Rebecca stared at Jenna, her gaze shifting from disbelief to a dawning comprehension that seemed to physically weigh her down.

“You’re saying someone is... targeting people who bought my father’s things?”

“That’s what the evidence suggests,” Jake said from behind Jenna.

Rebecca stood abruptly, moving to the window. Outside, the manicured grounds of the estate stretched into the distance, peaceful and oblivious to the darkness of their conversation. Her silhouette against the light trembled slightly.

“All these things,” she said, turning to gesture at the room filled with her father’s collection. “They were his passion. His joy.” Her voice faltered. “Now they’re somehow connected to... to murder.”

“We need your help, Ms. Mitchell,” Jenna told her. “The more we understand about who purchased these items, the better chance we have of preventing another tragedy.”

Rebecca nodded, composing herself with visible effort. “Of course. Anything I can do.”

“Do you recall anyone who showed particular interest in both the phonograph that Sandra Reeves purchased and the ham radio your father sold to Howard Mitchell?” Jenna asked.

Rebecca returned to her seat, brow furrowed in concentration. The ticking of an antique clock on the mantel punctuated the silence as she thought. Jenna could almost see her mentally sifting through faces, conversations, and moments from the estate sale.

“There were so many people,” Rebecca said finally, frustration evident in her voice. “Collectors, enthusiasts, just curious locals... I tried to keep track, but...” She shook her head. “I can’t recall anyone specifically interested in both those items. But of course, I could have missed it.”

Disappointment settled in Jenna’s chest, but she pressed on. “Did your father ever mention anyone whose interest in his collection struck him as concerning? Someone who perhaps seemed too eager or whose questions made him uncomfortable?”

Again, Rebecca thought carefully before answering. “My father was... selective about those he allowed to view his full collection. But he never mentioned anyone specific that worried him.” Her shoulders slumped slightly. “I’m sorry. I wish I could be more helpful.”

“There is something else you can do,” Jenna told her.

“We need a complete list of everyone who purchased items from your father’s collection.

It may help us identify potential targets.

” Jenna exchanged a glance with Jake before adding, “And anyone who has expressed interest in future purchases, or distress that they didn’t get what they wanted. ”

Rebecca looked concerned. “Of course. I have records of all the sales. I’ve been meticulous about that. But as for ... any resentment or anger ... I wouldn’t necessarily know ...”

“Your list of purchasers and any prospective buyers will be a great help,” Jenna said, reaching into her pocket for a business card with Spelling’s contact information. “If you could send that information directly to Colonel Chadwick Spelling at the Missouri Highway Patrol,”

Rebecca took the card. “I’ll compile everything and send it right away.” She stared down at the card for a moment, then looked up with new resolve in her eyes. “And I’ve made a decision. I’m shutting down the estate sale until this case is solved.”

“That’s a significant decision,” Jake observed. “The sale must represent substantial income.”

Rebecca shook her head firmly. “I can’t in good conscience continue selling these items if they might be putting people in danger. Money isn’t worth a life.” She glanced around at her father’s beloved collection. “He would have felt the same way.”

Jenna nodded, forming a new respect for Rebecca Mitchell. “That’s a wise precaution, Ms. Mitchell. We appreciate your cooperation.”

As they prepared to leave, the mood in the room remained somber. Rebecca walked them toward the front door, where Franklin waited to escort them out.

“Sheriff,” Rebecca called as they reached the threshold. “Please find whoever is doing this. Before anyone else gets hurt.”

“We will,” Jenna promised, hoping the assurance wouldn’t prove hollow.

Back in the patrol car, Jenna immediately pulled out her phone. “We need to update Spelling.”

Jake started the engine but didn’t pull away yet. “Put him on speaker.”

Colonel Spelling answered on the third ring, his voice crisp and formal. “Spelling.”

“Colonel, it’s Sheriff Graves and Deputy Hawkins. We’ve just finished speaking with Rebecca Mitchell.”

“And?” There was the sound of papers shuffling in the background.

“She couldn’t remember anything helpful. But she’s agreed to send you a complete list of buyers from her father’s estate sale,” Jenna reported. “And she’s halting any further sales until the case is resolved.”

“Good,” Spelling replied. “I’ll put a team on analyzing the list as soon as it arrives.”

“Any developments on your end?” Jake asked.

“Morgan and I finished interviewing the staff at Melody Forge Studios,” Spelling said. “We have a person of interest—a former sound engineer named Claude Davis who had a falling out with Ms. Reeves last year. Morgan’s running background

checks now.”

Jenna made a mental note of the name but kept her expectations measured. Their experience told her that obvious suspects rarely panned out in cases like this.

“Let us know if anything comes up with Davis,” Jenna said.

“Will do.”

After ending the call, Jake pulled the car onto the road. “Where to now?”

Jenna rubbed her temples, feeling the familiar pressure of a case with too many questions and too few answers. “Let’s stop at Brewed Awakening. I need coffee and time to think.”

The coffee shop on Main Street was bustling with afternoon customers.

The aroma of freshly ground beans and baked goods created an atmosphere so disconnected from death and murder that it felt almost jarring.

Jenna found herself noticing everyday details with heightened awareness—a woman laughing over her latte, a couple hunched over a computer tablet, a barista creating elaborate foam art.

They found a corner booth away from the crowd. Jake returned from the counter with two mugs of coffee and a plate with two blueberry scones.

“Thought you might be hungry,” he said, sliding onto the bench across from her. “I wanted a snack myself.”

Jenna accepted the coffee gratefully, wrapping her hands around the warm ceramic.

“Thanks.” She nibbled on a scone.

Jake took a sip of his coffee, studying her over the rim of his mug. “Can you remember anything more from your dream, Jenna? Anything at all that we haven’t discussed?”

She looked up sharply. “I’m not holding back.”

“I know you’re not. But we need everything we can get right now. If we’ve missed anything at all...”

Jenna sighed, knowing he was right. She closed her eyes, allowing the ambient sounds of the coffee shop to fade as she focused on recalling her dream encounter with Sandra Reeves.

The frustration was immediate. Dream memories were elusive at the best of times, and these encounters were always shrouded in a strange, otherworldly haze that made details difficult to grasp.

She concentrated harder, trying to remember Sandra’s words, her expressions, any clue she might have offered.

Fragments came back to her—Sandra’s fear, the description of being choked with a cord, being bound ...

Jenna’s eyes snapped open. “She said the killer was talking while he bound her to the tower.” Keeping her voice low, she explained. “Sandra said he kept babbling while he was binding her to something hard. There were certain phrases

Jake leaned forward, fully attentive now. “What phrases?”

“‘Astral voices,’ ‘Jenna recalled, the words surfacing with sudden clarity. ‘And ‘midnight voice.’“

Jake pulled out his phone immediately. “Let’s see what comes up.”

They huddled over the small screen as Jake typed the phrases into a search engine. The first few results were vague—references to spiritual practices, a few music albums, a self-help guru.

“Wait,” Jenna said, pointing to a result further down the page. “That one.”

Jake tapped on the link, which opened to a local history blog post titled “Forgotten Voices: Pinecrest’s Underground Radio Scene.” The article detailed the history of pirate radio stations in the area during the 1980s and early 1990s.

“‘Among the most notorious was ‘Astral Voices,’ broadcasting in Pinecrest from 1987 to 1991,’ “Jake read aloud.

“‘Based in the ruins of the abandoned Ozark Sole Works shoe factory, the station gained a cult following for its eclectic music and mysterious on-air personalities, including the popular late-night personality, a woman known only as the Midnight Voice.’“

“That’s it,” Jenna gasped. “Both of those phrases. That has to be a connection.”

The coffee shop continued its normal afternoon rhythm around them, the patrons unaware of the breakthrough that had just occurred. The hunt for a killer had just taken a new direction—one that pointed toward the airwaves of Pinecrest’s past.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Jenna pulled her phone from her pocket, pushing the remains of her scone to one side.

The café around them had emptied somewhat, leaving their corner booth secluded enough for the call she needed to make.

She glanced at Jake, as she scrolled through her contacts and found Spelling's number.

The colonel would have answers about Astral Voices – she was certain of it.

"I'm putting this on speaker, though not very loud," she told Jake, placing the phone on the table between them. "I want you to hear everything."

Jake nodded, setting down aside his coffee cup and bending forward to listen.

Spelling answered on the third ring, his voice crisp and official. "Colonel Spelling."

"Colonel, it's Sheriff Graves. I'm here with Deputy Hawkins."

"Sheriff. What can I do for you?" The formality in his tone was familiar territory – Spelling never wasted words.

"Colonel, I need to add Chief Morgan to this call. Is that possible?"

There was a brief pause. "Hold on."

The line went quiet for a moment, and then Spelling's voice returned. "Morgan's

joining now.”

A click, followed by Morgan’s gruff voice. “Chief Morgan here. What’s this about, Sheriff?”

Jenna leaned closer to the phone. “Chief, Colonel – we’re investigating a connection between our two murder victims and we need some historical information. What can you tell us about a pirate radio station called Astral Voices?”

“Well, that’s a blast from the past,” Morgan said, surprise evident in his tone. “Astral Voices. Haven’t heard that name in over twenty years.”

“You remember it?” Jake asked.

“Remember it?” Morgan let out a short, humorless laugh. “Colonel Spelling and I helped shut it down back in ‘98.”

Jenna’s eyes met Jake’s. A direct connection – better than she’d hoped for.

“What was the nature of the programming?” she asked.

Spelling answered first. “New age nonsense mostly. Conspiracy theories, paranormal events, supposed government cover-ups. But it wasn’t harmless entertainment. The broadcasts were designed to incite panic and paranoia among listeners.”

“Some folks took it too seriously,” Morgan added. “Followers stockpiling supplies, quitting jobs, pulling kids from school. One family sold everything and moved to a cave system because the ‘Midnight Voice’ told them electromagnetic waves were controlling people’s minds.”

“What can you tell me about the person called the ‘Midnight Voice’?”

“That was their star broadcaster,” Morgan explained. “Had this hypnotic quality to her voice. Smooth as honey but with an edge that got under your skin. She’d come on at midnight – hence the name – and spout the most alarming theories. Had quite a following.”

“The station was run by a man named Ray Tucker,” Spelling said. “When we finally pinpointed the broadcast location, we found him operating out of the abandoned Ozark Sole Works shoe factory with equipment that would’ve made a professional studio jealous.”

“Did he serve time?” Jake asked.

“No prison time,” Morgan said. “But the FCC hit him with massive fines. Equipment seizure, cease and desist orders, civil penalties. Financially destroyed him for years.”

Jenna made another note. “And now? Where is Tucker today?”

“Still in Pinecrest, last I heard,” Morgan replied. “He’s running a podcast called Breaking Tide these days. Same kind of content as Astral Voices, but legal since it’s not broadcast on regulated frequencies.”

Jake leaned forward. “And what about this Midnight Voice? Did you ever identify her?”

“We never did,” Spelling said. “Tucker was protective of his on-air talent. Refused to give names, even when facing charges.”

“Said it was a matter of journalistic integrity,” Morgan added with obvious disdain. “As if what they were doing resembled journalism in any way.”

“So Midnight Voice could still be in the area?” Jenna asked. “Maybe even working

with Tucker again?”

“Possible,” Spelling conceded. “Though I’d be surprised if she maintained the same level of... extremism after all these years.”

Morgan cleared his throat. “I guess I’m not supposed to ask what put Astral Voices on your radar after all this time, Sheriff?”

“That’s right, Chief,” Spelling cut in. “Leave it alone.”

Morgan responded with a sigh. “Right. Well, if you need Tucker’s current address, I can pull that up for you.”

“That would be helpful,” Jenna said.

There was a pause, and then Morgan said: “He’s at 1875 Ridgeline Drive in Pinecrest. Operating Breaking Tide from his home studio there.”

“Thank you, Chief.” Jenna wrote down the address. “And Colonel Spelling, we appreciate your help as always.”

“Keep us updated, Sheriff,” Spelling replied. “Whatever connection you’re following, be careful with it.”

“Always am, Colonel.” She ended the call and looked up at Jake.

“It’s not much of a stretch to connect radio towers to a former pirate radio operator,” he said.

Jenna nodded, pulling out her tablet. “Let’s see what Breaking Tide is all about before we pay Mr. Tucker a visit.”

A few taps on the screen brought up the podcast's website. The design was amateur – black background with neon graphics that reminded Jenna of late-night television from the 90s. The logo featured a stylized radio tower with waves radiating outward.

“Fringe science, government conspiracies, unexplained phenomena,” Jake read from the site's description. “Looks like Tucker hasn't strayed far from his roots.”

Jenna scrolled through recent episode titles: “Surveillance Through Smart Devices,” “Psychic Communications with Other Dimensions.” Then she stopped, her finger hovering over an upcoming episode scheduled for tomorrow: “Murder at the Tower: The Truth Behind Trentville's Ritual Killing.”

“Jake.” She turned the tablet toward him. “Look at this.”

His eyes widened as he read. “Promising to reveal the truth about the murder? How would he know anything about it unless ...”

“He's involved in some way?” Jake put in.

Jenna shut off the tablet and slipped it back into her bag. “Let's go talk to Mr. Tucker.”

They paid for their coffees and scones and headed out to the cruiser. Jenna spent the drive trying to organize her thoughts. If Tucker was responsible for both murders, what was his motive? Publicity for his podcast seemed too simple, too obvious. But she couldn't dismiss it either.

Ridgeline Drive curved through an older residential area of Pinecrest. The homes were modest single-story structures, most built in the 1970s. Number 1875 sat at the end of a cul-de-sac, its weathered brick facade partially hidden behind overgrown hedges.

“Not exactly what I pictured for a conspiracy personality,” Jake commented as they parked at the curb.

A concrete path led through the neglected front yard to a weather-worn door. Jenna knocked firmly, and they waited, listening to movement inside.

The door swung open to reveal a man in his late fifties with thinning gray hair pulled back in a short ponytail. He wore faded jeans and a black t-shirt bearing the Breaking Tide logo. Wire-rimmed glasses perched on a nose that had been broken at least once.

His expression shifted from annoyance to curiosity as he took in their badges. “Law enforcement? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Ray Tucker?” Jenna asked.

“The one and only.” He offered a smile as he looked at Jenna’s badge. “Sheriff Graves and...” He squinted at Jake’s badge. “Deputy Hawkins. Come in, come in.”

He stepped back, gesturing them inside with a flourish that struck Jenna as theatrical.

The living room had been converted into a makeshift studio, with sound dampening panels attached haphazardly to the walls.

A desk dominated the center of the room, crowded with audio equipment and multiple computer monitors.

“You caught me just in time,” Tucker said, closing the door behind them. “Was about to start recording today’s episode. But for Genesius County’s Sheriff, I can certainly delay it a while.” He said this with a wink that made Jenna’s skin crawl.

“We won’t take much of your time, Mr. Tucker,” she said, keeping her tone

professional. “We have a few questions about your podcast.”

“Breaking Tide? Going strong for three years now.” Pride colored his voice. “Nearly fifty thousand subscribers. Not bad for independent media.”

Jake gestured to one of the monitors displaying the episode schedule. “We noticed you’re planning a special episode about a recent murder discovered near Trentville.”

Tucker’s eyes lit up. “Ah, you saw that! Yes, absolutely fascinating case. Body bound to a radio tower? The symbolism alone is worth exploring.”

“And what theories do you plan to share with your listeners?” Jenna asked, watching his face carefully.

Tucker leaned against his desk, clearly delighted by their interest. “Well, I’ve been researching ancient binding rituals.

Did you know that several civilizations practiced similar methods for sacrifices?

The victim bound to a structure that connects earth to sky?

” He gestured dramatically upward. “I believe what happened in Trentville is part of a much larger pattern of ritual killings designed to open portals between dimensions.”

Jenna kept her expression neutral, though she found it increasingly difficult. “And you believe this theory?”

“Of course! The evidence is compelling.” Tucker reached for a notebook and flipped it open. “The positioning of the body, the stage of the moon that night, and its proximity to—”

“Mr. Tucker,” Jake interrupted. “Where were you on that night?”

The question caught Tucker off-guard. His animated expression faltered for a moment before understanding dawned.

“Am I a suspect?” He didn’t sound frightened – if anything, there was a note of excitement in his voice.

“Just answer the question, please,” Jenna said.

Tucker straightened, adjusting his glasses. “I was here, working on the podcast. Alone, unfortunately. No alibi, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“And last night?” Jenna pressed.

“Last night? Same thing. Here alone. Why? Did something else happen?”

Either he was genuinely unaware of the recent murder, or he was a skilled actor. Jenna couldn’t be sure.

“One more question,” she said. “We need to know the identity of the broadcaster who called herself the Midnight Voice.”

Tucker’s demeanor changed instantly. His shoulders stiffened, and the theatrical flair vanished. “I can’t tell you that. Professional confidentiality.”

“This isn’t a journalistic shield law situation, Mr. Tucker,” Jake said. “This is a murder investigation.”

“I gave her my word years ago.” Tucker crossed his arms. “She trusted me ...”

Jenna stepped closer, lowering her voice. “Mr. Tucker, if you withhold information relevant to our investigation, we can charge you with obstruction.”

Tucker stared at her, weighing his options. Finally, his shoulders slumped.

“Fine. But this isn’t going to help your case.” He sighed dramatically. “Diana Wells. She owns that new age shop in town – Avebury Visions.”

“Diana Wells,” Jenna repeated.

“She’ll deny it if you ask her directly,” Tucker warned. “She’s built a respectable business image. Being associated with Astral Voices again could damage that.”

“Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Tucker,” Jenna said, already moving toward the door. “We might have more questions for you later.”

“Hey, if you need any insight into the symbolic meaning of these murders, I’m your man,” Tucker called after them. “I could even have you on as guests!”

Jake closed the door firmly behind them, cutting off Tucker’s voice. They walked in silence to the vehicle.

Once inside, Jenna pulled out her phone. “We need to update Morgan and Spelling.”

She put the call on speaker again, and both men answered promptly.

“Any updates on Claude Davis?” Jenna asked, referring to the sound engineer who’d had a falling out with Sandra Reeves.

“Still searching,” Morgan replied. “He’s not at his registered address, and his phone goes straight to voicemail.”

“We just finished speaking with Ray Tucker,” Jake said, starting the engine. “He’s planning a podcast episode about the first tower murder, claiming to have special insight.”

“And his alibi?” Spelling asked.

“None for either night,” Jenna replied. “He was alone at home, by his account.”

“You think he’s involved?” Morgan’s skepticism was clear.

“Can’t rule it out.” Jenna glanced at Jake. “It might be worth having plainclothes officers keep an eye on him.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Morgan said.

“We also confirmed the identity of the Midnight Voice,” Jake added. “Diana Wells. Owns a new age store in Pinecrest called Avebury Visions.”

“Wells?” Morgan sounded surprised. “I know that shop. Never made the connection.”

“We’re heading there next,” Jenna said. “We’ll keep you posted.”

After they ended the call, Jake pulled away from the curb, heading toward the main street of Pinecrest.

“What do you think?” he asked after a moment. “Tucker seems like a charlatan, but a murderer?”

Jenna gazed out the window at the passing houses. “Would someone kill two people just to have material for a podcast? It seems extreme.”

“Could be an act,” Jake suggested. “The eccentric podcaster hiding a calculating mind.”

“Or he could be exactly what he appears to be – a conspiracy theorist looking to capitalize on a tragedy.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

As Jake turned off the cruiser engine, Jenna contemplated the peculiar world they were about to enter.

The shop stood out among the more practical establishments on the street—a Victorian-style building painted in deep purple with gold trim, its windows crowded with crystals.

A hand-painted sign declared “Avebury Visions: Where Spirit Meets Earth.”

“Ever stepped foot in a place like this before?” Jake asked.

“Not in an official capacity. My friend Cassie dragged me into a similar one back in college. She was convinced her boyfriend had been stepping out on her and wanted to buy some kind of ‘fidelity spell.’”

Jake’s eyebrows shot up as he turned to look at Jenna. “Did it work?”

“As it happened, the boyfriend was just part of a study group with another girl from his class,” Jenna revealed, reaching for her notepad on the dashboard. “The spell set us back twenty bucks though.” She opened the car door. “Let’s see what insights Ms. Wells can offer on our current case.”

They crossed the street together, their uniforms catching the glow from the store’s exterior lights. Dreamcatchers of various sizes hung in the window and wind chimes hanging from the awning created a delicate melody that seemed at odds with the serious nature of their visit.

A bell chimed overhead as they pushed open the door. The scent hit them immediately—a potent mixture of incense, herbs, and something earthy and primal. The air felt thick, almost viscous in the dimly lit space.

Jake coughed discreetly. “Smells like my aunt Meredith’s house after she discovered patchouli.”

Jenna’s eyes adjusted to the lighting—mostly provided by salt lamps and strategically placed candles.

The store was larger than it appeared from outside, stretching back into what seemed like a labyrinth of shelves and display cases.

Crystals of every color gleamed from black velvet trays.

Tarot decks in ornate boxes were arranged by theme.

Walls were covered in tapestries depicting celestial bodies and ancient symbols.

“Can I help you find something specific?” The voice came from behind a beaded curtain at the back of the store. “We just received a new shipment of selenite wands that are quite powerful for clearing negative energy.”

Jenna understood how this woman had once captivated radio listeners with just her voice. When she emerged from behind the curtain, there was something magnetic about her presence, even now, decades later.

Diana Wells was tall and willowy, draped in a flowing kaftan of blues and purples that shifted like water with each movement.

Her silver hair fell past her shoulders in a straight cascade, interwoven with small

feathers and glass beads that caught the light.

Every finger bore at least one ring—some simple bands, others elaborate settings with stones the size of small pebbles.

Multiple pendants hung around her neck, layered like geological strata.

Her striking green eyes seemed to look not at them but through them. They narrowed slightly as she registered their uniforms.

“Oh,” she said, her voice cooling by several degrees. “Law enforcement. How... unexpected.”

Jenna stepped forward, offering her professional smile. “Ms. Wells? I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves from Genesius County, and this is Deputy Jake Hawkins. We were hoping you might have a few minutes to talk.”

Diana’s fingers fluttered to one of her pendants—a piece of rough green stone wrapped in copper wire—and began turning it absently. “I haven’t broken any ordinances that I’m aware of. My business license and permits are current.”

“We’re not here about your business practices,” Jake assured her. “We’re investigating two recent murders.”

A flicker of something passed across Diana’s face—too quick to identify. She called out to a female employee.

“Janet, take over the cash register for a while,” she said. “I need to talk to these people.”

As the employee moved to her new post, Diana turned abruptly and moved to a

display case of tumbled stones, rearranging them with deliberate care. Jenna watched the woman's movements—the slight tensing of her shoulders, the way she kept her back to them. Classic avoidance behavior.

“There has been an estate sale going on for the late Howard Mitchell,” Jenna said, moving slowly around a table of incense holders to maintain line of sight with Diana.

“His daughter is selling off his vast collection of audio equipment. We were wondering if you purchased any items from his collection.”

Diana laughed, a sound like distant wind chimes. “Me? No. I’m more interested in natural objects than man-made ones. Crystals, woods, things shaped by earth energies rather than human hands.” She gestured around the store. “As you can see.”

Jake jotted something in his notebook. Jenna noted how Diana's eyes tracked the movement of his pen.

“Ms. Wells,” Jenna continued, keeping her tone conversational, “have you received any unusual messages lately? Anything threatening? Perhaps emails or social media contacts that concerned you?”

Diana's hands stilled on the crystals. The air in the shop seemed to thicken further, the incense smoke hanging in undisturbed curls.

“Why would you ask me that?” Her voice had dropped an octave.

“It's a standard question in our investigation,” Jake offered.

“But why me specifically?” Diana turned to face them fully, crossing her arms over her chest. The movement caused her many bracelets to jingle softly. “What makes you think I'd be a target?”

Jenna chose her next words carefully. “You’re a well-known figure in Pinecrest. You have a public presence. Sometimes that can attract unwanted attention.”

Diana’s lips pressed into a thin line. She moved behind the counter, putting a physical barrier between herself and the officers.

“There was an email,” she finally said. “Last week. I almost deleted it as spam, but...” She reached beneath the counter and withdrew a folder, sliding out a printed page. “I printed it. Old habits from before digital backups were reliable.”

Jenna accepted the paper, holding it so Jake could read it simultaneously.

The email was addressed to Diana’s business account. The sender’s address was obscured by a series of numbers and random characters, clearly a temporary account. The message itself was brief but disturbing:

“Your corruption of the astral plane ends soon. The frequencies you manipulate have consequences. Dawn approaches, and not all survive the light.”

“It’s anonymous, but I know who it’s from,” Diana said before they could ask. “Tyrone Voss sent it. He runs something called Firmament Reach—part cult, part self-help seminar. He charges people thousands of dollars to ‘ascend to their higher selves’ or some such nonsense.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. “And you two have history?”

Diana snorted. “If by ‘history’ you mean he’s been trying to discredit me for years, then yes. We met at the Midwest Metaphysical Conference in 2013. I was a featured speaker on intuitive sound healing. He was just starting out, selling cheap meditation CDs recorded in his basement.”

She began pacing behind the counter, her kaftan billowing slightly with each turn.

“He claimed I stole his techniques, which is absurd. I’ve been working with sound and energy for decades. Before he was even born, I was...” She stopped abruptly, glancing at them with sudden wariness.

“Before he was born, you were...?” Jenna prompted gently.

Diana waved a hand dismissively. “Just working in related fields. The point is, he’s always been jealous of my client base, my reputation. This is just his latest attempt to frighten me.”

Jenna squinted hard at Diana before asking her next question.

“Ms. Wells, is Tyrone Voss aware of your history as the ‘Midnight voice’?”

The change in Diana was immediate and alarming. Her eyes widened, darting around the room as if searching for hidden recording devices. She took several steps backward until she bumped against the wall of merchandise behind her, causing a small avalanche of precariously balanced dream journals.

“Who told you anything about the Midnight voice?” she demanded, her voice high and thin. “That information isn’t public. That was—that was a different life. How do you know about Midnight Voice?”

Jake raised both hands in a placating gesture. “Ms. Wells, we’re just trying to establish if there might be a connection between this threat and your past work.”

Diana’s breathing had become rapid and shallow. “No one knows. No one except—” She suddenly focused on Jenna with laser intensity. “Who are you really? Who sent you? Is it them? After all these years?”

Jenna took a cautious step forward. “No one sent us, Ms. Wells. We’re investigating a potential crime, that’s all.”

“Lies!” Diana’s voice rose sharply. “They always find a way. The government never really stops listening, you know. They monitor the frequencies. They knew what we were discovering back then—how sound can pierce the veil between dimensions. How certain frequencies can alter consciousness, can open doorways...”

She reached beneath the counter again, this time extracting a clear quartz crystal the size of a fist. She clutched it before her like a weapon.

“I can see your energies,” she continued, her voice trembling. “You’re not what you appear to be. Especially you.” She pointed the crystal at Jenna. “Your aura is... fractured. Split. You’re connected to the other side, aren’t you? They sent you to infiltrate, to find out what I know.”

Jenna felt a cold trickle down her spine. Diana couldn’t possibly know about her dreams, about her ability to communicate with the dead. It was coincidence, the ramblings of a paranoid mind, but still...

“Ms. Wells,” Jake said firmly, “we’re here to help. If you’re receiving threats, we can provide protection. We can have officers patrol this area more frequently, check in with you—”

“I don’t need your protection!” Diana almost shouted the words. “I have my own protection. I have a guardian spirit.”

“Who might that be?” Jenna asked.

Diana’s expression became secretive, almost sly. “Wouldn’t you like to know? He understands the vibrations. He knows the truth about the astral plane, about what’s

really happening in Pinecrest.”

She began moving around the counter, herding them toward the door with surprising determination for someone who moments ago had seemed frightened.

“I think you should leave now,” she said, her voice suddenly calm again, though her eyes remained wild. “I have nothing more to tell you about any of this, and I certainly don’t need your interference with Tyrone Voss. That’s my battle to fight on the spiritual plane.”

“Ms. Wells, please,” Jenna tried once more. “This could be serious. If someone is threatening you—”

“OUT!” Diana flung her arm toward the door, the crystal in her hand catching the light and sending prismatic reflections across the walls. “The energy in my space is corrupted now. I’ll have to cleanse for hours. OUT!”

Speaking calmly and quietly, Jenna said, “We’re only concerned about your safety. We’re going to post some officers outside to watch out for you until we solve this case. Don’t worry, they won’t do you any harm.”

The door chimed merrily as they found themselves back on the sidewalk, the sound incongruously cheerful after the intensity of the encounter.

Through the window, they could see Diana frantically lighting additional incense, moving around the shop in what appeared to be some kind of cleansing ritual.

Jake let out a long breath. “Well, that escalated quickly.”

Jenna nodded, still disturbed by Diana’s comment about her aura. “She’s genuinely frightened of something. Whether it’s Tyrone Voss or some other perceived threat,

I'm not sure."

"That comment about a guardian? Security system? Guardian angel?" Jake suggested.

"Whatever it is, she trusts it more than law enforcement." Jenna pulled out her phone. "We should update Colonel Spelling and Chief Morgan. And we need to get some officers watching over this place, despite her objections."

Jake nodded in agreement. "You think this Tyrone Voss is worth looking into?"

"Absolutely," Jenna said, dialing Colonel Spelling's number. "If he's the one who sent that message, he needs a conversation with law enforcement, at minimum."

The call connected quickly. Jenna gave Spelling a concise summary of their strange encounter, emphasizing Diana's paranoia and the threatening email from the anonymous sender who might be Tyrone Voss.

"We're going to need someone watching her store," Jenna concluded. "She refused protection, but I'm concerned she might be in danger—either from this Voss character or from her own mental state."

"I'll coordinate with Chief Morgan," Spelling replied. "We can have plainclothes officers observe from a distance without alarming her further."

After ending the call, Jenna turned to Jake. "Ready to pay a visit to Firmament Reach?"

"Nothing I'd like more than to meet a self-proclaimed spiritual guru who sends threatening emails," Jake said dryly. "That is, if he really is the one who sent it. Think he'll read our auras too?"

Jenna smiled despite herself as they walked back to the patrol car. “Let’s hope not. According to Diana, mine is ‘fractured.’”

She tried to make the comment sound like a joke, but Jake’s expression turned serious.

“She couldn’t know,” he said quietly. “It’s just part of her whole mystical persona.”

“Of course,” Jenna agreed, yet she couldn’t quite shake the lingering unease. “Either way, we now have two persons of interest—Ray Tucker and Tyrone Voss. Let’s see if we can connect either of them to our victims before there’s another death.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Diana remained at the window, watching the police cruiser pull away from the curb. She still clutched the quartz crystal, its cool surface now warmed by her grip.

They knew. Somehow, these supposed officers knew about Midnight Voice, about her past life at Astral Waves. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she stepped back from the window. The crystals on the sill seemed to pulse with warning energy, their usually comforting presence now screaming danger.

She called out to her employee, Janet Roff.

“Janet, fetch me a bundle of white sage,” she said.

Janet hurriedly complied.

“Protection circle,” she muttered, rushing to the center of the store with the sage in hand. “Need to cleanse the energies. They’ve contaminated everything.”

She lit the sage with shaking hands. Smoke billowed around her as she moved through the space, waving the smudge stick in elaborate patterns. The familiar ritual brought a momentary sense of calm, but the underlying panic remained, vibrating through her body like a discordant note.

“Cleanse this space of deception and lies,” she chanted, her voice growing stronger. “Shield these walls from prying eyes. Return to me my sanctuary.”

The smoke curled around her silver hair, catching in the feathers and beads woven there. As she completed her circuit of the store, Diana placed the still-smoking sage

in an abalone shell and set it on the counter. Her breathing had steadied somewhat, but her mind raced.

They weren't ordinary police officers. The woman—Jenna Graves—had an energy Diana had rarely encountered.

Split, fractured, as if existing in multiple planes simultaneously.

And she had known about Midnight Voice. That information wasn't public; Diana had been careful to separate that identity from her current life.

Only a handful of people knew the connection.

Government agents, perhaps? The pattern fit.

For years, Diana had known that certain branches of the government monitored frequencies that could alter consciousness.

Astral Waves had come too close to revealing truths about sound and interdimensional communication.

That's why they'd been shut down in 1998—not for the mundane broadcasting violations cited officially, but because they were accessing knowledge too dangerous to share.

Diana moved to the front door and flipped the "Open" sign to "Closed." She drew the blinds on all the windows with methodical precision, transforming the store into a dimly lit cocoon. Even with the sage cleansing, she felt exposed, vulnerable. Her gaze darted to the phone behind the counter.

Zephyr would know what to do. Zephyr always knew.

She had never met him in person. Their connection had begun with a phone call three years ago.

By the end of that call, Diana had felt a kinship with the mysterious caller that transcended ordinary connection.

He understood. He knew about the work she had done as Midnight Voice, about the frequencies that could pierce the veil between worlds.

Over time, their conversations had deepened. Zephyr revealed himself as a guardian of sorts—someone who monitored those who monitored others. He had warned her about surveillance, about people who might come asking questions about her past. And he had promised protection when the time came.

Diana picked up the phone and dialed the number she knew by heart. It rang three times before connecting.

“I need you,” she said without preamble, her voice quavering. “They’ve come.”

“Diana.” Zephyr’s voice was exactly as she remembered it—deep, resonant, with an almost hypnotic cadence. “Tell me what happened.”

She sank onto the stool behind the counter, suddenly exhausted. “Two police officers just left my store. Or at least that’s what they said they were. A Sheriff Graves and Deputy Hawkins. They knew about Midnight Voice, Zephyr. They knew my radio name from twenty-five years ago.”

“Breathe, Diana,” Zephyr instructed, his tone soothing. “What else did they ask about?”

“They offered protection, said they’d have officers watching the store. I refused, of

course. I told them I had you.”

There was a brief silence on the line. When Zephyr spoke again, his voice had taken on a new urgency.

“You were right to call me. The timing of this visit is no coincidence. First the threatening email, now law enforcement asking about your past. Dark forces are closing in.”

Diana’s free hand went to one of her pendants—a small vial containing herbs and crystals that Zephyr had instructed her to create as a personal protection talisman.

“What should I do?” she whispered.

“I think the time has come, Diana,” Zephyr said, his voice both gentle and firm. “We need to meet face to face at long last. You need to seek shelter where it all started.”

A weight seemed to lift from Diana’s shoulders. She had been anticipating this moment, preparing for it in small ways. “The station. Where we broadcast from. You think I should go back there?”

“Yes. The building has been abandoned since the station closed—no one will think to look for you there. You remember our contingency plan? About traveling undetected?”

“Yes,” Diana said, glancing toward the back room of her shop. “I’ve maintained my disguise kit, just as you suggested. I have the short brown wig, plain clothes, glasses. Nothing like my usual appearance.”

“Good.” Zephyr’s approval warmed her. “That disguise has worked for you before. You’ll need to use it now. There will likely be plainclothes officers—or at least

people posing as officers—watching the store despite your refusal of protection.”

Diana’s heart skipped. “They’re already outside?”

“Almost certainly. But they won’t be looking for a plain, middle-aged woman in unremarkable clothing. Your usual appearance is quite... distinctive.”

Despite her fear, Diana smiled. Her carefully cultivated image—the flowing kaftans, the adorned silver hair, the multiple layers of jewelry—was as much a part of her business as the crystals she sold. The severe bob wig and beige clothing she kept for anonymous errands was its perfect opposite.

“I can take the back exit through the alley,” she said, planning aloud. “There’s a bus stop three blocks south that runs to the old industrial district where the station was located.”

“Excellent. I’ll meet you there.”

Diana’s breath caught. “You’ll come in person? After all this time?”

“This is the moment we’ve prepared for,” Zephyr said, his voice now filled with what sounded like anticipation. “It’s time we combined our knowledge of the frequencies. Together, we can finally complete what Astral Waves began—accessing the vibrations that allow communion between dimensions.”

Tears sprang to Diana’s eyes. For years, she had carried the burden of knowledge about sound’s true power—how certain frequencies could alter consciousness, could even thin the membrane between worlds. To have someone who not only believed but understood was a gift beyond measure.

“I’ll leave immediately,” she decided. “I have some emergency cash in the safe,

enough to sustain me for a while.”

“Take only what you absolutely need,” Zephyr cautioned. “And Diana—leave your phone behind. They can track you through it.”

She hadn’t considered that. “Of course. I’ll leave it at the bus stop.”

“Good. Now go, quickly. Call me from a payphone once you’re away from the store to confirm you’ve departed safely. I’ll be waiting at the station.”

“Thank you, Zephyr.” Diana’s voice nearly broke with emotion. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’ll never have to find out,” he promised. “We’re connected through frequencies most people can’t even perceive. Now go, before they establish a tighter surveillance perimeter.”

The call ended, and Diana sat for a moment in the silent store. The sage had burned down to ash in the abalone shell, its cleansing work complete. She felt calmer now, purposeful. With confident movements, she went to the back room and unlocked a cabinet that held her personal belongings.

“I’m leaving, Janet,” she said to her employee. “I’m going back to where it started.”

“When will you be back?” Janet asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe never. But I’ve got to slip past those people outside who are watching me.”

The wig sat on a Styrofoam head—a simple brown bob without any of the adornments she usually wore. She removed the feathers and beads from her own hair,

gathering the long silver strands into a tight knot at the base of her neck. The wig fit snugly, transforming her appearance instantly.

From a drawer, she extracted plain black-framed glasses and a beige sweater set. The transformation continued as she removed her layered necklaces and rings, replacing them with a single modest pendant—still protective, but unremarkable.

Diana looked at herself in the small mirror hanging on the wall. A stranger looked back—an ordinary woman who would attract no second glances. She nodded at her reflection with satisfaction.

The safe behind a display of large amethyst geodes contained her emergency funds—five thousand in cash, carefully bundled. She took it all, along with a small notebook containing contacts and information too sensitive to keep digitally.

“One last thing,” she murmured, returning to the main shop area.

From a special display case, she selected specific crystals—a large piece of black tourmaline for protection, clear quartz for amplification, selenite for purification.

These, along with the cash and notebook, went into a nondescript canvas tote bag, nothing like the elaborately beaded bags she usually carried.

Diana took one final look around her store—the sacred space she had created and maintained for over a decade. The crystals seemed to pulse farewell, the gemstones glinting in the dim light. She wondered if she would ever return.

“Goodbye, Janet,” she said to her employee.

She slipped through the back door into the alley, leaving behind the life she had built—just another unremarkable figure moving through the evening, invisible to

anyone who might be watching.

“The frequencies are calling,” she whispered. “Midnight Voice must answer.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Twilight cast long shadows across the Firmament Reach building as Jake pulled the cruiser into a vacant spot.

The modern structure with its large windows glowed against the deepening violet sky.

Jenna studied the clean lines and understated signage—the words “Firmament Reach” in a simple, elegant font above the entrance.

“Doesn’t look like the cultish lair Diana made it sound like,” she commented.

“Let’s see if the inside matches,” Jake said as he cut the engine.

The glass doors slid open soundlessly as they approached the entrance, revealing a reception area decorated in varying shades of blue and gray.

Subtle recessed lighting cast a soft glow over comfortable-looking furniture arranged in conversational groupings.

A small water feature trickled gently in one corner, its sound barely perceptible.

A woman looked up from behind a curved reception desk, her smile immediate and genuine. “Good evening,” she said, standing to greet them. “Welcome to Firmament Reach. How can I help you?”

Jenna stepped forward, “Sheriff Graves and Deputy Hawkins from Genesius County. We’re here to speak with Tyrone Voss.”

The receptionist's smile didn't falter at the sight of law enforcement.

"Of course, Sheriff. Tyrone is just finishing up a mindfulness workshop. It should be wrapping up in the next five minutes or so." She gestured toward a hallway to their right.

"You're welcome to observe the final moments if you'd like.

He always ends with a beautiful closing exercise. "

"Thank you," Jenna said, surprised at the offer.

The receptionist nodded. "Room 103, just down that hall. You can enter quietly. No one will mind."

As they moved down the hallway, Jake leaned close. "Friendly place."

"Maybe a little too friendly?" Jenna whispered back.

They reached Room 103, and Jenna carefully opened the door just enough for them to slip inside. The room was dimly lit, but not dark. About twenty participants sat in a circle on cushioned mats, their attention directed toward a man standing in the center.

Tyrone Voss was speaking, "And as you return to full awareness, bring with you that sense of calm you reached in your meditation. Let it anchor you throughout your evening and into tomorrow."

Jenna studied him carefully. He appeared to be in his late thirties, and his hair was cut in a simple, neat style.

He wore a light blue button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows and

khaki pants—clothes that would blend in at any casual business meeting.

Nothing about him suggested the flamboyant charlatan Diana had described.

In fact, the process the group was using seemed to her like a simple meditation exercise, not the “part cult, part self-help seminar” Diana had called “nonsense.”

“Now, gently open your eyes and reconnect with the room,” he instructed the group.

As the participants blinked and stirred, soft murmurs of appreciation filled the space. Tyrone acknowledged each person with a small nod or smile.

“Thank you all for your presence tonight,” he said. “I look forward to seeing you next week.”

The group began to gather their belongings, and several approached Tyrone with questions or comments.

Jenna watched how he interacted with each person.

One older woman with silver hair pulled into a bun gripped his hands tightly.

“My grandson is responding so well to those breathing techniques you showed me,” she told him, her voice thick with emotion.

“His anxiety attacks have decreased by half this month.”

Tyrone’s face lit up with genuine pleasure. “That’s wonderful news, Martha. Remember, consistency is key. And make sure he knows it’s his own mind doing the healing—you and I are just showing him the tools.”

The woman nodded eagerly, then moved away, making room for others. After several minutes, the room had cleared except for the leader, who finally turned his attention to Jenna and Jake.

Approaching them with an extended hand, he said, “Tyrone Voss. I didn’t realize I had official visitors this evening.”

Jenna shook his hand. “Genesius County Sheriff Jenna Graves, and this is Deputy Jake Hawkins. Thank you for seeing us without notice.”

“Of course,” Tyrone gestured toward a small seating area in the corner of the room. “Would you like to sit? Or we can go to my office if you prefer more privacy.”

“This is fine,” Jenna said, moving toward the offered chairs.

Once seated, Tyrone leaned forward slightly, his hands relaxed on his knees. “So you’re from our neighboring county. How can I help?”

Jenna studied his face, searching for any hint of defensiveness. “We’re investigating two homicides that occurred in Pinecrest over the past few days. Marcus Derrick three nights ago, and Sandra Reeves last night. We’re speaking with individuals who might have information.”

At the mention of murders, Tyrone’s brow furrowed, and genuine concern crossed his features. “That’s terrible. I hadn’t heard. Pinecrest is usually such a peaceful community.”

“Where were you three nights ago, Mr. Voss?” Jake asked, his tone professional but not accusatory.

Instead of the expected defensiveness, Tyrone nodded thoughtfully.

“Three nights ago would have been Tuesday. I was here until about nine, leading an evening workshop on stress management. After that, I drove to Columbia for a late dinner with Dr. Elaine Morris from the psychology department at Mizzou. We’re collaborating on a research project about mindfulness techniques in addiction recovery.

We were at Barley’s Pub until around eleven, then I drove back to Pinecrest and arrived home shortly after midnight. ”

Jenna noted the specificity of his response—details that could be verified. “And last night?”

“Last night I was home grading papers—I teach a night class at Ozark State on Thursdays. I arrived home around nine-thirty and was on a video call with my sister in Portland from ten until about eleven fifteen. After that, I read for a while and went to bed.”

“Do you have security cameras here at Firmament Reach?” Jake asked.

“Yes, several,” Tyrone replied without hesitation. “Both inside and outside the building. You’re welcome to review the footage from Tuesday evening to confirm my departure time. I can also provide Dr. Morris’s contact information, and my sister would be happy to verify our call.”

“Did you know either of the victims?” Jenna asked, watching his reaction carefully.

Tyrone’s expression showed genuine puzzlement. “Derrick’s name is new to me. I’ve never actually met Sandra Reeves. What can you tell me about them?”

Marcus Derrick was a recluse who lived outside town. Former tech developer turned ham radio enthusiast,” Jenna explained, noting no flicker of recognition in Tyrone’s

eyes. “Sandra Reeves owned Melody Forge Studios in Pinecrest.”

At this, Tyrone’s face brightened slightly. “That’s right. I’ve seen the building, but I’ve never met Ms. Reeves personally. I’ve been meaning to reach out to her about possibly recording some guided meditations, but I hadn’t gotten around to it yet.”

“We also spoke with Diana Wells at Avebury Visions,” Jenna said, deliberately introducing the name to gauge his reaction.

Something shifted in Tyrone’s expression—not anger or resentment, but something that looked remarkably like compassion.

“How is Diana?” he asked. “I haven’t spoken with her in some time.”

“She mentioned your history,” Jake said, his tone neutral.

Tyrone sighed, a small smile touching his lips. “I imagine she did. Diana and I have different approaches to helping people. She believes I hold a grudge against her for adapting some of my techniques, but the truth is, I believe that healing practices should be shared, not hoarded.”

Jenna leaned forward slightly. “She showed us a threatening email she received. She believes you sent it.”

For the first time, Tyrone’s eyebrows rose in genuine surprise. “A threatening email? No, I would never do something like that. May I ask what it said?”

“It accused her of corrupting the astral plane and manipulating frequencies,” Jenna explained, watching him closely. “It ended with what certainly seemed like a veiled threat.”

Tyrone shook his head slowly. “That wasn’t from me. I know Diana has had conflicts with others in our field over the years. I suppose that email could have come from any of a number of sources.”

He paused, his expression thoughtful. “Diana has... struggled with paranoia for as long as I’ve known her.

I’ve tried to reach out several times over the years, but she interprets even friendly gestures as attempts to undermine her.

Diana has incredible intuitive gifts, but the same sensitivity that makes her perceptive also makes her vulnerable to fears and suspicions. ”

He clasped his hands together. “I hope you’ll find whoever sent that email. Diana deserves to feel safe.”

The sharp ring of Jenna’s phone cut through the room. She pulled it from her pocket, noting Chief Morgan’s number on the screen.

“Excuse me,” she said, getting up and stepping a few paces away to answer. “Graves.”

“Sheriff, it’s Morgan,” the Chief’s voice came through, tight with urgency. “Diana Wells has gone missing. Somehow, she slipped away from the officers who were watching out for her. Spelling and I are headed to her store right now.”

“We’ll be right there,” Jenna said, ending the call and turning back to Jake and Tyrone. “We need to go. There’s a situation with Diana Wells.”

Jake was on his feet immediately, reading the urgency in her tone.

Tyrone stood as well, concerned about his features. “Is Diana alright?”

“She’s missing,” Jenna said, watching his reaction carefully.

A genuine alarm flashed across his face. “Oh no. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“We may have more questions for you,” Jenna said, already moving toward the door.

“I’ll be available anytime,” Tyrone assured them. “My cell is always on.”

Outside in the parking lot, the darkness had deepened. “What do you think?” Jake asked quietly.

Jenna paused with her hand on the driver’s door. “He’s either exactly what he appears to be—”

“Or the best actor we’ve ever interviewed,” Jake finished.

“Either way, Diana’s disappearance changes things. I’ll call Spelling and let him know we’re on our way to Avebury Visions.”

Jake slid into the driver’s seat, starting the engine.

As they pulled away from Firmament Reach, Jenna couldn’t shake the feeling that they were racing against time.

If Diana had fled, driven by paranoia, she might have placed herself in danger.

But if she had been targeted by the same killer who took Marcus and Sandra, her chances were already dwindling.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Kevin Barrett stood on the roof of the abandoned Ozark Sole Works factory, his silhouette stark against the darkening sky.

He swept the beam of his flashlight upon the crude broadcasting antenna, its metal framework rusted but still intact.

The bolts had corroded, creating a reddish stain that spread across the concrete like dried blood.

Kevin ran his fingers along the metal struts, feeling the rough texture.

Yes, it would serve, if it proved necessary.

Sandra Reeves had been a disappointment. Her voice—once so vibrant, so perfectly pitched—had failed to capture the cosmic signal he sought. Useless, just like his first attempt with the man.

His plan had been flawless. Why didn't it work either time? He had become despondent, and then the phone call earlier that day had changed everything.

Diana had called, using the name he'd adopted solely for her—Zephyr.

"I need you," she'd said. "They've come."

Kevin had felt the panic rise in his throat as she'd spoken of law enforcement officials asking questions.

He knew the visit could only mean one thing—that the law was closing in on him.

And now he had to act faster. And he had to seize an opportunity he'd been long waiting for.

The Midnight Voice herself was coming to him.

Kevin checked his watch. 9:32 PM. She would arrive soon.

He gathered his equipment and moved toward the roof access door.

The hinges groaned in protest as he pulled them open, revealing a dark stairwell below.

Kevin flicked the flashlight beam down the concrete steps, illuminating decades of dust and debris.

The beam caught a scuttling movement—a rat or large insect—and Kevin felt a momentary kinship with the creature.

Both of them dwelled in forgotten spaces, and both moved through shadows unseen.

He descended the stairs carefully. When he reached the landing, a vast, empty mass production space spread out before him, where workers had long ago stitched and shaped footwear. Kevin had spent countless hours here as a sound engineer during Astral Waves' brief existence.

He smiled as he remembered those days—the excitement of illegal broadcasting, the thrill of sharing fringe ideas that mainstream media would never touch. Ray Tucker had been the face of the operation, but Diana—she had been its soul.

The Midnight Voice had spoken of cosmic consciousness, of signals from beyond our dimension trying to break through. She alone had heard the messages in the static between stations, and she had interpreted them for her loyal listeners.

And Kevin had believed her. Had worshipped her.

Until she rejected him.

The memory still burned like acid in his mind. The night he'd approached her after a broadcast, trembling with excitement, confessing that he too had begun to hear whispers in the static. Her eyes had narrowed, assessing him.

"You're not ready," she had told him. "You're hearing echoes, not the true voice."

The dismissal had crushed him, but he'd persisted in his efforts. Years of listening, tuning, and adjusting frequencies. Years of failure.

Until he'd realized the truth—human bodies were better antennas than any metal construction.

Kevin descended another flight of stairs, moving deeper into the building's core.

Finally, he reached the narrow staircase that led to the basement.

This had been Ray's stroke of genius—broadcasting from below ground level, using the building's mass to help shield their signal from immediate detection by the FCC.

Kevin descended slowly. The basement corridor was lined with storage rooms and utility spaces.

At the far end, behind an unmarked door, lay the former heart of Astral Waves.

He approached it reverently, feeling the familiar quickening of his pulse.

How many nights had he spent in that room, listening to Diana's hypnotic voice weaving tales of cosmic consciousness and interdimensional communication?

He pushed the door open, and there it was—the studio, preserved like a time capsule of fringe radio broadcasting.

Kevin swept the beam of his flashlight across the space, noting with satisfaction that the backup generator he'd checked last week still sat in the corner.

He approached it, set down his equipment, and gave the starter cord a firm pull.

After a moment of resistance, the generator coughed to life, its low rumble filling the room.

With power flowing, Kevin flipped switches on the wall. Battery-powered emergency lights flickered on, casting the studio in a dim, yellowish glow. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

He moved to the central table and placed a two-way radio there, a poor substitute for the professional equipment that had once filled this space, but adequate for his purposes.

He checked his watch again. 9:51 PM.

Soon, he thought. Very soon.

The tires of their vehicle squealed as Jake took the corner. Jenna braced herself

against the door, her mind racing faster than the car. Diana Wells had vanished—slipped right past the officers assigned to protect her.

“How the hell does someone under police protection just walk out?” Jake grumbled. “Morgan’s going to be apoplectic.”

“Morgan’s the least of our concerns right now,” Jenna replied. “If the killer gets to Diana before we do...”

She left the thought unfinished. They both knew what was at stake.

The new age shop came into view. A police cruiser was already parked haphazardly near the entrance—Chief Morgan’s vehicle. Colonel Spelling stood beside it.

Jake pulled in behind the cruiser and killed the engine. They approached the storefront where Morgan was berating a uniformed officer. “—most basic aspect of the job. You had one responsibility. One!”

Colonel Spelling stood slightly apart. When he spotted Jenna and Jake approaching, a flash of relief crossed his features.

Morgan turned, his anger redirecting toward the newcomers. “Glad you could join us, Sheriff.”

Jenna ignored the comment and addressed the uniformed officer directly. “Officer, I need to understand exactly what happened. When did you last see Ms. Wells?”

The young officer straightened, clearly relieved to be addressing someone other than Morgan.

“Ma’am, I checked on her approximately an hour ago.

She was with the employee, Janet Roff, discussing inventory.

Everything seemed normal.” He swallowed hard.

“I returned to my post outside. When I went back in to check again about a half hour ago, Ms. Roff informed me that Ms. Wells had stepped out. I immediately called it in.”

“Stepped out,” Morgan repeated, his voice dripping with disdain. “Like she went for a coffee run instead of fleeing protection during an active murder investigation.”

Jenna studied the storefront. The dreamcatchers hanging in the window swayed gently in the morning breeze, and wind chimes created a jarring melody against the tense scene unfolding below them.

“Let’s talk to Janet,” she said, moving toward the entrance. The others followed, the bell above the door announcing their arrival with a cheerful chime that felt wildly inappropriate.

Janet emerged from behind a beaded curtain, her expression shifting from professional welcome to apprehension when she registered the four law enforcement officers.

“I’ve already told Officer Daniels everything I know,” she said defensively.

“Well, now you can tell us,” Jenna said, stepping forward. “We need to know exactly how Diana left without being noticed.”

“Diana has... methods of avoiding attention when she doesn’t want it. She’s been doing it for years.” She gestured vaguely toward the back of the store. “Wigs, makeup, different styles of clothing.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this to the officers assigned to protect her?” Morgan’s voice rose.

“Diana values her privacy,” Janet replied stiffly.

Jenna stepped closer to Janet, intentionally positioning herself between the employee and Morgan’s mounting frustration.

“Janet, where did she go?” Jenna’s voice was firm but measured. “This isn’t about privacy anymore. It’s about keeping her alive.”

The employee’s shoulders slumped. “She went to her childhood home,” Janet finally said. “It’s been vacant for years, but she still has a key. She goes there sometimes when she needs to... center herself. That’s how she puts it.”

“Address,” Morgan demanded.

Janet hesitated, then wrote an address on a piece of paper embossed with the store’s logo. She slid it across the counter.

“It’s on the eastern edge of town,” she explained. “Kind of isolated.”

“Did Diana specifically tell you she was going to her childhood home?” Jenna asked, watching Janet’s face carefully.

Janet’s eyes flicked away for a fraction of a second. “Not exactly,” she admitted. “She said, ‘I’m going back to where it started.’ I’m sure that’s what she meant.”

Where it started ...

The words echoed something else, something important ...then the connection

snapped into place.

Sandra Reeves. The dream.

During her dream visit, Sandra had said something crucial—that her captor had mentioned luring the Midnight Voice “to where it all started,” the place where she “spoke to the world.”

Not Diana’s childhood home. The radio station.

“Thank you for your help, Janet,” Jenna said, already turning toward the door. “If Diana contacts you, call immediately.”

Outside on the sidewalk, Jenna turned to the group.

“I think we’re making a mistake,” she said before Morgan could start issuing orders. “I don’t believe Diana went to her childhood home.”

Morgan’s expression darkened. “And where exactly do you think she went, Sheriff? You have a crystal ball we don’t know about?”

Jenna steadied herself. “The abandoned shoe factory—Ozark Sole Works. The one that once housed Astral Waves.”

“The pirate radio station?” Morgan scoffed. “Based on what?”

Jenna measured her words carefully. “Janet said Diana’s exact words were ‘I’m going back to where it started.’ For the Midnight Voice, that could easily mean where she first broadcast.”

“That’s one hell of a leap,” Morgan said, shaking his head. “The employee

specifically said she meant the house.”

“She interpreted,” Jenna corrected. “She didn’t know for certain.”

Colonel Spelling had been quiet, but now he studied Jenna with that penetrating gaze she’d come to recognize—the look that said he knew she wasn’t sharing everything but wasn’t going to press her on it.

“Diana Wells hasn’t been connected to that station in what, twenty-five years?” Morgan argued. “We have a concrete address and a pattern of behavior versus your... hunch.”

Jenna held her ground. “My professional assessment suggests we should check both locations.”

Morgan threw up his hands. “Fine. Spelling and I will check the address we actually have. You and your deputy can waste time at an abandoned factory if that’s how Genesius County wants to allocate its resources.”

He stalked back to his cruiser, leaving Colonel Spelling standing with Jenna and Jake. The Colonel’s expression remained impassive, but his eyes held a question.

“Graves,” he said quietly, “is there something specific pointing you toward that factory?”

Jenna met his gaze. “I have reason to believe I’m right.”

Spelling nodded, not asking for details she couldn’t provide. “You have my number. We’ll check the house, but I’m keeping a unit available. Call if you need backup.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” Jenna said.

As Spelling headed toward Morgan's cruiser, Jake asked Jenna, "Alright, what am I missing? That had something to do with Sandra in the dream, didn't it?"

"Sandra told me the killer talked about luring the Midnight Voice 'to where it all started,' "Jenna confirmed, as they walked quickly toward their vehicle. "The place where she 'spoke to the world.' Those were her exact words."

Jake opened the driver's side door. "And you're certain that means the radio station?"

"It makes more sense than her childhood home," Jenna said, sliding into the passenger seat. "Think about it—Diana became the Midnight Voice at Astral Waves. That's where she 'spoke to the world.' Where it all started for her public persona."

Jake started the engine. "Morgan's going to be insufferable if we're right."

Jenna was already pulling up the location on her phone. The GPS map on her phone zoomed out to show the location of the abandoned Ozark Sole Works factory on the outskirts of Pinecrest. Jenna's intuition hummed like a live wire. She was right about this—she had to be.

"There," she said, holding up the phone for Jake to glance at. "Four miles northwest, just off Route 7."

Jake pulled away from the curb, accelerating. Jenna stared ahead, hoping they weren't already too late.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The bus lurched to a stop, and Diana Wells steadied herself against the metal pole.

Her heart quickened as she stepped down from the bus.

The doors wheezed shut behind her, and the vehicle pulled away, leaving her alone on the empty street corner.

Streetlights flickered erratically, some dead entirely, creating pools of darkness between islands of sickly yellow light.

Diana pulled her coat tighter. After decades of broadcasting the unseen, of channeling ethereal voices, she was finally about to meet her guardian spirit for the first time.

She wondered, what form would he take?

She walked the block toward the factory—three stories of weathered brick, most windows broken or boarded, smokestacks rising against the night sky. It had once bustled with workers crafting shoes that walked across America, but had fallen to economic change.

Then the old building had been the birthplace of Astral Waves, where Diana had transformed into the Midnight Voice. Now it stood as a hollow monument, no longer of use.

When she reached the heavy wooden entrance doors, she saw that boards blocking the way had been pried loose.

One had fallen entirely, leaving a gap wide enough to slip through.

She ducked through the opening into the dark interior.

Dim light filtered through broken windows.

Her eyes adjusted slowly, revealing the cavernous main floor of the factory.

She hadn't spent much time on this floor much during her Astral Waves days. They had built the small broadcast tower on the roof, and Ray had kept their equipment hidden in the basement.

Diana moved deeper into the factory, toward the back stairwell they had always used. When she opened that door, she saw that the thin beams of light barely penetrated the first few steps. She would be descending into absolute darkness.

She placed one hand against the cold wall, using it as a guide.

By the third step, the weak light from the factory floor no longer reached her.

The darkness was absolute and disorienting.

The fourth step. The fifth. How many were there?

In her memory, a dozen or so, but memory was a tricky companion.

Halfway down, doubt crept in. What if she fell? What if this was a mistake? Then a sound came from below.

“Diiiiiaaaannnnaaa.”

Relief washed through her—Zephyr was there, waiting.

“Zephyr?” she called, her voice small in the darkness.

“Come to me, Diana. I’ve been waiting.”

Relieved, she moved on downward in the dark, Zephyr’s voice encouraging her every step.

Diana also heard a subtle crackling that reminded her of...radio static. In all their previous communications, Zephyr’s voice had been clear, resonating directly in her mind. But she reminded herself that meeting a spiritual entity in physical form was unprecedented in her experience.

She reached the bottom of the stairs. Her outstretched hands touched nothing. She’d worked in this basement for two years, but in the absolute darkness, nothing was familiar. Her sense of direction faltered.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“This way.” The crackling words came from her right. “Follow my voice.”

Diana turned, taking small shuffling steps. The concrete floor was uneven beneath her feet. Something small skittered past—disturbed by her presence.

Finally her foot struck something solid—a wall. She moved her hands across it, feeling the smoothness of painted cinderblock, until she found the edge of what must be a doorframe.

“Yes,” the voice confirmed, seeming to come from just beyond that door. “You’ve found it. The place where it all began.”

The broadcast studio. Where she'd first channeled the Midnight Voice. Where listeners across the region had tuned in to hear prophecies and warnings, cosmic truths and spiritual guidance.

Her hand found a doorknob. It turned easily in her grip, and the door swung inward. The small studio had once contained their broadcasting equipment—a mixing board, microphones, recording devices. But now, nothing was visible in the darkness.

“Come in, Diana,” the voice said.

She stepped forward, across the threshold.

The door slammed shut behind her with a force that couldn't have been natural. Diana spun around, heart pounding.

“Zephyr?”

“Tell me the message,” the static-ridden voice interrupted. “Tell me what the cosmic voice revealed.”

Cold fear washed through Diana as she realized that the voice was coming from a speaker in the room with her.

“I don't know what you mean,” she cried.

“The cosmic voice spoke to you. It shared secrets meant only for the worthy. Now tell me what it said, if you value your life.”

Kevin Barrett stood in the dark hallway outside the studio. He had just slammed the

door shut, trapping the Midnight Voice where she'd once broadcast her wisdom to the world—the same room where, years ago, she'd deemed him unworthy.

His hand tightened around a hand-held radio, its plastic casing warm against his palm.

He raised the radio to his lips, pressing the talk button to broadcast his words to the receiver that was inside the room with Diana.

He'd rigged the radio inside so that it transmitted her voice whenever she spoke.

“Diana?”

Her response was shaky. “Please, let me go. Whatever you want—”

“What I want,” Kevin interrupted, “is for you to think. To remember. Does my voice sound familiar to you? From some other time, perhaps?”

The radio crackled with silence. Kevin could almost see her inside the studio, trying to place his voice among the countless listeners and callers she'd encountered over the years.

“I... I don't know what you mean,” she finally answered. “Should I recognize your voice?”

“Try harder,” he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Think back to Astral Waves. To this very building.”

“Were you...” Diana's voice hesitated. “Were you a listener? A caller to my show?”

Kevin laughed, a harsh sound. “Closer. Much closer than that.”

Time seemed to stretch as he waited for her to make the connection.

“You worked here,” she said finally. “At the station.”

A small thrill ran through him. “Yes.”

“You were... technical staff? An engineer?”

“Yes,” Kevin breathed. “I worked the boards during your midnight broadcasts. I made sure your voice reached everyone who needed to hear it.”

“I’m sorry,” Diana said. “There were so many people at the station over the years. I can’t recall your name.”

The fragile bubble of Kevin’s excitement burst, replaced by a familiar, caustic anger.

“You don’t remember.” It wasn’t a question.

“My name is Kevin Barrett. I sat less than ten feet from you, night after night, for almost two years. I brought you herbal tea when your throat was sore. I adjusted your microphone levels to make your voice sound perfect. But when I asked you about the message in the static—” Kevin’s voice broke.

“You told me I wasn’t ready. That I was unworthy to know what the universe was trying to say. ”

“Kevin,” she whispered finally. “Yes, I... I remember now. You were always so quiet, so... intense.”

A small, bitter smile twisted Kevin’s lips. “Intense. Yes. And now I need to know, Diana. After all these years, I need you to tell me what it meant.”

“What what meant?”

“The message. The cosmic message you said you could hear in the radio static. The one you said I wasn’t ready for.”

The radio went silent. Kevin waited, his breathing shallow. This was the moment he’d been working toward. The revelation that would make sense of everything—the voices, the visions, the towers, the bodies. All of it was for this.

The seconds stretched into a minute. Then two. The silence was maddening.

“Diana?” he prompted.

A sound came through the speaker. It took Kevin a moment to recognize it. The Midnight Voice was weeping.

“I don’t remember,” she said between sobs. “I don’t remember what I thought I heard back then. It was too long ago, Kevin.”

“Mind the next turn,” Jenna warned Jake, pointing ahead to where the road narrowed. She braced herself against the dashboard as he took the sharp curve, the patrol car’s tires gripping the asphalt with a faint squeal.

“What I don’t understand,” Jake said when the car straightened out, “is why Diana would go back to the Astral Waves studio.”

“Maybe looking for something ... evidence from back then, or... I don’t know.” Jenna couldn’t explain her certainty, even to herself. “Maybe lured there. But if I’m wrong about this, Jake...”

“Your instincts have never steered us wrong before,” Jake countered. “I’d bet on your gut over Morgan’s evidence any day.”

Diana cringed in the dark. How many hours had she spent in this very place, her voice traveling through the night to reach the faithful? The irony wasn’t lost on her: the studio that had once been her sanctuary was now her prison, and the man who once facilitated her broadcasts was now her captor.

She struggled to recall something—anything—about the insights she’d claimed to receive from radio waves all those years ago. In the haze of memory, it was difficult to separate genuine mystical experiences from the theatrical persona she had cultivated as the Midnight Voice.

She had believed some of what she said—truly believed it. But how much had been performance? How much had been the heady power of knowing thousands were listening to her every word?

The nearby transceiver crackled again.

“I’m waiting, Diana,” Kevin’s voice came through, tight with barely contained impatience.

“Kevin, I’m trying to remember. It was so long ago.”

“You told me it was the most important message humanity would ever receive,” he replied, his voice rising.

Diana’s mind raced. She had said something like that, hadn’t she? Part of her late-night rhetoric, designed to keep listeners tuned in through the small hours. But what

had she claimed to hear? What supposed wisdom had she dangled before her audience like a spiritual carrot?

She could sense Kevin's growing agitation even through the sporadic transmission of the radio. If she couldn't produce the cosmic message he so desperately sought, what would he do to her?

"Kevin," she said carefully, measuring each word. "The message came to me in fragments, in moments when the veil between worlds was thinnest. It wasn't something I could simply repeat verbatim."

"You're stalling."

His voice had changed—flattened, deadened in a way that sent a chill down her spine.

Diana swallowed hard. Her only chance was to invent something convincing, something that would satisfy his obsession.

"The message," she began, forcing her voice into the melodious, authoritative tone of the Midnight Voice, "spoke of frequencies that bind all living things. It revealed that consciousness itself is a form of broadcast—thoughts and emotions traveling like radio waves between minds."

It was a bluff, of course—an improvisation. She paused, listening for his reaction. When none came, she continued, her confidence wavering with each word.

"The static contained a pattern—a repeating sequence that matched the golden ratio found throughout nature. It suggested that by attuning ourselves to certain frequencies, we could access a collective consciousness, a shared wisdom that exists beyond individual human experience."

Diana waited, heart hammering in her chest. Had she convinced him? The silence stretched, unbearable.

Then came a sound that froze her blood—laughter.

“You’re lying,” he cut her off, voice suddenly sharp as a blade. “Making it up as you go.”

“No,” she protested weakly. “I’m telling you what I remember.”

“I’ve spent twenty years searching for that message,” Kevin continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“Twenty years listening to the static, trying to hear what you claimed to hear. I’ve built receivers, positioned them perfectly, used human conductors to amplify the signal.

But you never heard the message, did you?

” Kevin asked, his voice soft now. “I caught traces of it, scattered whispers, but you never heard a thing. You were a fraud all along. You made me think I was unworthy when you were the one who was truly unworthy.”

Silence filled the room again, broken only by Diana’s ragged breathing and the subtle electronic hum of the old equipment.

“I’m sorry, Kevin,” she finally said, the words inadequate even as she spoke them. “I never meant to hurt anyone.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” he replied, a strange peace in his voice that frightened her more than his anger had. “I know how to find the message myself. And you’re going

to help me.”

“Help you?” Diana repeated, her voice small. “How?”

“The antenna on the roof still works,” Kevin explained, as casually as if discussing the weather. “With some adjustments, it could be quite effective. And with the right conductor—I might finally hear what I’ve been trying to hear all these years.”

The radio went silent. Then she heard the door swing open, and then shut again. He was in the room with her.

“Hello, Diana,” he said softly. “It’s time for your final broadcast.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

As the beam of Jenna's flashlight cut through the darkness of the abandoned factory, she moved carefully to minimize noise of her footsteps on the debris-strewn floor.

Beside her, Jake matched her cautious pace, his own light sweeping methodically from side to side, revealing the skeletal remains of shoe manufacturing equipment that loomed like prehistoric beasts in the cavernous space.

"Clear," Jake whispered, completing his scan of the immediate area.

"The studio should be in the basement," she murmured. "According to Ray Tucker, Astral Waves broadcast from a makeshift studio they built underground."

Jake turned his flashlight beam to a metal door in the far corner. "That must be our way down."

The door groaned in protest as Jake pulled it open. Jenna winced at the noise, hoping it hadn't traveled far enough to alert anyone to their presence.

"Watch your step," Jake cautioned as they gazed down a narrow concrete stairwell.

Jenna took point, her service weapon drawn but held low as she descended. At the bottom of the stairs, they found themselves in a dark corridor.

"Which way?" Jake asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"This way," she decided, heading to the right.

“Place is like a maze,” Jake observed as they turned yet another corner, finding themselves in an identical passageway.

A distant sound stopped them both mid-step.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered.

“Sounded like someone talking.”

Another sound reached them—faint but unmistakable. It was a voice, though too distant to make out the words.

“End of the hall, maybe?” Jake observed.

As they moved that way, the sounds became clearer—a man’s voice and a woman’s, though they couldn’t catch the words

Jenna felt a familiar prickling sensation at the back of her neck. Her intuition—the same sense that had guided her through countless investigations—told her not to call out.

“We need to move,” she whispered, urgency propelling her forward. “Now.”

Kevin held the audio cord in his hand, the familiar texture of the braided cable reassuring against his skin. In the pitch darkness of the old Astral Waves studio, he felt a sense of rightness, of destiny fulfilled.

He circled slowly around where he knew Diana stood frozen, enjoying the soft sound of her frightened breathing. She couldn’t see him, but he didn’t need to see her. He

knew this room well.

He moved three steps clockwise, maintaining the circle he traced around her. The cord dangled from his hand.

“I was there when you told your listeners about the cosmic vibrations,” he told her. “About the messages hidden in radio waves. I believed you heard them, just like I heard bits and pieces. Everyone believed you.”

“That was a long time ago,” Diana said, her voice quavering. “It was just a radio persona, Kevin. Entertainment.”

The word ‘entertainment’ ignited something in Kevin’s brain, a flash of white-hot anger that momentarily blinded him even in the darkness.

“Entertainment?” he hissed. “Is that what you call it? People made life decisions based on your guidance. They trusted you!”

He stepped closer, his anger propelling him forward before he regained control and resumed his circling pattern.

“I trusted you,” he continued, softer now. “When I came to you and told you I could hear the message too, that I needed help understanding it—you turned me away.”

He explained, as if Diana had asked for clarification. “I’ve been trying to tune into it for years now. The others helped me get closer. But it’s still not clear enough. I need your help to tune it properly. You’re the only one who can do it.”

In the darkness, Diana’s breathing had accelerated. Kevin could almost taste her fear, metallic and sharp on his tongue. He moved closer, allowing the cord to sway from his hand like a pendulum.

“You’re going to help me tune the frequency. That’s why we’re here, where it all began. Where you first taught me to listen.”

A sound from beyond the studio—a metallic creak, faint but distinct—interrupted his monologue. Kevin froze, head tilted toward the door.

“What was that?” he whispered.

He strained to listen, suddenly acutely aware of the building around them—old, abandoned, full of shifting metal and settling concrete. But this had sounded different. Deliberate.

“Is someone here?” Diana asked, hope creeping into her voice.

“Shut up,” Kevin snapped, panic flaring briefly before he tamped it down.

He held his breath, listening intently. For several seconds, there was nothing. Then—another sound. Unmistakably footsteps.

Someone was in the building. Had he been followed here?

Sweat beaded on Kevin’s forehead. This wasn’t part of the plan. They were supposed to be alone, undisturbed as he made one last attempt to receive the cosmic message.

“We need to hurry,” he muttered.

Another sound reached him—closer now. Definitely footsteps, and they were approaching.

Paranoia bloomed in Kevin’s chest, spreading outward like ice through his veins. But how? Unless...

“You led them here,” he accused, tightening his grip on Diana’s arm. “Somehow, you knew. You’ve been working against me all along.”

“No,” Diana protested. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

In the darkness, he moved to find her, the cord stretched between his hands.

Hope flared in Diana’s chest at the sounds of someone else in the building. Had anyone noticed her missing from her shop? The Sheriff, perhaps—what was her name? Graves. Sheriff Graves, who had interviewed her about two murders. Or were the footsteps those of some indifferent stranger?

She forced herself to breathe slowly, fighting the rising panic that threatened to overwhelm her. If she called out for help, would her captor strike her down before anyone could reach her?

The darkness was absolute, robbing her of sight, but her other senses had sharpened in compensation. Each shuffle of Kevin’s feet against the concrete floor, each rustle of his clothing as he moved, painted a mental picture of his position.

She knew he had been moving around her, maintaining a precise distance. She struggled to remember the details of the room. But of course, those details had changed. The room had long since been divested of almost all of its equipment.

“I don’t have time to make you understand properly,” Kevin said, his voice taking on a manic edge. “We need to proceed now. They’ll leave without finding us. Then your body will help me tune into the signal.”

Diana reached out, her fingers connecting with cold metal—the base of a microphone

stand, apparently one stray piece of equipment that hadn't been taken away with the station was shut down. Relief surged through her as she wrapped her hand around it, feeling its solid weight.

She had seconds at most. Kevin was moving toward her again, his breathing growing louder as he closed the distance between them.

"Now," Kevin hissed, his hands moving toward her throat. "It has to be now."

Diana gripped the microphone stand with both hands, summoning every ounce of strength within her.

With a desperate cry that tore from her throat, she swung the heavy stand in a wide arc through the darkness.

The microphone stand cut through the air with a soft whoosh, momentum carrying it forward with more force than Diana had anticipated.

She felt resistance as it connected with something solid, followed by a grunt of surprise and pain.

Time seemed to slow as Diana realized she had made contact. But in the absolute darkness, she couldn't tell if she had merely glanced him or delivered a more significant blow. She adjusted her grip, preparing to swing again if necessary.

"You—" Kevin began, his voice strained but still too close for comfort.

At that precise moment, the studio door burst open, flooding the room with the harsh beams of flashlights that momentarily blinded Diana after so long in complete darkness.

Jenna burst through the studio door, weapon drawn, flashlight beam cutting through the darkness.

The scene before her unfolded in chaotic fragments—Diana Wells with a microphone stand raised like a club, Kevin Barrett stumbling backwards, his face a mask of surprise and rage.

The beam of Jake's flashlight joined hers

“Police! Don't move!” Jenna commanded

For a fraction of a second, everything froze—Diana with the microphone stand still clutched in white-knuckled hands, Kevin with one hand pressed to his temple where blood trickled from a fresh wound, an audio cord dangling from his other hand like a dead snake.

Then, as if released from a spell, Kevin lunged toward Diana once more, his face contorted with fury.

“Get back!” Jenna shouted, moving forward, her weapon trained on Kevin.

Jake immediately flanked right, creating a tactical advantage as they both advanced into the room. Their flashlight beams bobbed and crossed, illuminating Kevin's wild eyes and Diana's terrified expression.

“On the ground! Now!” Jake ordered Kevin, his voice carrying the unmistakable authority of law enforcement.

“I need to hear the message!” Kevin screamed, his voice cracking. “She has to help

me tune into it!”

Jake forced Kevin face-down onto the floor, applying pressure to keep him there as he reached for his handcuffs. The killer continued to struggle, his body twisting with manic energy, forcing Jake to apply more pressure to his restraint hold.

“Stop resisting,” Jake commanded through gritted teeth.

The metallic click of handcuffs closing around Kevin’s wrists seemed to finalize something—both the end of the immediate danger and the completion of his descent into madness.

His body went slack beneath Jake’s grip, though his mouth continued to move, muttering about frequencies and static and messages that needed to be heard.

Only when Jake had fully secured Kevin did Jenna lower her weapon and turn her full attention to Diana.

The older woman stood trembling, still gripping the microphone stand as if it were a lifeline. Her silver hair, usually so neatly arranged, hung in disarray around her pale face.

“Ms. Wells,” Jenna said gently, holstering her weapon and extending a hand. “You’re safe now. It’s over.”

Diana’s eyes, wide with residual terror, fixed on Jenna’s face as if struggling to comprehend her words. The microphone stand wavered in her grasp.

“He—” Diana began, her voice a hoarse whisper. “He was going to—”

“I know,” Jenna said, carefully approaching and placing her hand on the microphone

stand. “You can let go now. We’ve got him.”

Slowly, Diana’s fingers uncurled from around the metal pole. As Jenna took it from her, Diana’s composure crumbled completely. Her knees buckled, and Jenna quickly discarded the stand to catch her before she collapsed.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Frank's bungalow welcomed them like an old friend as morning sunlight filtered through the kitchen windows. Jenna cradled her coffee mug between both hands while Frank leaned back in his chair, absorbing every detail of the case she and Jake had just laid out for him.

"So that's it," Frank said. "Barrett's victims—they were people he thought were 'antennas' for a cosmic message he needed to hear?"

"That's what the psychiatrist thinks," Jenna said.

She set her mug down on the sturdy oak table.

"Barrett came to believe there's some sort of a signal trying to break through, and certain people could help amplify it.

Back when he was working as an engineer at Astral Voices, he became fixated on Diana Wells—the Midnight Voice, but she ignored him.

When the station shut down, something in him just.. .broke." "

"His evaluation could take weeks," Jake added. "But there's no doubt he'll be found incompetent to stand trial."

Frank nodded solemnly. "You two did good work. Not just solving the case, but understanding what drove him. That's the mark of real police work."

He reached for the coffee pot and topped off their mugs. The rich aroma filled the

kitchen.

The conversation drifted toward more mundane matters—the upcoming town council meeting, a fishing tournament Frank was considering entering, the unusual weather pattern that had settled over Genesius County. It felt normal, and after the past few days, Jenna treasured the ordinary moment.

When she and Jake finally rose to leave, Frank walked them to the door.

“Don’t be strangers,” he said, clasping Jake’s shoulder firmly. “And take tomorrow off too, both of you. Sheriff’s orders.”

“You’re not the sheriff anymore,” Jenna reminded him with a smile.

Frank’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Old habits.”

As Jenna drove back toward Jake’s house, they were both quiet at first, the silence comfortable rather than strained.

“Frank hasn’t changed a bit,” Jake said. “Still sees everything, doesn’t he?”

“That’s what made him such a good sheriff,” Jenna replied.

Jake turned to look at her, his sandy hair catching the light. “Is that what makes you a good sheriff too? Seeing what others miss?”

“Sometimes I see too much,” she answered honestly. “And sometimes, not enough.”

His gaze lingered on her profile before he turned back to the window.

Jenna navigated through the familiar streets of Trentville, passing the turn that would take her to the Sheriff’s office.

They were taking today day off. Jake's house appeared around the bend, a modest one-story with a neatly kept yard.

Jenna pulled into the driveway and put the cruiser in park, the engine idling softly.

"Thanks for the ride," Jake said, making no immediate move to leave.

"Anytime," Jenna replied, her hands still on the wheel.

The moment stretched between them, taut with unspoken words. Jake shifted in his seat, clearing his throat.

"Listen, Jenna..." he began, then paused, searching for the right words. "With a day off—I was thinking maybe we could—"

"Jake," she interrupted gently, turning to face him fully. The sun illuminated the angles of his face, highlighting the fatigue that still lingered beneath his steady gaze.

"Let's just take a real day off. Sleep. Recover. We both need it."

Disappointment flickered across his features before understanding replaced it. "You're right. Rain check?"

"Rain check," she confirmed, offering a smile that felt both genuine and guarded.

He reached for the door handle, then hesitated. In one swift motion, he leaned across the center console and pressed a warm kiss on her cheek. Before she could react, he was out of the car, the door closing behind him with a solid thud.

Jenna sat frozen, the ghost of his kiss warm on her skin. Through the windshield, she watched him walk to his front door, confidence in his stride. He turned at the threshold, raising a hand in a casual wave before disappearing inside.

Her heart thrumming an unfamiliar rhythm, Jenna backed out of the driveway, her mind replaying the brief moment of contact. Frank's words from their conversation days ago echoed in her thoughts: "It's obvious Jake has feelings for you. And if I'm not mistaken, you feel the same way about him."

She shook her head. There would be time to consider what had just happened—what it meant, what she wanted it to mean. But not now.

Jenna directed the cruiser toward her mother's house, the familiar route requiring little conscious thought. She hadn't planned this visit, but after everything that had happened, checking on her mother felt necessary.

The front yard of her childhood home looked better than it had in years. The flower beds had been weeded, and fresh mulch surrounded the perennials that had somehow survived years of neglect. Jenna parked at the curb, noting a familiar truck—Zeke Canfield's—in the driveway.

A burst of laughter greeted her as she approached the front door, the sound so unexpected and rare that she paused with her hand on the knob.

Inside, she found her mother seated at the kitchen table, a genuine smile lighting her face as Zeke gestured animatedly, finishing what appeared to be a humorous story.

"Jenna!" her mother exclaimed, the surprise in her voice mixed with pleasure rather than apprehension. "We were just having coffee. Join us?"

"I'd love to, but I can't stay long," she said, accepting a quick hug from her mother, noting the absence of alcohol on her breath. "I just wanted to check in."

"I'm doing really good," her mother said, exchanging a look with Zeke that spoke of shared understanding. "The meeting yesterday was... it was what I needed."

He commented with quiet pride as he looked at Margaret. “Your mom’s got grit. Spoke up at her first meeting—most folks take weeks to work up to that.”

Jenna studied her mother’s face, seeing the subtle changes that sobriety, even this new and fragile, brought to her features. The puffiness around her eyes had diminished, and there was a clarity in her gaze that Jenna hadn’t seen in years.

“I’m proud of you, Mom,” she said simply.

Margaret squeezed her hand, her grip surprisingly strong. “Zeke says there’s another meeting tomorrow evening. I’m going to that one too.”

“One day at a time,” Zeke added, the familiar AA mantra delivered without pretension.

Jenna recognized the moment for what it was—a beginning, not a miracle. Her mother had tried sobriety before, but something felt different this time. Perhaps it was Zeke’s steady presence, or perhaps Margaret had finally reached her own turning point.

“I should go,” Jenna said. “I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“You look tired, honey,” her mother observed. “That case you were working on—is it finished?”

“It is,” Jenna confirmed, not volunteering details her mother didn’t need to hear. “I’ll tell you all about it some other time. I’m headed home to get more rest.”

She left them with promises to call later, feeling a curious lightness as she walked back to her car. The weight of worry about her mother, which had been her constant companion for so many years, seemed momentarily lifted.

The drive to her own home took less than ten minutes. Her small bungalow stood quiet and waiting, offering the solitude she suddenly craved. Inside, the rooms were cool and still, exactly as she'd left them days ago.

Jenna moved through her familiar space, dropping her keys on the kitchen counter, checking the nearly empty refrigerator out of habit rather than hunger. The events of the morning—Frank's wisdom, Jake's kiss, her mother's progress—swirled in her mind, demanding analysis and consideration.

But exhaustion crashed over her in a sudden wave. The previous night's sleep, while restorative, hadn't erased the deep fatigue.

She kicked off her shoes and sank onto her bed fully clothed, not bothering to draw the curtains against the sun.

Darkness claimed her first, then the cold.

It seeped through her clothes and into her bones.

Jenna knew, with the strange certainty that came with lucid dreaming, that she was no longer in her bed, no longer in her home, perhaps no longer in her time.

Somewhere beyond the reach of her vision, hushed voices murmured in urgent, desperate tones.

She tried to move, to orient herself in the pitch blackness. Her feet slipped slightly on what felt like wet stone, her hands extended before her, grasping at nothing. The darkness was absolute, a void that swallowed her whole.

"Hello?" she called, her voice sounding muffled and strangely flat, as if the space

around her absorbed sound itself. “I’m here. I can hear you.”

The murmuring intensified, a dozen voices or more, speaking over each other in frantic whispers. She couldn’t make out individual words, just the rising tide of desperation in their collective sound.

In these lucid dreams, she sometimes had a measure of control, could sometimes guide the interaction. She concentrated on the voices, trying to separate one from the cacophony.

“Please,” she said, more firmly this time. “One at a time. I can’t understand you when you all speak together.”

The whispers didn’t cease, but they seemed to recede slightly. Jenna felt a shifting of air that suggested bodies moving around her.

“I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves,” she tried again. “I’m here to help if I can.”

A single voice spoke near her ear: “No badge matters here.”

She spun toward the sound. “Where is ‘here’?” she asked. “What is this place?”

The answer came as a collective moan. Jenna fought the urge to retreat, reminding herself that her physical body was safe in her bed. This was just a dream, a communication, nothing more.

“What do you want me to know?” she asked, trying to sound calmer than she felt. “Why have you brought me here?”

The whispers swelled again, a tide of anxiety breaking against her. She caught fragments now—” taken,” “forgotten,” “help us.”

“I need more,” she insisted. “I can’t help if I don’t understand.”

Then, without warning, a scratching sound pierced the darkness. It was so mundane, so ordinary, that it took Jenna a moment to recognize it—the sound of a match being struck against its box.

A tiny flame burst to life a few feet away from her, illuminating a face in sharp relief.

It was a man, perhaps in his forties, though weariness had aged him prematurely.

Deep shadows pooled beneath his eyes, and a week’s growth of beard roughened his hollow cheeks.

His eyes reflected the match light, twin points of desperate hope in the darkness.

“They are collecting people,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

The small flame cast just enough light for Jenna to glimpse stone walls that glistened with moisture. Huddled shapes—people—crowded around her, their faces appearing and disappearing at the edges of the match light.

“Who?” Jenna demanded, taking a step toward the man with the match. “Who is collecting people? For what purpose?”

The man opened his mouth to answer, but the match sputtered, the flame dancing wildly as it consumed the last of its fuel. Then the flame winked out.

“No,” she protested, trying to hold onto the dream, to force herself deeper into the lucid state. “Come back!”

But the spirits were gone.

Jenna felt the weight of her own body again, the softness of her bed beneath her, the late afternoon sunlight warm on her face. She pushed herself up on her elbows, the memory of the dream still vivid.

“They are collecting people,” she murmured, repeating the spirit’s words. What did it mean? Who were “they,” and who was being collected? And what could she possibly help? A new challenge opened up in front of her, bringing with it a sinking sense of dread.