



# In Her Sights (Jenna Graves #1)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Midwestern Sheriff Jenna Graves has a unique secret—the dead communicate with her through lucid dreams, helping her solve both active crimes and cold cases.

When hikers vanish without a trace in the local forest, Jenna must confront her own haunted past. As she communicates with a former victim in her dreams, a 20-year-old cold case resurfaces—one that may hold the key to finding her long-lost twin sister.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Sarah Thompson's boots left a distinct imprint on the carpet of leaves covering the trail in Whispering Pines Forest. She was enjoying the serenity, the scent of pine and earth mingling in the crisp air. She was also enjoying the challenge of pushing through the brush of a trail that hadn't been traversed for years.

She was so engrossed in her enjoyment that she didn't notice that the sun had dipped low, casting elongated shadows between the tree trunks and signaling the close of the day. When a sudden rustling sound from the undergrowth to her right pierced the silence, Sarah halted mid-step, unease invading her calm.

She scanned the thick brush, searching for the source of the disturbance. Leaves trembled where the noise had come from, but nothing revealed itself as the cause. She fought against the instinctive swell of alarm, reminding herself that wildlife was common in Trentville's outskirts. It might be a curious raccoon or a skittish rabbit, but she thought it had sounded larger than that. A white-tailed deer perhaps? But of course, a deer wouldn't be likely to follow so close to her path like this.

Was she being stalked by a mountain lion? Sarah told herself she was being silly, that there weren't supposed to be mountain lions in Whispering Pines Forest. But she wasn't so sure about the possibility of black bears.

With a deep breath aimed at calming her nerves, Sarah resumed walking, her strides purposeful now. She knew that this trail curved up ahead, leading back toward the main path that would take her out of the forest. She hurried along, aiming to rejoin the main trail before nightfall claimed the last of the light.

But the comforting solitude of Whispering Pines Forest had shifted now, giving way

to a prickling sensation on the back of her neck. There was still movement—subtle, yet deliberate— somewhere close to her. Whatever it was, the rustling persisted as she moved ahead, and an unnerving sense of being watched crept over her.

There was no mistaking it now; the sounds were too calculated, too intentional to be merely the innocent rustlings of woodland creatures.

Panic surged through Sarah, hot and fierce, urging her limbs into action. She broke into a run, leaves and twigs snapping under her desperate flight. The rustling seemed to synchronize with her movements, no longer blending into the background symphony of nature. The sounds of pursuit amplified with every frantic heartbeat, a discordant symphony that chased her through the fading light.

It must be a mountain lion, she thought, no matter what people said ... or worse, a human. Could it be some other person out here, stalking her?

Deep down, Sarah knew the answer to her question. This was not just nature at play. This was something far more sinister—a human lurking in the shadows of Whispering Pines. Some stranger with malicious intentions was following her through the woods. The unseen presence clung to her heels, an ominous force that refused to be outpaced.

Adrenaline coursed through Sarah's veins, propelling her forward as the forest floor blurred beneath her sprinting feet. A protruding root, barely visible in the waning light, caught the toe of her hiking boot. Her heart slammed against her ribcage, a drumbeat of survival, as she pitched forward, arms flailing for balance. For a moment, the world tilted dangerously, but her muscles instinctively tensed, correcting her stance with swift agility.

Again, the echo of Sarah's boots against the earth rebounded off the dense foliage. And again, the rustling sounds followed.

She moved on, every sense attuned to the path ahead and the uncertain safety it promised. Her pulse thrummed in her ears—loud, insistent, a metronome ticking off the precious seconds of her lead. She could almost feel the presence of her pursuer, a malignant form that crept closer with every panicked beat of her heart. The haunting silence of the predator's approach set her nerves on edge, amplifying the feeling of vulnerability that gnawed at her resolve.

Sarah's breathing turned erratic, her lungs laboring to draw breath as she pushed her body beyond its limits. Each inhalation was a ragged battle, fighting against the constriction of fear that gripped her chest. Her legs pumped furiously, muscles burning with the strain of sustained flight, yet she urged them onward, propelled by the primal instinct to survive.

With every step, the forest seemed to echo her distress, rustling in the underbrush warning of danger and pursuit. She forced herself not to look back, to focus solely on the blur of the trail ahead that now twisted into obscurity, shrouded by the encroaching nightfall. Sarah's eyes, wide and vigilant, scanned the dimming environment.

To her, the trail no longer seemed to be an ally. With a sharp turn, Sarah darted into the underbrush, branches clawing at her clothes as she plunged into the forest's thicket. The ground beneath her feet was uneven, blanketed with decaying leaves and hidden traps of roots and rocks. She ducked under low-hanging limbs, the need to escape driving her deeper into the untamed wilderness.

Her chest tightened, breaths coming in short, controlled bursts as she navigated through the dense foliage. Thorns snagged at her skin, leaving thin lines of red in their wake. She pushed on, hoping the natural barrier would confuse her pursuer, offering her a chance at eluding capture.

The farther Sarah ventured from the path, the more oppressive the forest became.

Twisted trunks and overgrown vines formed a disorienting maze around her. Shafts of pale light struggled to penetrate the canopy, casting long, reaching shadows that moved with every rustle of leaves. Her heart thundered against her ribs, a relentless drumbeat that seemed to resonate with the ancient trees surrounding her.

She could no longer distinguish the sounds of her own frantic passage from those of the entity that pursued her. Every snap of a twig or brush of foliage sent jolts of fear down her spine. The boundary between hunter and hunted blurred as the forest consumed all sense of direction and time.

Whispering Pines lived up to its name, the wind hissing through branches as though sharing secrets meant only for the darkening woods. Sarah's eyes flicked from one indistinct shape to another, searching for any hint of movement other than her own. But the forest offered no solace, only a suffocating closeness that seemed intent on swallowing her whole.

Sarah's lungs burned as she darted through a narrow clearing, her feet tangling in the underbrush. For a fleeting moment, relief flickered within her. She dared to hope that her frantic zigzag through the thicket might have thrown off whoever—or whatever—was stalking her.

But that hope shattered as suddenly as it had formed. A vise-like grip clamped onto her shoulder, halting her escape. With an alarming jerk, Sarah was wrenched backward, her balance failing as she tumbled to the leaf-strewn forest floor. The impact jarred her, driving the air from her lungs and scattering her thoughts like leaves in a gale.

For a split second, Sarah's mind grasped at the idea of fighting back, of confronting her unseen assailant with the ferocity of a cornered animal. Instinct screamed at her to scream, to call out into the encroaching night in the hopes that someone, anyone, would hear her plight.

But before any sound could escape her lips, a blunt force met the side of her head, snuffing out the spark of her defiance. Pain exploded in a white-hot flash, radiating through her skull and rendering her vision into swirling eddies of darkness. As consciousness slipped from her grasp, Sarah fell into the void, the forest swallowing her whole.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Jenna Graves was sitting at her desk, where familiar paperwork lay before her in neat stacks. The door to her office swung open, and her father strolled in, his familiar grin lighting up the room. “Evening, Jen,” he greeted her with that twinkle in his eye that she had inherited—or so people said.

Jenna sat unmoving for a long moment. Her father, Greg Graves, had been dead for five years—succumbed to prostate cancer after a drawn-out battle that left scars deeper than the earthy plots of the local cemetery. Yet here he was, looking as hale and hearty as she remembered from her teenage years.

“I am dreaming,” she said firmly, as the office around her subtly shifted, the edges blurring like watercolors caught in the rain. Her father visited her only in lucid dreams now; she knew this. When Jenna became lucid—aware that she was dreaming—she could continue with the experience, though sometimes only briefly.

“Does seem like it,” her father replied casually, leaning against the doorframe that no longer belonged to the sheriff’s office, but now to the familiar surroundings of their family home. The wallpaper was adorned with tiny forget-me-nots from her childhood, while the scent of pine and an undercurrent of lavender from their mother’s garden filled the air. This was the house in Trentville where Jenna’s heart had broken and mended countless times.

“I miss you,” Jenna murmured, feeling the gap of his absence. She hesitated before asking him the question that never strayed far from her mind. “Is Piper still alive?”

Her father’s expression softened and he opened his mouth to reply, but at first Jenna couldn’t hear his words. Her twin sister, Piper, had vanished twenty years ago,

leaving behind a silence that resounded more deafeningly each time she asked.

“I can’t say,” he repeated gently, his voice a distant echo in the corners of their old living room.

“Could you just tell me if she’s still somewhere in our living world?” Jenna pressed. But the dream logic held firm, the answer evading her grasp like smoke. Her father simply stood there as Jenna’s heart twisted with longing and unanswered questions. As she felt the sting of tears forming, blurring the lines of the dream, she cradled her face in her hands.

The transition from dream to waking life was abrupt, like surfacing from deep waters with a gasp. Jenna’s bedroom snapped into focus, the first light of dawn painting her walls a soft blue. But in the turmoil of her rapid awakening, a thought anchored itself firmly in her mind: never once had Piper appeared in her lucid dreams. Since Jenna spoke only with the dead in these twilight encounters, her twin’s absence supported a fragile hope.

Piper might still be alive.

The twin connection they shared had never felt severed. Even after all these years, Jenna felt it, a constant reminder that Piper’s story wasn’t over—or at least so Jenna hoped. Her intuition, a silent guide honed by years of lucid dreaming and conversations with those who’d passed, told her insistently that Piper was still out there, somewhere.

Jenna got out of bed, her feet finding the cool wooden floor. The remnants of her dream clung to her like cobwebs as she traversed the short distance to the bathroom. The familiar surroundings greeted Jenna with their stark reality, yet something was amiss. The tiles underfoot seemed to shift ever so slightly, disorienting in their fluidity.



She reached the sink and braced herself against it, her eyes slowly lifting to meet her own reflection. With a deep breath, she anchored herself firmly in the waking world.

She studied the woman staring back at her with solemn scrutiny, and the mirror was not kind in its honesty, exposing the toll that the impending twentieth anniversary of Piper's disappearance had taken on her. Shadows haunted the hollows beneath her 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 nighttime meetings with the absent, the lost, and the departed. She was sure she looked older than someone in her mid-thirties should.

Jenna's hands moved mechanically, cupping water from the tap and splashing it against her skin, the chill of the droplets jolting her senses awake. As rivulets coursed down her cheeks, they seemed to carry away fragments of her nocturnal encounter. She repeated the action, each handful of water acting like a ripple disturbing the surface of a still pond, disrupting the lingering visions of sleep.

She reached for the towel, the fabric rough against her fingers, grounding her further in the present. As she patted her face dry, her thoughts shifted, unbidden, from the spectral visitation to another, still living, image from her past—her mother, Margaret. The guilt of their estrangement tugged at her, a constant reminder of conversations postponed and apologies unspoken.

Jenna made a vow. She would call her mother after work. It was time to bridge the gap that tragedy had wrought, to try to heal the fissures that had fractured their family. Perhaps today could mark the beginning of reconciliation, or at least the start of an uneasy truce.

With her resolve fortified, Jenna turned away from the mirror, its reflective surface no longer holding her captive. She reached for the outfit hanging on the door, the crisp uniform that signified her position as the sheriff of Genesius County. She had

duties to attend to and a community to keep safe, as well as a sister's memory to honor. The badge affixed over her heart was a symbol not only of her authority but of her commitment.

A cursory glance at the clock told Jenna she needed to hurry. Her hand swept over the kitchen counter, snagging a granola bar wrapped in a crinkle of plastic—a meager substitute for a proper breakfast, but a necessary compromise given the ticking minutes. When she tore it open, the solid crunch of oats and honey grounded her senses back in the tangible world.

As she chewed, Jenna mulled over the significance of the day and the anniversary it marked. Resolute, she swallowed the morsel and moved through the familiar motions of securing her gun in its holster—a weight that served both as a tool of her trade and a metaphor for the burdens she carried. The cool metal against her hip was a constant companion, a reminder of the responsibility she bore to protect and serve. Keys jangled as she picked them up.

As Jenna stepped out onto her porch, granola bar in hand, the very breeze carried memories of the Ozarks' secrets. A cicada's shrill song filled the air, a forewarning of heat to come. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the day ahead, and her mind clicked into the sharp focus required of her profession. The morning marked another day in Trentville, another opportunity to chase down leads, to scour the landscape of Genesius County for problems, while never losing hope for some sign of Piper.

Her patrol car greeted her like an old friend, its engine rumbling to life under her command. As she drove, Jenna focused on the tangible—the steering wheel beneath her hands, the steady hum of the car's engine, the rhythmic thump of the tires against the pavement. It was a grounding technique, one that kept her anchored in the present, even as her mind roamed the past.

The drive to the sheriff's office was a short one as Jenna's car moved through the

streets of Trentville, the morning sun casting pale light over the quaint facades of Main Street. The town was awakening, shopkeepers unfurling awnings and early risers nodding greetings in her direction. Jenna acknowledged them with a nod of her own, her mind working through the logistics of the day, preoccupied yet never missing a detail.

As Jenna parked her car and turned off the ignition, she sat for a moment in the quiet cocoon of the vehicle, staring at the familiar facade of the Genesius County Sheriff's Office. The old brick building was steeped in history and the quiet dramas of small-town law enforcement. Then, steeling herself with a deep breath, Jenna stepped out of the patrol car and into the reality of another day. As she walked, her feet crunched on gravel, and her badge shimmered in the morning light.

Jenna strode into the building, exchanging brief, knowing looks with her colleagues. They understood the toll this anniversary took on her, offering silent support through their shared glances. Her focus narrowed, zeroing in on the tasks that awaited her in her private office, a simple space adorned with little more than the essentials: a desk, some filing cabinets, a bookshelf, and a couple of chairs for visitors.

Her heavy oak desk was a small island of familiarity in the sea of her unsettled thoughts. Papers were strewn across the surface in an organized chaos that only Jenna could understand. The walls were adorned with framed certificates and commendations, interspersed with maps of Genesius County and Trentville. A bookshelf filled with law enforcement manuals and case files lined one wall, while a corkboard plastered with photos and notes took up another. Despite the clutter, there was a sense of order to it all.

Her computer welcomed her as she booted it up, and emails loaded with mechanical indifference. She settled at her desk, immersed herself in reports and emails. There were disturbances and petty crimes, the usual ebb and flow of small-town life, but nothing that jumped out at her. It was just another day in the life of a small-town

sheriff, but the monotony of the routine work clashed with the emotions within her—hope, fear, and the relentless yearning for answers.

A subtle shift in the air pressure signaled the opening of her office door, the sensation eerily reminiscent of her dream, where her father had walked through that very threshold. Instead, standing in the doorway right now was Deputy Jake Hawkins, his very real presence a sudden spark in the room. Tall and lean, with that boyish charm that often left her with an unprofessional flutter in her stomach, Jake grinned at her, his presence a stark contrast to the somber atmosphere of the office.

“Morning, Sheriff,” he greeted her, leaning against the door frame, arms casually folded, awaiting her response. He wore his usual attire—dark trousers paired with a neatly pressed shirt that fit well on his athletic frame. A shaft of sunlight from the window caught the edges of his sandy hair, giving him an almost ethereal glow. His uniform hugged his broad shoulders, the badge reflecting the light with a glint. There was an easy confidence about him, the kind that came from years on the force in Kansas City before he sought the quiet of small-town life.

“Deputy,” Jenna replied, making an effort to smooth out the creases of concern from her brow. Jake’s arrival was a welcome interruption to her spiraling thoughts. She found him undeniably attractive, but such thoughts were luxuries she seldom afforded herself. Besides, there was a reason beyond the physical that she welcomed him; his loyalty provided an anchor when the waves of the past threatened to pull her under.

“Got an emergency, Sheriff,” Jake said.

## Page 3

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“An emergency?” Jenna echoed, her tone measured. Her mind sifted through the possibilities, each more improbable than the last. “As in urgent?” she asked.

“Depends on your definition of ‘urgent,’” Jake said, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement. Then she noted the sly grin, the hint of mischief in his blue eyes. It was a look Jenna had come to recognize and appreciate for its rarity in their usually mundane line of work.

“Jake Hawkins and his riddles,” she mused, feeling a smile tugging at her lips. She pushed her chair back and stood, ready to engage with whatever challenge awaited them. The room appeared normal, the files on her desk remained stacked in orderly chaos, but the air seemed charged with an undercurrent of expectancy.

“Remember Mrs. Rigby’s parrot, the African Gray?” Jake asked. “The one with a vocabulary colorful enough to make a sailor blush?”

“Vaguely,” Jenna replied, recalling the local eccentric and her pet parrot.

“Well, it’s escaped. And it’s causing quite the ruckus downtown. It seems to have developed a new talent for mimicking car alarms.”

For a moment, Jenna simply stared at him, processing the absurdity of the scenario. Then she laughed out loud, and the sensation felt good. “Lead the way, Deputy Hawkins.”

They stepped outside and walked along Main Street to the area where the bird was said to be at large. Residents were standing outside their homes and businesses, their

expressions ranging from annoyance to amusement. The noise of what really did sound like a car alarm echoed down the street. Dogs barked in response, adding to the bedlam.

“It woke me right up,” one man complained. “Somebody should shoot the thing down.”

“Don’t talk that way,” another admonished him. “He doesn’t mean any harm.”

“No gunfire will be necessary,” Jake spoke seriously. “The sheriff and I are here to bring the bird in.”

As they headed toward the source of the noise, they encountered Arnold Henley, the owner of the Feathers and Fur pet store, pacing frantically. Apparently he too had been summoned to help track down the fugitive. His usually ruddy cheeks were now flushed a deeper shade of red, his hands animated as he described the size and color of the parrot to a group of onlookers. “It’s just about a foot high,” he said. “All gray except for bright red tail feathers. I always told Thelma she should never let that creature outside ...”

“Mr. Henley,” Jenna called out, her voice cutting through the chatter. “We’re here to help.”

“Thank goodness, Sheriff Graves.” Arnold wrung his hands. “Cyril could be in danger from hawks and such, and even some people. I told Thelma when she bought him that African Grays had to be both entertained and protected. Now he’s out there flying all over the place, all alone.”

“So she hasn’t clipped his wing feathers?” Jake asked.

“Of course not.” Arnold huffed indignantly. “These birds need exercise just like we

do. But they have to be kept safe. They can live as long as people do, that is if folks don't get careless with them."

"Any tips on where he might go or how we can catch him?" Jenna asked.

"Never took him outside when I had him in my store," Arnold said, his eyes darting about. "But he's partial to music—used to sing along to my radio."

"Music, you say?" Jenna mused. "That could be helpful."

"And talk to him. African Grays have big vocabularies. Oh, and another thing ..."

He rushed to his nearby parked car and fetched a bag filled with mixed seeds and a net on a long handle.

"These seeds are his favorite," Arnold said, handing the seeds and the net to Jake. "If you can get close enough for him to see what you're offering him, then you can ..."  
He nodded toward the net.

Jake gave Arnold a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "We'll find Cyril, Mr. Henley. This town may have its quirks, but it looks after its own—feathered or otherwise."

With that, he and Jenna set off toward the town square, Jenna's mind already sifting through possible hideouts for a musically inclined parrot among the quaint homes of Trentville. When the raucous sound of a car alarm rang out over their heads, they knew they had found the right tree.

Jenna brought up a tune on her cell phone, turning the volume up loud. The blaring sound overhead came to a halt.

"You've got his attention," Jake said, peering up into the branches. "See anything?"

“Right there,” she pointed, shielding her eyes from the bright morning sun. “Alright, Cyril,” she continued, “we’re here to take you home.”

Cyril seemed to consider her words, tilting his head and meeting her eyes. For a moment, Jenna felt a flicker of connection, an unspoken understanding between them. But then, with a squawk and a flutter, Cyril leaped to another branch, far out of reach.

“He’s going to make us work for it,” Jenna muttered, a smirk playing at her lips despite the frustration.

“Wouldn’t be fun otherwise,” Jake quipped. “But those branches aren’t strong enough to hold either of us. We’ve got to get him to come down here.”

“We need a distraction and a catcher,” she said, keeping her voice low as if the parrot might overhear their strategy. “So you’re on distraction duty. I’ll handle the net.”

Jake pulled out the bag of seed. “Here, Cyril,” he coaxed, sprinkling some seeds into his hand.

Cyril let out a squawk that sounded suspiciously like laughter, but to Jenna’s and Jake’s relief, the bird fluttered down a few branches, inching closer to investigate.

“Easy does it,” Jenna whispered, watching Jake crouch and extend his arm, offering seeds up to the parrot like an olive branch.

“Come on, buddy,” Jake murmured, his voice surprisingly soothing. “Just a little bit closer.”

Cyril hopped along the branch, descending farther, drawn by the promise of food. Jenna tensed, preparing to swoop in with the net at the right moment.



“Anytime now,” Jake muttered under his breath, glancing toward Jenna with a raised eyebrow, trying to suppress a grin.

“Patience,” Jenna replied, though she too fought back a smirk. The absurdity of the situation wasn’t lost on her—the sheriff and her deputy engaging in a contest with a parrot.

Then Cyril descended to the lowest branch, tilting his head at Jake, who held perfectly still, save for the gentle rustling of seeds in his palm.

“Now, Jenna!” Jake hissed as Cyril took the bait, hopping down onto his outstretched arm.

With reflexes honed by years on the force, Jenna lunged forward, net sweeping through the air. Cyril, sensing the trap, took off—but Jenna ensnared him mid-flight.

“Gotcha!” she exclaimed, securing the net around the flustered parrot as he flapped wildly, a blur of gray and red. Cyril squawked a torrent of expletives in protest.

“Good catch,” Jake said, joining her side.

“Easy there, Cyril,” Jenna coaxed in her most soothing tone, which seemed to have an effect even through the din. “You’re okay.”

Jake edged closer, his hands ready to assist. Together, they gently bundled the net, ensuring the parrot couldn’t hurt himself in a panic. It was not unlike defusing a ticking bomb, where precision and calm were crucial.

“Well done!” Arnold Henley called out, having followed them from some distance.

“Let’s get him home,” Jenna said. They walked toward Thelma Rigby’s cottage, just

a few blocks away.

As they walked, Jenna cradled the netted bundle in her arms. Cyril had quieted down, sensing that his escapade had come to an end. Townsfolk peered from their windows, their earlier agitation replaced by smiles and waves. The sheriff and her deputy had once again ensured tranquility in their small corner of Genesius County.

They arrived at the quaint little house, where Mrs. Thelma Rigby was pacing the porch. Her anxious face broke into relief as she saw them approach. Her hands fluttered to her heart when she spotted her beloved pet, safe within the confines of the net.

“Oh, bless your hearts!” Thelma exclaimed, rushing to meet them at her front porch. “My Cyril, my sweet boy!”

“Safe and sound, Mrs. Rigby,” Jenna assured her, handing over the net carefully.

Once they were indoors, Thelma’s fingers worked quickly to release Cyril, who immediately perched on her shoulder and nuzzled against her cheek. Overcome with gratitude, Thelma enveloped Jenna and Jake in a warm embrace.

“Thank you both so much,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I would have come out looking with you, but I wanted to be at home in case he decided to come back on his own. I don’t know what I would have done without you two. Such a splendid thing you did!”

“It’s all part of the job, ma’am,” Jenna replied, feeling a hint of embarrassment at the praise.

“Please, let me at least offer you some lemonade. You must be parched after all that excitement,” Thelma insisted.

“Maybe just for a minute,” Jenna conceded, aware that the real work of the day was still ahead, but recognizing the value of these small moments of connection in the fabric of Trentville.

A few moments later, they stood on the front porch, chilled glasses frosted in the warmth of the late June sun. Thelma thanked them again and disappeared back inside to take care of her pet.

“Parrot wrangling,” Jenna mused aloud, watching Jake finish his own drink with an amused smirk. “Didn’t see that in the job description when I signed up.”

Jake chuckled, leaning beside her, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “You know, for a sleepy town, Trentville sure keeps us on our toes.”

“Maybe we should add ‘exotic bird expertise’ to our resumes,” Jenna said.

“Let’s hope the rest of today’s emergencies are more... terrestrial,” said Jake, leaving his empty glass on the porch table. “Ya know, Jenna,” he mused with a grin, “hunting down Cyril was fun and all, but it’s not quite the same thrill as the Shannon Mine case this spring, huh?”

Jenna nodded. She remembered all too well—the cold walls of the cavernous tunnels, the damp earthy smell that clung to the air, the darkness that seemed to press in from all sides.

“Definitely one for the books,” she agreed, but her mind whirled with the memory that she had never shared with Jake. A lucid dream had been the key—a vivid, otherworldly experience where clues had unveiled themselves in sleep, guiding her steps when she was awake.

In Jake’s eyes, it had been her uncanny “sixth sense” that led them to the abandoned

Shannon Mine, following leads that seemed to come out of thin air. But Jenna knew better. It was the visitation in her dreams, an ephemeral voice from beyond, which had shown her the secret location where a local burglar was hiding all his loot. Afterward, she was careful never to reveal too much of how her insight had come about, but with someone as observant as Jake, it was only a matter of time before he figured it out—if he didn't half-realize the truth already.

In the stillness of night, a miner had visited her in that dream—a specter from a century past. His face was etched with the brutal history of the mines, scars crisscrossing his skin like a map of sorrow. He wore the heavy canvas of his trade, stained with the earth's blood. With each step he took in her dreamscape, his lantern swung, casting erratic shapes on the rough-hewn walls of the tunnels that stretched out like veins near Trentville.

The miner never spoke; words were as spent as the air in his lungs. Instead, he beckoned, gesturing with a hand gnarled and twisted from toil and tragedy. Forward, ever forward, he led her through the labyrinthine passages, always pointing toward a specific direction.

Awake, Jenna knew exactly where she had been in her slumber. As sheriff, she'd seen old maps documenting every inch of Genesius County—maps that included the abandoned veins of the Shannon Mine. Her intuition insisted that this was more than just a dream—it was guidance. And so it was. The discovery of the stolen goods had been almost anticlimactic after the spectral visitation she received, but she was glad about the outcome.

She shook off the memory and returned to the present. "Let's head back in," she said. "We've still got paperwork to deal with."

"Ah, the true calling of law enforcement," Jake joked, falling into step beside her.

They retraced their steps toward the station, each lost in their thoughts. Jenna's gaze lingered on Jake for a moment longer than necessary, taking in his easy confidence and the way his uniform emphasized his athletic build. Her heart fluttered, a reminder of her unspoken feelings, but she quickly stifled it. Then she noticed that he was staring at their destination.

"Something up?" Jenna asked, following his gaze. There, on the steps leading up to the station, sat a young woman, her shoulders shaking with sobs, her hands clasping what appeared to be a crumpled tissue.

"Looks like our break is over," Jake muttered, and Jenna nodded, feeling the shift in atmosphere as the weight of duty settled back onto her shoulders. The distressed figure before them was familiar—Bea Carter, who worked at Trentville's busiest diner. Bea's usually bright eyes were now red-rimmed and desperate. Her tear-streaked face stood out starkly against the weathered brickwork of the old sheriff's office. A silent plea in her gaze struck a chord deep within Jenna.

Something really bad must have happened.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

“Come inside, Bea,” Jenna said. “We’ll talk in my office.”

Bea stepped into the room,

Jenna gestured to a chair, and Bea sank down gratefully. Jake followed close behind, closing the door softly before taking a stance near them.

Jenna poured a glass of water from the pitcher on her desk and gave it to Bea, who took it with trembling hands. “Thank you,” Bea said softly, her voice barely audible above the hum of the outdated air-conditioning unit wedged into a window.

“Take your time,” Jenna said as she pulled up a chair close to Bea. She studied her visitor—an image of vulnerability wearing a waitress’s uniform, her apron bearing the logo of the local diner where she worked.

“Sarah didn’t come home last night,” Bea finally said, skipping formalities, her eyes not leaving the glass in her hands. “Sarah Thompson, I mean.”

Jenna’s mind sharpened at the mention of Sarah Thompson, who had arrived here in Trentville around five or six years ago—the young schoolteacher whose smile had become familiar at the town’s gatherings. Jenna clearly recalled the name and face of one of Trentville’s newest residents.

Bea’s gaze lifted, revealing red-rimmed eyes that spoke of unshed tears and sleepless worry. “She’s my roommate, and we rent a little house just a block away from the diner. Sarah is so responsible, Sheriff Graves. This isn’t like her.”

“Call me Jenna,” she replied, noting Jake’s subtle nod, sharing the sentiment. It was small-town culture; the titles often felt too heavy for such intimate settings.

“Jenna,” Bea repeated, clinging to the name like a lifeline. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Let’s start from the beginning,” Jenna suggested, reaching for a notepad.

Bea nodded, sipping water as if to brace herself. “Sarah... she went hiking yesterday in Whispering Pines Forest,” Bea finally said, her voice barely audible. “She does that most weekends, just to clear her head, you know? Said she’d be back by nightfall. But I was tired, and I slept soundly. And this morning, I didn’t even notice... not until the phone call came.”

“What phone call?” Jenna asked.

“From the school—she teaches at Trentville Elementary. They wanted to know why she didn’t show up this morning. Then I looked in her bedroom and saw that she was gone.”

Jenna leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk. Whispering Pines Forest was wide and dense, stretching out like a green sea just beyond Trentville’s town limits. It was easy for the unprepared or unlucky hiker to get lost.

“Did she have any favorite spots, trails she frequented?” Jenna asked.

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t like hiking, spend too much time on my feet working at the diner. So I’m not really familiar with where she went.” Bea then offered hesitantly, “She sometimes mentioned names like Old Man’s Creek or Eagle’s Perch, but I don’t know about this trip.”

Something in Bea’s tone mirrored a self-reproach that Jenna knew all too well.

“Bea,” she began gently, her gaze softening as she addressed the young woman. “You couldn’t have known she wouldn’t return. You did the right thing coming here as soon as you realized something was wrong.”

Bea blinked back tears, her breath hitching slightly. “I just... I should’ve noticed sooner.”

“Listen,” Jenna continued. “When my sister disappeared, I spent years torturing myself over what I could’ve done differently. But the truth is, we can’t predict these things. We can’t blame ourselves for not seeing the signs when there weren’t any to see.”

“Let’s focus on finding Sarah,” Jake contributed. “Can you think of anything else that might be relevant?”

Bea shook her head silently.

“What about family?” Jake asked.

“Her parents live out on a farm near Gildner. That’s where she grew up. I can give you the address.”

After jotting down the address, Jenna stood.

“We’ll find her,” she said, “and we’ll bring her home.”

Bea’s eyes, red-rimmed and anxious, searched theirs for hope. A tiny nod, almost imperceptible, was her silent thank-you.

“If you think of anything else or hear from Sarah, call us right away,” Jenna instructed.



“I’ll do that,” Bea replied. Then she got to her feet, thanked them, and left.

Jenna glanced at Jake. “Let’s gear up,” she said tersely.

Exiting the building, Jenna squinted under the glare of the midday sun high above Trentville. They moved quickly to their patrol car, the black-and-white vehicle stark against the backdrop of the town’s modest architecture. Jenna slid behind the wheel while Jake settled into the passenger seat.

Soon they were driving the main road through Whispering Pines, dense with evergreens and deciduous trees. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting a dappled pattern on the underbrush that grew thick in places. Through the open car windows, Jenna heard the sounds of a forest alive with nature—rustling foliage, bird calls, and the distant murmur of a creek hidden from view.

“Sarah’s car could be anywhere along these trails,” Jake commented as the patrol car maneuvered along a narrow road, passing trailheads marked with wooden signs. They both had hiked the trails, knew their quirks and hiding spots.

The ranger’s station loomed ahead, a modest, weather-beaten structure that seemed to have grown organically from the forest floor. Jenna parked the patrol car, and they stepped out. The air was thick with the scent of pine and earth, and the cicadas sang a relentless chorus that vibrated through the stillness of midday.

As Jenna approached the front door of the station, it swung open, and Ranger Billy Schmitt emerged. He was a sturdy man with a ruddy complexion and hands as rough as the bark on the trees he protected. A faded baseball cap with an official logo sat atop his head, shading a face marked by years spent squinting against the sun. His eyes held a glint of concern.

“Jenna, Jake,” Billy greeted. “What brings you out here?”

“A woman named Sarah Thompson is missing,” Jenna stated plainly. “A schoolteacher at Trentville Elementary. She went hiking yesterday and hasn’t returned. Her roommate, Bea Carter, came to us.”

“Let’s not waste any time then,” Billy said. “Let’s go looking for her.”

He led them to a mud-splattered SUV with the forest service emblem on the side. They all climbed into the vehicle, its interior smelling of leather and the faint, lingering presence of wet dog. Billy turned the key in the ignition, and the engine rumbled to life. Jenna took the passenger seat, her gaze fixed on the tree line as they began to roll down the narrow dirt road that carved through Whispering Pines.

“Any particular trail she might’ve taken?” Billy asked.

“Her roommate didn’t know,” Jenna replied. “She said Sarah had mentioned Old Man’s Creek and Eagle’s Perch, but she didn’t know where she went this time.”

They continued the search, the forest giving nothing away. Ahead, the road forked, and Billy steered them left toward the heart of Whispering Pines, where the underbrush grew thicker, and the terrain became more treacherous. The forest seemed to close in around them. Vines crawled across the ground, ensnaring rocks and fallen branches in their embrace. Ancient trees stood, their knotted roots breaking through the soil like the fingers of giants grasping at the world above.

“Stop the car,” Jenna suddenly said, her eyes locked on a break in the foliage where a small clearing opened up. She couldn’t explain it, but something about the place called to her. She didn’t need to share her intuition with the men; she’d already felt that tug in her gut when they rounded the bend and saw the vehicle.

Billy obliged, bringing his SUV to a gentle halt. They stepped out, the forest enveloping them.

“Looks like we might’ve found her car,” Jake observed, his voice tight with concern.

“Give me a second,” Jenna said, pulling out her phone as she walked toward the car. Quickly, she keyed in the details needed to access the motor vehicle database, tapping in the license plate number.

“Confirmed,” she announced after a moment. “This is Sarah Thompson’s car.”

“Damn,” Jake muttered.

Jenna pocketed her phone, joining the two men as they tried the door and found the car unlocked.

“Nothing looks out of place,” Jake observed. “No signs of a struggle or forced entry.”

“Could be she just went deeper into the woods than she planned,” Billy offered.

Jake nodded, stepping forward to inspect a map that lay on the passenger seat. “She’s marked a common trail. If she stuck to it, she shouldn’t have had any trouble.”

“Let’s get going,” Billy said decisively, turning back to his vehicle. “I’ll radio the deputies to meet us here. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Billy’s thumb pressed firmly against his radio transmitter, a static crackle slicing through the tension. “Base to Delta One, Two, and Three, converge on my twenty at the Whispering Pines trailhead parking. Over.”

“Copy that, Base,” came the first crisp reply, followed by two more affirmations. The rangers were efficient, their responses quick and clear-cut.

Jenna stepped away from Sarah’s car, under the dense canopy of Whispering Pines.

She could feel the forest's breath—a damp exhale that seemed to murmur with secrets. “Billy, in your experience, what kind of dangers might Sarah have encountered out here?”

Billy Schmitt, his face creased with concern beneath his ranger hat, glanced around at the thick underbrush and towering pines before meeting Jenna's gaze. “Well, Sheriff, mountain lion incidents are rare in these parts, but ...” He hesitated. “My deputies have reported some black bear activity recently.”

“Black bears?” Jake interjected, his protective instincts causing him to scan their surroundings with renewed wariness.

“Yup,” Billy confirmed with a solemn nod. “They're generally shy creatures, but it's possible for encounters to turn dangerous, especially if she stumbled upon a mother with cubs.”

The thought of a bear attack sent a shiver through Jenna. It was one thing to confront human malevolence, quite another to be at the mercy of nature's raw and uncalculating force.

“Could she have gotten lost? Maybe injured herself?” Jenna asked, her eyes searching the forest as if it might yield its secrets to her keen intuition.

“Definitely a possibility,” Billy said, scratching his beard thoughtfully. “This terrain can be treacherous, and an injured hiker could easily go unnoticed.”

“Alright. We need to cover as much ground as possible,” Jenna stated, the leader in her emerging with clear command. “If Sarah is injured, time is against us. Jake, let's you and I start by following the trail nearest her car. Billy, do you think there are other routes she might've taken from where she parked?”

“Several,” Billy replied, his expression grave. “I’ll show you on the map.”

Together, they hunched over the crinkled paper that was now spread across the hood of Billy’s vehicle. Trails snaked like veins across the forest’s heart, each a potential path that Sarah may have walked. Jenna’s finger traced the lines, her mind racing to unlock the pattern that would lead them to the missing hiker.

The rustling sound of tires over gravel announced the arrival of Billy’s deputy rangers. Three sturdy SUVs pulled up, each one driven by a man who bore the same rugged, capable look of their lead ranger. They stepped out, geared up with boots laced tight and radios clipped to their shoulders. Their faces were set with determination; they were the guardians of these woods, familiar with its secrets and prepared to unearth them.

“Everyone, listen up,” Billy commanded, gathering the group with a practiced ease. “We’re looking for Sarah Thompson, missing since yesterday afternoon. She’s a schoolteacher in Trentville and she knows these trails. But we can’t rule out an accident or even foul play. We’ll split into teams, cover the main routes, and then fan out from there.”

“Her roommate said she often went hiking alone,” Jenna added. “Let’s assume she stayed on marked trails, at least to start with.”

“Look for signs of deviation,” Billy instructed. “Broken branches, disturbed ground, footprints, discarded gear, anything Sarah might have left behind.”

He handed out maps and assigned areas to search and directed that they launch a couple of drones to check out any small clearings and overgrown dirt roads.

The group dispersed, each team with a designated leader.

As the deputy rangers faded into the tree line, Jenna turned to Jake, her expression somber. “I have a feeling...” She paused, struggling to articulate the intuitive sense that clamored for attention in her mind. “...we’re not just searching for one missing hiker.”

“What do you mean?” Jake asked. “We haven’t had reports of any other hikers missing out here, have we?”

“Nothing that clear cut.” She struggled to find the right words to convey the intuitive whisper that echoed in her mind.

“One of your gut feelings?” Jake questioned, his face furrowed with confusion.

“More than that,” Jenna admitted. “It’s like a looming sense of unease, as if we’re walking into something much bigger and more complicated than we imagined.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Jenna let out a slow, deliberate breath as she leaned against the rough bark of an ancient pine. The musky scent of earth and decay mingled with the metallic tang of her own sweat as she wiped a smear of dirt from her cheek. She could feel every thorn scratch and bramble snag like badges of futility on her skin.

She glanced at Jake; he caught her look and offered a cautious smile.

“Maybe the others had better luck,” he muttered.

“Let’s hope,” she said.

The forest around them was a living entity—whispering leaves, chattering wildlife, the occasional creak and groan of ancient wood flexing in the wind. It was easy to imagine how it got its name, Whispering Pines; nature’s voices were all too eager to fill the silence left by missing human ones. The shadows were lengthening now as the sun began to dip in the sky.

“Team report.” Billy’s voice broke through the silence, accompanied by radio static. “Find anything?”

One by one, the responses crackled in over the radio, each deputy ranger’s voice uniform in its discouragement. “Negative,” they said, the word repeated like a curse.

“Graves, Hawkins, status?” Billy’s voice cut through the chorus.

“Negative,” Jenna confirmed, her voice steady even as her heart sank a little further.

“Copy that.” There was a pause on Billy’s end, a moment of heavy silence before he continued. “Alright, let’s head back to the station. Regroup and figure out our next move.”

“Ten-four,” Jenna responded. As she and Jake made their way back through the forest, her thoughts churned with the possibilities, each more disheartening than the last. Abduction, an accident, animal attack, something else entirely—each scenario seemed equally plausible and impossible at once. They’d been searching for hours, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something they were missing, some vital clue that lay just beyond their understanding.

When they neared the ranger’s station, Jenna paused, letting her eyes sweep across the familiar facade, the flag hanging limp on its pole, the windows reflecting the late afternoon light. Then she squared her shoulders and stepped forward, pushing at the door. Jake held it open as they both stepped inside.

The air in the wooden building was stale, tinged with the scent of pine cleaner and old coffee. Billy’s three deputies, young and weather-beaten, were gathered around a worktable, their faces marked with frustration. They had all scoured the woods for hours only to come away with empty hands and heavy hearts.

“So we’ve got nothing at all?” Jenna asked automatically, though the set of their shoulders already told her the answer.

“Nothing,” Billy Schmitt replied, shaking his head. “No blood, no torn clothing. It’s like she just vanished. At least we didn’t find a body.”

A map of the forest was spread across the scratched surface of the worktable. They all leaned over it.

“Here’s where we found Sarah’s car,” Billy said, tapping a spot on the map. “We’ve



covered these areas on foot.” His finger traced the sections they’d searched, marked with neat crosshatches. “The drones have found no sign of her either.”

“If she went off-trail, there are miles of dense forest she could be lost in,” Jake observed.

“Or hiding in,” one deputy ranger offered, though the suggestion was ignored by the rest in the room.

“Or was taken,” Jake added, folding his arms across his chest.

“Abduction?” Billy’s voice conveyed his reluctance to entertain the idea. “In my years here, we’ve never—”

“Times change, Billy,” Jenna cut in. She fixed her eyes on the map spread out on the table. “We can’t rule it out.”

“Alright,” Billy conceded, rubbing the back of his neck. “So where does that leave us?”

They took a few minutes to trace the paths marked on the map, the ones they had searched and the ones that might be a potential escape route if Sarah had indeed been taken against her will. They found no answers, and the silence that followed felt heavy, laden with unspoken fears.

“Okay.” Billy’s voice was resolute despite the fatigue etched in the lines around his eyes. “We’ve done all we can out here on foot for today. This forest canopy is too thick for helicopters to be of much use. Tonight, we’ll put up the drones in a pattern of passes that will spot anything like a campfire or even a flashlight. My deputies and I will go again at first light tomorrow. We’ll expand the search grid. We’ll keep searching all day. No stone unturned.” He scanned his team, seeing affirmation in

their nodding heads.

“But we also need to consider expanding the search perimeter beyond Whispering Pines,” Jenna said firmly. “Set up roadblocks, notify local law enforcement, get descriptions out to the public. Jake and I will contact the State Highway Patrol for assistance. We need all hands on this.”

“I hate to think she might still be in my forest somewhere,” Billy said with a shake of his head. “I wish I could do more.”

“You did everything you could today,” Jenna told him. “Thanks for moving so fast.”

“We’ll do better tomorrow,” he replied, rubbing his chin.

Jenna thought of the missing woman’s parents on their farm near Gildner, unaware of the storm that was about to break over them.

“Jake,” she said, “we need to go talk to Sarah’s parents now. They should hear about this from us first.” It was a duty she dreaded, yet one she would not shirk.

He met her gaze squarely. “I’m with you, Jenna. Bea mentioned they’re on a farm near Gildner, right?”

“That’s right,” Jenna said, handing him the jotted down address. “She also gave us the location. Let’s get going.”

Under the canopy of trees, darkness enveloped them as they approached their squad car at the edge of the lot. As Jenna slid into the driver’s seat, her mind wandered to Piper, her absence now amplified by the recent disappearance of another young woman. For a long moment, she just sat there, the silence thick and heavy, like a dense fog settling over her thoughts.

Jake's voice from the passenger seat brought her attention back as he asked, "Do you think there's any chance that Sarah just got lost?" There was a hopeful lilt to his question, something Jenna wished she could cling to.

"I can't deny the possibility," she answered, her voice tinged with doubt. "But my instincts tell me otherwise. And they're not often wrong. We need to inform Colonel Spelling," she added as she started the engine and headed the car down the dark, winding road through the forest.

"On it," Jake said.

Jake reached for the radio handset, dialing the frequency for the Missouri State Highway Patrol. "Colonel Spelling, this is Deputy Hawkins with Genesius County Sheriff's Office."

"Go ahead, Deputy," came the crisp reply over the speakerphone.

"We need to initiate an APB and a public announcement regarding a missing person—a young woman named Sarah Thompson."

"Can you provide a description?" Colonel Spelling's voice was crisp over the speakerphone, all business.

"Sarah's in her mid-twenties," Jenna began, recalling the spirited woman she had met at a school function not too long ago. "About five-foot-six, with shoulder-length blonde hair. She has blue eyes and was last seen wearing hiking gear."

She paused for a moment, letting the details settle in the air between them. Then she added, "You can pull up a photograph of her from the Trentville Elementary School's website. She's a teacher there."

“Understood, Sheriff Graves. We’ll disseminate the information immediately. Keep me informed of any developments.”

The drive toward Gildner felt longer than Jenna knew it to be. As she drove, her mind grappled with strategies, how to deliver news that would inevitably tear at the seams of the Thompsons’ reality. Would they hold onto hope or succumb to fear? Would they look to her for answers she didn’t have? After all, she knew too well the torment of uncertainty, the hollow space left by a missing loved one.

“We’ll find her, Jenna,” Jake said, breaking into her troubled reverie. “We’re not giving up.”

His words were meant to comfort, but they both knew the truth was more complicated.

“First, we deal with tonight,” she murmured, her resolve solidifying. “Then we figure out the best way to keep looking.”

As the stars blinked to life above, Jenna Graves drove on, the weight of her duty pressing down on her. They were not just deputies enforcing the law; they were bearers of bad news, a role that never got easier with time. The silence in the car was thick, broken only by the sound of the engine and the occasional crackle of the radio.

A deer darted across the road, and Jenna tapped the brakes, causing the creature to freeze in the headlights before bounding off into the forest. Her grip on the steering wheel tightened— a reflex born of countless nights spent chasing phantoms and echoes in her mind.

“Sometimes I envy animals,” Jenna mused aloud. “They don’t get tangled up in things like this.”

“Maybe not,” Jake replied. “But they also don’t solve mysteries or save lives.”

“True,” Jenna conceded, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

As they approached the outskirts of Gildner, Jenna’s thoughts turned inward, focusing on the task ahead. The necessity of bearing bad news to another set of parents was a bitter pill to swallow, but it was one she hoped to fulfill with compassion and strength.

Jenna’s thoughts were turbulent, churning like the storm clouds that so often loomed beyond the distant hills. If Sarah Thompson was still alive, she might be in great danger—a realization that settled heavy in Jenna’s chest, sinking like a stone in still water. Each passing second, each mile they covered, the weight of urgency grew. Time was a relentless adversary, always ticking forward, indifferent to the fates it sealed.

Her jaw clenched as she navigated a bend in the road, the car’s headlights cutting through the dusk. A part of her wondered if this was how it had been for those who searched for her sister—this maddening blend of hope and helplessness. But Jenna was no longer the helpless teenager she had been; she was the sheriff, the hunter, the seeker.

Glancing briefly at Jake, she was grateful to have this silent ally, his resolve mirroring her own.

As they neared the outskirts of Gildner, Jenna’s senses sharpened. The town was small, its heartbeat slow but steady. The farmland stretched out all around it, vast and open, completely unlike the dense woods they had combed through earlier. Here, secrets seemed impossible to keep, and yet Jenna knew better than most how deceptive such appearances could be.

Following Jake's directions, she turned the car onto a winding gravel road that crunched and popped beneath the wheels, signaling their approach to the Thompsons' farm. The jagged rocks and loose pebbles created a bumpy ride, jostling the car and causing loose objects to rattle against each other. The slight discomfort seemed somehow appropriate. They were about to shatter the peace of a family's evening with the kind of news that left scars on souls. She imagined the Thompsons going about their evening routine, unaware of the pain heading their way. It was a scene Jenna knew all too well—the calm before life as one knows it shatters.

Her emerald eyes now reflected a more somber resolve. This was more than a job; it was a personal covenant etched into the core of who she was—a vow to those taken too soon from the world they knew. This was more than a search for a missing hiker; it was a battle against time, against the unknown.

"Jenna." Jake's voice broke through the quiet, his hand reaching out to rest briefly on her arm, a silent gesture of solidarity. "We'll find her."

The affirmation was simple, yet it carried the weight of an unspoken oath shared by two people who had come to understand the fragility of life in their line of duty. Jenna nodded, steeling herself against the encroaching fear, the specter of loss that loomed over Genesius County and, indeed, over her own heart. She exhaled slowly, attempting to quell the rising tide of anxiety. The moment they would have to knock on the Thompsons' door and deliver news of their missing daughter was just ahead, an inevitable confrontation with fear and despair.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

The Thompsons' farmhouse loomed ahead, a silhouette against the dark gray sky. A porch light cast a faint glow on weathered boards that told of harsh winters and relentless summers. After Jenna pulled the car to a stop and shut off the engine, she and Jake got out and made their way up onto the creaky porch.

Jenna rapped firmly on the weather-beaten front door. After a few moments, the door creaked open, revealing a woman whose face showed the hard lines of rural life. Her eyes held a weariness that came from years of looking out onto fields that demanded more than they gave. Strands of gray streaked through her once dark hair, pulled back in a practical bun.

"Mrs. Thompson?" Jenna asked.

"Yes," the woman replied, her face etched with lines of fatigue, her hair an untamed halo of graying strands around a face that hinted at faded beauty. "I'm Evelyn Thompson."

"I'm County Sheriff Jenna Graves, and this is Deputy Jake Hawkins. May we come in?" Jenna requested.

Evelyn stood back and gestured toward the hallway, her movements slow.

"What brings you out here at this late hour?" she inquired as they stepped inside. The interior was a time capsule, wallpaper yellowed with age and adorned with patterns of pastoral scenes—an idealized version of the farming life that seemed at odds with the nature of their visit. A television blared from a nearby room.

“Are you Sarah Thompson’s mother?” Jenna asked.

The woman’s expression was a bit wary when she replied, “Yes, I am.”

“Have you heard from your daughter today?”

“Well, no. Why would I?”

Jenna hesitated, choosing her words carefully. “Mrs. Thompson,” she began, “we have reason to believe that your daughter, Sarah, has gone missing. She was last seen hiking in Whispering Pines Forest yesterday afternoon and hasn’t been heard from since.”

A flicker of concern crossed Evelyn’s face, her brow furrowing as if trying to decipher a hidden message in Jenna’s words. “Missing?” The mother’s worry was tempered by confusion. “But why come all the way out here to tell me?”

“Because we need to gather any information that might help us find her,” Jake said, his tone gentle.

Evelyn nodded slowly, her eyes clouding over with a distant apprehension, the kind that had settled like dust over the years, undisturbed until now.

“Is... is your husband here?” Jake asked, glancing around as if expecting the farmer to materialize from the shadows.

“Yes, Ralph is right through here.” Evelyn turned and led Jenna and Jake into the adjoining living room.

A threadbare couch sat opposite a bulky, wood-paneled television set, fighting for space among crochet throws and dog-eared magazines. Family photos crowded the



available surfaces. Ralph Thompson sat in an oversized armchair, a remote control clutched in one hand like a scepter of sovereignty over his domain. A plaid flannel shirt hung loosely over his lean frame, sleeves rolled up to reveal forearms corded with veins like the roots of an old tree.

The glow from the TV flickered across his weathered face, highlighting stark creases made by time and toil. His attention was fixed on the screen, where a game show host conducted his proceedings with exaggerated enthusiasm as contestants shouted and jumped up and down.

“Ralph,” Evelyn’s voice sliced through the tension, “the sheriff and deputy are here. It’s about Sarah.”

Ralph barely glanced at the newcomers. He made no move to mute the volume or acknowledge the possible gravity of the situation that had brought law enforcement to his doorstep.

“Sarah’s gone missing.” Evelyn spoke louder, her voice cutting through the noise to reach her husband.

He scoffed, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, eyes still locked on the screen as if the fate of his daughter paled in comparison to the outcome of the next question posed by the animated host. “Hardly anything new,” Ralph muttered, the words laced with a bitterness that suggested long-held grievances. “Hope you can find her, though,” he added.

Evelyn sighed, a sound that carried years of frustration, and motioned for Jenna and Jake to follow her to the kitchen. The room was Spartan, functional, with a kettle on the stove that seemed to have served countless cups of tea over decades.

She motioned for them to take a seat at a worn wooden table, its surface marred by

generations of use. “I’m sorry about Ralph,” she said, her voice carrying the same weary note as the house itself. “He doesn’t much concern himself with anything... or anyone.”

She gestured as if looking for something to offer them. “I could make tea,” she said uncertainly.

“Thank you, but we won’t be staying long,” Jenna replied. “We just need to fill in some information about your daughter.”

“Ralph mentioned that Sarah’s disappearance wasn’t anything new,” Jake observed, his tone gentle.

Evelyn leaned against the counter. “Yes, well...” She hesitated, her eyes drifting toward the window, where the night had painted everything in shades of uncertainty. “Sarah hasn’t really been... around for years now. Ever since she was little, she always said she wanted to leave, and she did, as soon as she got her diploma from Gildner High. Got herself a degree in education at one of them state colleges. We...” She paused, her throat working against the words. “We didn’t see much of her after that. That was just her way. Sarah always took the road less traveled.”

“Did she come back at all?” Jake prodded gently.

“Once,” Evelyn replied curtly, as if the brevity of her answer could mask the sting of its truth. “Only once, when she moved to Trentville for a teaching position at the elementary school.”

Jenna nodded, picking up on the undertones of that visit. It hadn’t been the warm reunion one might expect. There were no fond memories here, only the echoes of arguments and the chill of estrangement. Jenna sympathized silently; it was a familiarity that resonated deep within her own heart.

“Did she keep in touch with anyone at all in Gildner after she left?” she inquired.

“No.” Evelyn shook her head. “Sarah was a loner through and through. Never one to cling to the past.”

“Wasn’t there any communication at all?” Jenna asked.

“Occasionally we got a postcard, maybe a call on holidays. But it was as if she moved to another world,” Evelyn confided, the lines on her face deepening with the admission. “And we were just ghosts of her past life.”

The revelation settled heavily in the room. Jenna recognized the pattern, the desire to flee, not just from a place but also from memories and expectations. As Jenna observed Evelyn, she could almost feel the tangled web of emotions that enveloped the woman. The aura of resentment toward Sarah for leaving this life behind was palpable, interwoven with threads of envy for the freedoms her daughter had claimed for herself. Jenna understood too well the complexities of such familial dynamics—the silent battles fought over dinner tables, the unspoken accusations that hung in the air like stale smoke.

She also knew that there were no answers to be found in this household.

“Thank you, Mrs. Thompson,” Jenna said. “We won’t trouble you further.”

“I wish there was more I could do,” the woman said. Then, after a short silence, she added, “Please find my girl.”

“Of course, Mrs. Thompson,” Jenna replied.

She signaled to Jake, and they made their way back through the house, leaving the Thompsons and their haunted silences behind. As they stepped outside into the

embrace of the late June night, the air was thick with the scent of overgrown grass and the distant promise of rain. Jenna inhaled deeply, feeling the coolness against her skin. As she navigated the patrol car along the gravel road leading away from the Thompsons' farmhouse, the night air was thick with the scent of summer earth and growing things, so unlike the stifling atmosphere that had hung over the living room where they'd left Ralph Thompson and his game show.

As they drove away from the Thompsons' house, she flicked on the high beams, and the car's headlights cut through the dark, illuminating the uneven terrain of the farmstead. Fields of crops stretched out on either side of the road. It was easy to imagine Sarah as a child, running through those fields, dreaming of a life beyond their borders. And easy to imagine her fleeing ... disappearing into the darkness.

"Hey," Jake said softly, his gaze fixed on Jenna as she drove. "You look like you've got a storm brewing in your head. What's going on?"

Jenna felt the question hang in the air, heavy and expectant. Her fingers gripped the steering wheel a little tighter, a physical manifestation of the tension inside her. She knew Jake was observant, but it still surprised her how well he could read her.

"It's just..." Jenna started, then paused, searching for the right words. "Cases like these, they stir up old feelings. Sarah's disappearance... it feels personal."

"Piper," he said, the name falling between them like a stone.

Jenna exhaled slowly, her eyes fixed on the dim glow of the dashboard lights.

Jake said sympathetically, "I guess it doesn't help that today's the anniversary of ... well, you know."

"Yeah, it hits close to home ..." She trailed off, weighing her words. "And

Evelyn—there’s something about her that reminds me of my mother.”

Jake studied her for a moment, reading the lines of strain. “When are you going to try to fix things with your mom?” he asked gently, though a hint of challenge also laced his tone.

“Ironically, I was thinking about visiting her tonight,” Jenna admitted. “I tell myself that every morning. But then, there’s always something...” She glanced at the clock on the dash. “It’s too late to visit her now. And she’s probably been drinking by this point.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Jake offered, but they both knew it was an empty suggestion—one often repeated and seldom acted upon.

“Let’s just focus on finding Sarah,” Jenna finally said, the resolution in her voice mixed with an undercurrent of something else—fear, perhaps. She pressed her lips together. She gripped the steering wheel tighter, as if the act could keep her anchored in the present.

The ride back was spent in contemplation, the occasional flare of headlights from an oncoming vehicle offering brief illumination before they were once again enveloped in the darkness. Jenna’s thoughts turned from her mother to the case at hand, to Sarah Thompson, whose life seemed to be a puzzle with pieces scattered across Genesis County. But she knew that Sarah’s disappearance was more than a case; it was a mirror reflecting the fractures in her own life.

As they entered the sleepy town of Trentville, the streets were quiet, the storefronts darkened, and the courthouse clock tower stood sentinel over the slumbering city. The familiar storefronts and houses passed by in a blur. It was a typical small town that might have appeared peaceful to any passerby, but Jenna knew better. Beneath its tranquil exterior lay secrets and stories that only someone like her could unravel. She

pulled the patrol car into the lot at the Genesius County Sheriff's Office, where Jake had left his own vehicle.

"Hard to believe it's the same place where we chased down a noisy parrot just this morning, isn't it?" Jenna remarked.

Jake turned toward her from his position at the passenger door. "Yeah, it seems weird now," he replied with a grin. "But try not to worry too much about Sarah. We'll get a break in the case tomorrow."

"Maybe," Jenna murmured almost inaudibly.

Jake pushed open the door and stepped out. He paused for a moment before turning back to Jenna.

"You look tired," he said gently. "Take care of yourself. Get some sleep."

"Sure, I ... will ..." she stammered.

"Goodnight, Jenna." His farewell hung in the air between them as he shut the car door and walked away into the encroaching darkness.

Jenna's eyes followed him. They had worked together closely and seamlessly, but was she right in sensing a different energy between them? Could there be something more than just friendship in his words?

As he reached his own car, Jake turned and called out. "You and me, we've got this, Jenna. Sarah isn't going to turn into another Piper."

Jenna realized how much Sarah's story had opened a door to memories that were usually kept locked away, and the flood threatened to overwhelm her senses. She

hoped Jake was right, that her doubts were just the rawness this case brought to her own unhealed scars.

But she was afraid that things were only going to turn uglier.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Sarah Thompson's mind fumbled through a fog of grogginess, piecing together bits of time lost to sleep—or was it unconsciousness? Either way, whenever she seemed to be waking up she always found herself in the same nightmare. Her eyelids fluttered open to pitch darkness, each blink as ineffective as the last in penetrating the oppressive black that enveloped her. The air around her had the unmistakable mustiness of an old basement, tinged with the metallic scent of old piping and damp earth.

In this void, she had no reference points, no clues to the passage of days or nights. The darkness remained absolute, although the silence was not complete. Sarah's ears picked up subtle sounds around her: the faint stir of air that spoke of a space larger than the confines she could feel, the distant drip of moisture that hinted at the earthen walls encasing her; the low, constant hum of a boiler working tirelessly nearby; the relentless ticking of a clock. The sound of the ticking was maddeningly loud, each second punctuated like the beat of a heart.

Earlier during her captivity, Sarah had filled this void with her own voice. She had screamed until her throat rasped raw, until the sound became nothing more than a hoarse gasp. And when no answer came, no sign of another living soul, she ceased her cries. They served no purpose other than to affirm her helplessness.

She tried to shift her position, but the clinking of chains served as a harsh reminder of her captivity. Cold metal hugged her ankles tightly, shackles tethering her to the very source of the humming—the boiler. It radiated a faint warmth, its presence both a comfort against the chill and a reminder of her imprisonment. Sarah closed her eyes—not that it made any difference in the darkness—and willed herself to think clearly despite the fear that threatened to consume her.



She remembered the setting sun in Whispering Pines Forest, painting the trees in various hues of green. She had been hiking, the tranquility of nature a welcome change as always. But twilight had crept up on her, cloaking the forest in uncertain light, and with it came a sense of unease. Sarah chastised herself now, wondering how she could have ignored the encroaching darkness, how she could have missed the signs that she was not alone.

Her thoughts spiraled back to that moment—an ambush that was both swift and violent. The pain had been immediate and terrifying.

“Idiot,” she muttered under her breath, a word swallowed by the dark. Her self-reproach was pointless, but it was all she had left—a way to punish herself for the decisions that led to this nightmare. If only she had turned back earlier, if only she had listened to that small voice of caution instead of the stubborn pride that urged her to press on. But there was no changing the past, no altering the choices that brought her here.

Sarah’s mind drifted, a thin stream of meandering consciousness. She thought of Gildner, the tiny town that had been a cradle for her earliest years, now seeming like a distant planet from her current prison. The image of the farm near the outskirts surfaced unbidden. She remembered the way the sun would rise over the cornfields, the rooster’s crow that was a call to relentless toil; the soil under her fingernails a never-ending reminder of days spent in servitude to the earth and her father’s expectations. Her mother, Evelyn, once vibrant and full of dreams, had withered like the neglected rows of their kitchen garden, bitterness seeping into the lines on her face.

“Escape,” Sarah complained to the darkness, recalling the word that had pulsed in her veins back in those days. Escape from the crushing weight of an unhappy childhood, from parents who could never understand her need for more than the simple life they cherished. Ralph, her father, content with the cycle of planting and harvesting, had no

room for her aspirations. The television flickering in the corner of their living room offered him all the excitement he desired, and her dreams were met with silent indifference or cold disdain.

The darkness there had been different, born from regret and misunderstanding—a prison she thought she had left behind. But here she was, ensnared in a new shade of black. The irony was not lost on her, even as her spirit waned. She was back in a place without horizons, without the freedom she'd so fiercely sought. And now the estrangement from her parents seemed trivial, a foolish squabble over unmet expectations and harsh words that could never be taken back.

A door creaked open somewhere above her, shattering the silence but admitting no light. Footsteps descended, slow and deliberate, each thud against the wooden steps an echo in the cavernous space of her fear. Sarah stiffened, her heart pounding against her ribcage as though seeking escape from the confines of her chest. She knew this routine well by now—the opening of the heavy door signaling another round of silent interaction, another reminder of her helplessness.

The sound approached closer, the rhythm of footsteps growing louder. Sarah's breath caught in her throat as she squinted, trying to discern any change that might reveal the figure's form. "Please," she wanted to say, "tell me why." But the words lodged in her dry throat, unspoken prayers to something that seemed less human with each passing encounter. Instead, she watched, listened, and waited, knowing that any plea for mercy would fall on deaf ears.

As it had twice before, a penlight pierced the darkness, a sharp lance of white that stabbed at Sarah's eyes. She flinched, her pupils contracting painfully as she turned her head away from the blinding beam. Each visit began this way, a reminder that her captor controlled even the simple mercy of light. The footsteps halted, and then came the soft clink of ceramic on concrete. The beam tilted downward, illuminating a plate with a slice of bread and a piece of cheese.

No words had ever been exchanged, no explanation offered. This silence was another shackle, one that bound her mind as surely as the iron clasped her ankles. Yet the delivery of sustenance seemed like a confirmation that she had not been abandoned to die. The plate lay before her, a meager feast set by a ghost.

Sarah's fingers trembled as they brushed against the coarse texture of the bread, her senses heightened by the gnawing ache in her stomach. The cheese seemed like a luxury she hadn't been afforded in what seemed like eons. She brought the bread to her lips, the musty scent of it filling her nostrils and promising a momentary reprieve from her hunger.

But when she tried to swallow, her throat seized up, a desiccated passage too dry to allow even the softest morsel passage. The bread turned to ash in her mouth.

She reached for the cheese with desperate hope, thinking perhaps its moisture would help. But as the texture crumbled between her fingers, it became clear that it would only exacerbate her parched state. A bitter laugh bubbled up from her chest, the sound raspy and foreign to her own ears. How ironic that she could be surrounded by food yet tormented by thirst, an anguish she remembered well from the sweltering summers on the farm near Gildner, where water was as precious as gold during droughts.

"Water," she croaked, the word barely audible, more air than voice. It was an instinctive plea, not really expecting an answer from the barely seen figure that had delivered her meager meal. Once, her voice had carried across classrooms, crisp and clear, imparting knowledge to eager young minds in Trentville's elementary school. Now it was reduced to a hoarse whimper, a testament to the hours she had spent screaming into the void, hoping someone would hear her plight.

"Please," she tried again, the effort sending a jolt of pain through her raw throat. She swallowed hard, her tongue feeling like sandpaper against the roof of her mouth. In

these moments, the memory of cool well water from her childhood home taunted her, a cruel reminder of what she once took for granted.

The figure remained motionless, a specter whose presence offered neither comfort nor terror—simply indifference. Sarah's plea hung in the air, unanswered. Her body slumped against the boiler, the iron cuffs around her ankles clinking softly—a discordant lullaby for the weary and the broken.

The figure's hand withdrew, and the penlight snapped off, plunging Sarah back into darkness.

She felt the air shift as the figure moved, the sound of footsteps echoing hollowly against the earthen walls. The door creaked open, and before it closed again, she heard a faint raspy chuckle. Then the door closed, and Sarah was alone again in the awful dark.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

The sky was a canvas of twilight hues, colors muted as if the world was holding its breath. Jenna watched as buses shot by on either side of the highway, blurred streaks of color and motion. Yet no gust of wind followed their passage, no thunder of engines broke the stillness; they moved in silence, like specters racing toward oblivion.

“Waiting for the bus?” The question sliced through the quiet, startling Jenna more than the sound of a voice should.

Her gaze shifted from the silent, speeding buses to the young man standing beside her. A buzz cut crowned his head, a distinct contrast to a well-trimmed red beard that seemed almost aflame against his pale skin. He carried a green duffel bag slung over one shoulder and a fishing rod in a case in the crook of his arm.

“No,” Jenna said, finally finding her voice. “I’m not waiting for a bus.”

The man looked at her with curiosity, his brows knitted together beneath the brim of his cap. “What are you doing at a bus stop, then?”

She looked around. Yes, she realized for the first time, she was standing at the bus waiting area outside a familiar truck stop called Hank’s Derby. She searched for an answer to his question, but her memory of why she was here seemed as fleeting as the signs on the buses that blurred past.

“I... don’t know,” she confessed, feeling uncertain.

“Sure you do,” the man said.

In that instant, clarity pierced the fog of Jenna's mind, sharp and unwelcome. The realization dawned on her: the impossible silence, the eerie stillness of the scene before her—they were all constructs of her own subconscious. Jenna knew she was experiencing a dream.

When she became lucid like this, she had choices, up to a point. She could walk away; she could find a mirror to see how her dream self looked; maybe she could even get on a bus to see where it went. But right now, she knew she needed to listen to whatever this man had to say, because the only voices that spoke to her in this world were those of the dead. Although they were seldom easy to understand, their hints from the beyond were important. They often offered her clues that no sheriff could find with just a badge and a gun.

With that perception, her dream senses sharpened, and the details of the man standing beside her crystallized into focus. She could see the fine grains of stubble on his cheeks, the frayed edges of his duffel bag, and the subtle tension in his posture.

“Obviously, you're here because there's something you're supposed to find out,” he stated confidently.

“All right then,” Jenna said as she took a deep breath and let the dream's reality take over. As soon as she had spoken, a single bus materialized from the blur of motion on the highway, its hulking form grinding to a halt in front of them. The door swung open with a mechanical sigh, revealing an empty vehicle awaiting a passenger. The man at Jenna's side stared at the idling bus and muttered, “I need to get on this one.”

“Are you leaving?” she asked.

“Yes, I am,” he said firmly. But there was no movement toward the open door, no shift in his stance; he remained anchored to the spot beside her.

“Why don’t you get on the bus then?” Jenna suggested.

The man’s gaze lingered on the bus, a mix of longing and frustration clouding his features. “I don’t know,” he admitted, helplessness creeping into his voice. “I’m trying, but I just can’t seem to do it.”

With a mechanical groan, the door of the bus clamped shut, severing any possibility of passage for the man whose hand bore the inked image of a pair of angelic wings. Jenna watched as the vehicle pulled away from Hank’s Derby. The man stood stationary, as if his feet were rooted to the cracked pavement, his eyes trailing the retreating bus with a mixture of longing and defeat. The other buses resumed their silent ballet, zooming past in both directions, blurs of motion that seemed disconnected from any reality she understood.

“Can’t you see? There’s no point,” the man said, his voice brittle as dry leaves. His eyes met hers, and Jenna saw the desolation within them, a chasm so deep it threatened to swallow him whole. “No one can help me now. But someone else is in terrible danger. And there isn’t much time.”

She wasn’t surprised by the odd situation or by the lack of explanation. Part of her understood that the dream might never yield the straightforward responses she hoped for. Dreams were landscapes of symbols and metaphors, more mysterious than most of the leads she uncovered in waking life. But in both waking and dreaming life, Jenna had become skilled at extracting information from silences, from the things left unsaid.

The young man turned slightly, casting a glance over his shoulder, his expression forlorn. “Maybe Sheriff Frank can help you.”

That startled her for a moment. She caught the expectation in his words, the belief that Frank Doyle—her predecessor—would have answers or guidance for this man in

her dream. She was sure she had never met this young man in real life, and yet he was naming the man who had taught her most of what she knew about enforcing the law and keeping the peace in a small town.

“How do you know Frank Doyle?” she asked him. “What do you think he could do to help?”

But the man didn’t answer. His expression contorted, a sudden rawness apparent in his features. “Thirsty,” he croaked, voice sandpaper rough. The simple declaration sounded oppressive, filling Jenna’s senses with the acrid tang of dust and the parched crackle of drought-withered leaves.

“Thirsty,” he repeated, his throat working visibly as he swallowed. “But maybe Sheriff Frank can get me a drink.”

“Water,” she echoed thoughtfully, aware that in this place, the simplest things could hold profound significance. Was water a clue, a sign, or merely a stray detail in her subconscious? Was the thirst a fact or a symbol?

“Perhaps,” Jenna mused aloud, her eyes reflecting the enigma before her, “we should find this water together.”

“I can’t think,” the man beside her muttered, desperation in his voice. “That noise is driving me crazy. Can’t you stop it for me?”

Jenna frowned, searching the immediate vicinity for any sign of disturbance. “What noise?” she asked, her voice sounding strangely hollow in the stillness.

“Can’t you hear it too?” There was a pleading note in his question, one that resonated with an urgency she couldn’t ignore. She focused, tuning into the spectrum of silence, and then—there it was. A loud ticking, rhythmic and relentless, like the pulse of an



unseen clock, echoing through the space around them.

“You hear it now, don’t you?” the man asked. “That’s what it’s all about.” His eyes, hollows of despair, held hers with an intensity that was almost overpowering. “Time,” he added, “it’s all about time. Five years. It’s always five years.”

He reached out toward her as if seeking help. The movement drew her attention back to his hand where ink bloomed against his skin—a tattoo, intricate and dark. It depicted a pair of angelic wings, their feathers stretching elegantly across his forearm, disappearing beneath the frayed edge of his sleeve. The detail was remarkable, each feather drawn with such precision that Jenna could almost envision them rustling in an unseen breeze.

“What does it mean?” she asked him.

His eyes, clouded with confusion, met hers. “Don’t know,” he admitted, the words edged with frustration. His hand reached out in a helpless gesture, as if grasping for an answer floating just beyond his reach.

“Guardian,” he murmured, his voice soft, harmonizing with the gentle flutter of wings. Then, as if as an afterthought, he said again, “Five years. Five years.”

“Please explain that to me,” she urged him, but any reply he made was stolen by the intrusion of a harsh sound—a shrill ring that sliced through the silence of the dream.

Jenna’s eyes snapped open, and the murky world of the bus stop at Hank’s Derby dissolved into the familiar colors of her bedroom. The phone continued its insistent call, dragging her further from the realm of sleep. Jenna reached out, her movements automatic as she fumbled and finally grasped the device, bringing it to her ear.

“Hello?” Her voice carried the sound of her disorientation. She blinked against the

sunlight that played across her comforter, casting patterns that seemed to mock her sudden return to reality.

“Jenna, it’s Jake.” His voice was clear, a stark contrast to the spectral echoes of her dream. “Did I wake you?”

“Hey,” she managed to respond, the dream remnants clinging to her like cobwebs. She sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, trying to ground herself in the room’s tangible details—the way the early light caught the edges of her dresser, the soft hum of her air conditioner.

“Are you okay?” There was a hint of concern in Jake’s voice, a subtle reminder of the protective shield he often cast over her.

“I’m fine,” Jenna assured him, though her mind was still racing with the enigmatic words from the man who couldn’t board the bus. She shook her head, willing the image away, focusing on the urgency of the present. “What’s up?”

“Checking in. We’re organizing the search teams for Sarah Thompson this morning. Wanted to make sure you were in the loop.”

“Jake, I won’t be joining you at Whispering Pines,” Jenna said. “I’ve got something else I need to do. I think you’ll have plenty of help.”

“Sure thing, Jenna,” came Jake’s response, ease in his tone. He was used to her sudden intuitions, her unexplained hunches that often led her down separate paths. “Billy Schmitt and his deputy rangers will all be on the job, and they know the landscape a lot better than I do. I might even be kind of superfluous. But maybe we’ll find something that will help wrap this case up one way or another.”

“Keep me updated,” she told him. “And be careful out there.”

“Alright, see you soon,” Jake said. “Call if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Jenna replied automatically.

He ended the call with the usual click that felt like punctuation to their brief exchange. The clock on her nightstand ticked steadily, reminding her of the ticking sound in her dream, the one that grew louder just before she woke. It made her uneasy, though she had no idea why. She remembered the words of the man who had spoken to her: “It’s all about time.” He’d also kept saying something about “five years.” She knew she was working against the ticking clock of a missing person’s case, but was that all his words meant?

Jenna sat up in bed, the sheets falling away from her as if shedding the remnants of that dream. She set the phone down, took a deep breath, and let her gaze drift to the window where the sky painted promises of a new day over Trentville. But her thoughts were on the night that had just ended and on the day ahead. The dream had been a signpost, a nudge from beyond the veil, pointing her toward something—or someone.

The man with the fishing rod, the silent whirl of buses, the insistent tick of a clock—all fragments of a subconscious puzzle that demanded attention. It was always up to her to connect dots unseen by others, to draw lines between the living and the dead, but so far this message was still a mystery.

She welcomed the one thing she had grasped clearly. The man in her dream had said a name: Sheriff Frank, the man who had turned his job over to her. But Frank Doyle was more than just her predecessor. He was her mentor. His steadfast presence had guided her through the murky waters of law enforcement and sometimes even through the unpredictable seas of her dreams. If anyone could help her navigate these surreal tides, it would be Frank.

She swung her legs off the bed and planted her feet firmly on the floor as if to verify her existence within this waking world. She moved with purpose, dressing quickly in her uniform and holstering her weapon. Her hand found its way to the phone once more, but this time it was to place it in her pocket. Jenna Graves, Sheriff of Genesius County, stood framed in the doorway of her bedroom—a figure cut from both reality and something altogether different.

Time, the red-bearded man had said, was slipping away, and someone was in terrible danger. The answers Jenna needed to find lay somewhere in a tangle of dreams and reality. As she left her home, the door closed behind her, the click of the latch a punctuation mark on her decision.

“I need to see Frank,” she murmured to herself as she continued on her way. “Something really odd must have happened on his watch.”

But why had Frank never told her about it?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

The drive to Frank Doyle's house wasn't long, and today Jenna appreciated it for a rare moment of tranquility. Frank's bungalow emerged between the sprawling branches of oak trees, its modesty an honest reflection of the man who lived there. The wooden walls were weathered with time, bearing the marks of countless storms and seasons. A small porch with two creaky rocking chairs invited visitors to sit and stay for a while, a place she had enjoyed in cooler weather.

Moments after Jenna rapped her knuckles against the solid wood, the front door swung open, revealing the former Sheriff of Genesius County. His weathered face was marked by the years, and his short, thick hair was white, but he still stood tall and sturdy. Despite a gruff exterior, kindness softened the lines around his gray eyes, and he was wearing an apron.

"Jenna!" he exclaimed with genuine surprise and warmth. "Was just fixin' to have some breakfast. Care to join me?"

"Sounds good, Frank," Jenna replied. It was comforting to be here, to share a simple meal with someone who knew her so well.

As she stepped inside, Jenna was enveloped by the familiar scent of black coffee brewing. In the small living room, the familiar framed photographs lining the shelves held her attention, each one a frozen moment from Frank's life. Children's laughter seemed to echo from the walls: two boys and two girls who had grown up and moved on. The images portrayed beach vacations, Christmas mornings, and backyard barbecues—so unlike the solitude of Jenna's own existence.

Her gaze lingered on one photograph of Frank and his late wife, arms wrapped

around each other, love evident in their shared glance. Jenna felt a pang of longing—for that kind of connection, the partnership, the sense of belonging. Frank's wife had died before Jenna was old enough to become a cop, but she'd always been aware that Frank had experienced a terrible loss. She also knew that the love that once filled these rooms had left an indelible mark on the man she respected so deeply.

"Jenna?" Frank's voice drew her back from her reverie.

"Sorry," she murmured. "Just got caught up in thoughts."

Frank nodded in understanding. He had always been perceptive, keenly aware of the undercurrents of emotion that Jenna herself sometimes failed to acknowledge. She followed him into his kitchen, where the morning sun filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow on a well-worn table.

Jenna loved this room, steeped in memories of laughter and life lessons learned over steaming cups of coffee. Over the years, this had become a haven—a place where she could lay down the burdens of her badge and simply be Jenna Graves, not Sheriff Graves.

Frank moved to his stove and cracked eggs with a rhythm that spoke of countless mornings spent doing just the same.

"Toast?" Jenna inquired, pointing toward the breadbox.

"Please," Frank replied, his attention momentarily divided between the skillet on the stove and Jenna's movements.

The toaster clicked as she depressed the lever, the soft noise joining the symphony of breakfast preparations. Jenna turned back to watch Frank whisk the eggs, his wrist rolling in tight circles. He added a splash of milk, a pinch of salt, and a grind of black

pepper. They worked in companionable silence, the only sounds the clink of utensils and the soft hum of the refrigerator. Jenna found comfort in the routine, in the simple domesticity of preparing a meal with someone who understood her unique burdens.

As the eggs began to coalesce in the pan, Frank looked up at her, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that belied the casual atmosphere. “Have you had another dream?”

Jenna’s fingers curled around a mug she had chosen for her coffee, still trying to displace the chill that had settled in her bones from the night’s revelations. Frank’s question had caught her off guard.

“How did you know?” Her question came out more sharply than intended.

Frank chuckled, a low, comforting sound that filled the kitchen. “Jenna, you only show up unannounced at the crack of dawn when those dreams of yours stir up trouble,” he said, his voice teasing but not without an undercurrent of concern.

She set down her mug, the sound a soft thud against the countertop. A pinch of guilt twisted in her gut. “I’m sorry, Frank. I know I don’t see you as often as I should.”

“Hey, no need for apologies,” he cut her off gently, his smile kind. “But I won’t lie; these old walls do miss your company when you’re not chasing specters in your sleep.”

Jenna sighed and leaned against the counter, her gaze falling to the sizzling eggs in the pan. “I’ll try to come around more often,” she promised, although the words felt hollow. As sheriff, her days were consumed by responsibilities for the living; it was in the veil of night that the dead came calling.

“Well, my door’s always open,” he replied, sliding the eggs onto plates with practiced

ease. “And I’m always here.”

He gestured to the table, and they moved to sit down, bearing plates laden with the fruits of their labor. Frank watched her settle into her chair before taking his own seat opposite her.

“Understand you’ve been keeping busy,” Frank said, his voice carrying the familiar, teasing lilt. “What with chasing down notorious fugitive parrots and all.”

Jenna glanced up, finding the quirk of his brow contagious as a laugh escaped her lips. “Cyril was quite the handful,” she admitted, shaking her head at the memory of feathers and squawks. “Never thought my job would include negotiating a bird’s surrender.”

“Times haven’t changed much since I was sheriff,” Frank replied, chuckling. “The players might be different, but the game’s the same. Always something strange brewing in Trentville and thereabouts.”

“But those are the moments that make the job... interesting,” she replied.

“Interesting,” Frank echoed, his tone suggesting that “interesting” was just one way to put it.

“I heard about another situation yesterday,” he added. “The disappearance of Sarah Thompson, the schoolteacher over at Trentville Elementary. Even got the Missouri Highway Patrol sniffing around.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged with a subdued nod, “that’s at least part of what I wanted to discuss with you. She disappeared while hiking in Whispering Pines.”

“So, tell me,” he asked, folding his napkin onto his lap, “how are you planning to



tackle this one?"

Jenna reached for the salt, sprinkling it over her eggs before responding. "I've got my deputy working on it with the Forest Service, searching the woods. They'll also be canvassing the area, checking with any possible witnesses." She met Frank's gaze squarely. "But there's a feeling I can't shake, Frank. It's like static in the air just before a storm hits."

"Instincts, huh?" Frank speared a piece of toast with his fork, a soft smile playing on his lips. "You've always had a knack for reading the undercurrents."

"More than instincts this time," Jenna confessed, pausing to take a sip of coffee. The heat of the liquid did little to warm the chill of uncertainty within her.

"It still feels strange," Jenna began calmly despite the odd sensation that twisted in her gut, "to be able to talk to you about... my dreams." She met Frank's gaze, seeking the reassurance that only he could provide when it came to this part of her life.

Frank chuckled, a low rumble that filled the small kitchen. "Jenna, after all these years in the Ozarks," he said, his eyes crinkling with good humor, "I've come to expect the unexpected. There are more things in heaven and earth than can be found in most folks' philosophies."

Her lips curved into a brief smile, grateful for his acceptance. It was a rare thing to find someone she could trust not to dismiss her experiences as fanciful nightmares or stress-induced illusions.

"Last night, I—" She hesitated, then took a deep breath, steadying herself. "I met someone in one of those lucid dreams."

Jenna took a deep breath and continued. She described the scene as best she could recall, the vivid imagery playing back in her mind like a film reel.

“I found myself outside Hank’s Derby. I saw a man standing alone. He had a buzz cut and a red beard, rough-looking, like someone who’s been on the road awhile.” Jenna paused, her eyes losing some of their usual brightness as she delved into the memory. “He was carrying a duffel bag and had a case with a fishing rod propped up beside him. He looked... weary, but determined, like he had somewhere important to go but didn’t quite know how to get there.”

Frank listened intently, his face giving away nothing of his thoughts.

“Interesting,” was all he said at first, but Jenna could see gears turning behind his calm exterior. Frank prodded gently, leaning forward in his seat, elbows on the table. “Tell me, Jenna, did the man say anything to you?”

“Actually, yes,” Jenna finally replied, her voice barely heard as she traced the rim of her coffee mug with a finger, her gaze lost in the steam swirling upward. “But what struck me most about him was a tattoo on the back of his hand.”

“Don’t tell me,” Frank interrupted her gently, a knowing look in his eyes. He began to describe the inked image with an uncanny precision. “Wings—no, angel wings, spread wide across his skin. Starting right at the base of his thumb, the feathers detailed enough to seem almost...alive.”

Jenna stared at Frank, her eyes reflecting a mix of shock and affirmation. “Yes, that’s exactly what the tattoo looked like.” She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

She leaned forward, closing the distance between them. “The man... he mentioned you, Frank. Said maybe ‘Sheriff Frank’ could help me with my problem.” Her words

hung in the air, mingling with the scent of freshly scrambled eggs and coffee.

Frank nodded slowly, his expression unreadable for a moment before the corners of his mouth turned up in a small, knowing smile. “I think he might be right,” he said, his voice carrying a weight that belied his casual demeanor. “I just might be able to help. At least I hope so.”

The air was full of a sense of something unfolding that neither of them fully understood. Jenna watched as Frank’s hands, always so sure while flipping omelets or cuffing a suspect, now hesitated in the air, as if the past were something tangible he could grasp—if only he reached out in the right direction.

Jenna felt her pulse quicken, not with fear but with the thrill of the unknown. Here in the comfort of Frank’s kitchen, surrounded by the remnants of a life well-lived, she again found herself on the cusp of something vast and uncharted. The possibility that the answers she sought might lie within reach sent a surge of determination through her veins.

Frank leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, his gaze traveling back in time to a place Jenna could not follow. The lines on his forehead seemed deeper now, as if they were grooves mapped out by the weight of memories. His eyes, normally a clear gray, were clouded with thought. Jenna knew that look; it was the same one he wore whenever he turned over a case in his mind, connecting invisible dots.

“Frank, please tell me,” Jenna prompted gently, her voice breaking through the quiet of the room. He blinked, returning from wherever his thoughts had taken him, and fixed his gaze on her once more.

“Sorry, Jenna,” he said, his voice a little distant. “It’s just that... well, there’s a lot to unpack here.”

“Anything at all that you can tell me could help,” she insisted, leaning forward, her green eyes pleading for answers.

“Jenna,” Frank said, his voice carrying a solemn note that commanded her full attention. “The man in your dream—the one with the tattoo...” He paused, and Jenna felt the gravity of what he was about to tell her.

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As Jenna watched, Frank's eyes assumed a faraway look. She knew it was the gaze he wore whenever he dredged up details from the depths of his memory—a memory that seldom failed him. Frank's keen powers of observation were legendary in Genesius County. His nearly photographic memory had served as an invaluable asset during his time as sheriff—a trait Jenna admired and wished she could master for herself.

“Mark Reeves was his name,” Frank said, breaking the silence that had settled over the kitchen. “Came to the sheriff's office asking about a good place to fish. I remember him clear as day.”

“Because of the tattoo?” Jenna asked.

“Partly,” Frank admitted, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. “It was quite distinctive. Not every day you see wings like that etched into someone's skin around these parts. But there was something else about him—a sort of earnest curiosity. He was interested in the town, its stories.”

Jenna leaned forward, her elbows on the table. It was no surprise to her that Frank could identify a man from years past just based on a description from a dream, but the details he recalled seemed especially vivid this time.

“He was a good kid,” Frank continued, warmth softening his voice. “Said he was an aspiring writer, traveling across the country to ‘discover America.’ He reminded me of those beatnik writers from back in the day—restless souls wandering the land in search of stories.”

Jenna nodded. It fit well enough with the image she'd met in the dream.

"Mark stayed at the Twilight Inn the night he came to my office," Frank went on. "Even back then, it was nothing fancy."

She knew the small, run-down motel across from Hank's Derby truck stop. The building itself hadn't been updated in decades, so it was probably much like it had been back when Mark Reeves had stayed there. And the place where she'd encountered the man in her dream would be the logical choice for catching a bus near there.

"Next morning," Frank continued, "we met up and headed out to Shannon Creek in Whispering Pines Forest. Seemed like the perfect spot for what he was after."

"Sounds like you two hit it off," Jenna observed, trying to reconcile the friendly, adventurous spirit Frank described with the worried figure she'd seen trying to get on that bus.

"We did," Frank agreed with a nod. "Mark could talk Hemingway and Kerouac like they were old buddies of his." Frank's eyes were distant, reflecting on the literary debate he'd shared with the young writer. "We stood there in the stream, casting our lines, and he spoke of *The Sun Also Rises* and *On the Road* with such passion, I believed he might just be the next great American novelist."

Jenna could picture the scene: two kindred spirits connected by their love for words, surrounded by the dense canopy of pines, engrossed in the exchange of ideas. Shannon Creek, with its clear, bubbling waters, and the surrounding forest that earned its whispering moniker from the hushed sounds of wind through pine needles, had always been a favorite hideaway for anglers and contemplative souls alike.

"His eyes," Frank continued, "they lit up when he talked about his travels, the people

he met, the stories he'd gathered. There's a special kind of fire in people who chase the written word, Jenna. Mark—he had that fire.”

He then vividly recounted their evening, filled with the sweet satisfaction of a successful day of fishing. The creek's bounty had seemed to jump onto their hooks with enthusiasm, and they eagerly reeled in their catches. As the sun began to set, they made their way back to Frank's home, where they feasted on their freshly caught meal.

“Mark savored that meal like it was fit for a king,” Frank said, a half-smile creasing his weathered face. “He was grateful, you know? For the simple things—good food, good company. Things I appreciate, too.”

Frank fell into a silent reverie for a moment.

“Before we parted ways that night,” Frank said, “he shook my hand and said he'd write. I was sure that he meant it. I still have to believe that he was sincere at the time.”

“Did he tell you where he was headed?” Jenna inquired.

“No,” Frank said, shaking his head. “And he didn't tell me where he'd come from, either. But he left with that firm promise to keep in touch, a promise unkept. And of course he knew my address.”

Frank's eyes clouded over, his gaze drifting toward the window where a robin inspected the dew-covered grass. “You know,” he began, his voice softer now, his tone one of contemplation, “from what you've ever told me about your dreams—the lucid ones ...”

He inhaled deeply.

“Not just anybody talks to you in your sleep,” he continued. “So I reckon that if Mark were still around, breathing the same air as us, he wouldn’t have showed up in your dream like that.”

She nodded slowly, her mind replaying the haunting vision of Mark Reeves she had seen.

“In the dream, he was at the bus stop, but he couldn’t get on the bus,” she said. “It stopped for him, but finally it just...left without him.” Jenna paused, a bitter possibility creeping into her voice. “Maybe it means he never left Trentville at all. That he couldn’t leave, not really.”

“That probably explains why he never contacted me,” Frank muttered. “It didn’t occur to me back then that his life might have ended here. I just thought I must have overestimated his ... reliability.”

“But did anyone report finding a body?” Jenna asked. “You were sheriff, surely you would have heard about that.”

“You’re right, of course. If a stranger had died anywhere in the county, naturally or otherwise, I’d surely have been informed of it sooner or later. But I didn’t get word of anything. Did you notice anything else in the dream? Anything peculiar?” Frank asked, his investigator’s instinct surfacing.

Jenna closed her eyes, sifting through the ethereal memories. “A clock,” she said, opening her eyes to meet Frank’s questioning look. “I heard it ticking, loud and insistent, like a warning. He complained about the sound. Then he said it was all about time.”

“Time,” Frank murmured. “It can be important in our line of work, but what can it mean for the dead?”



That question tripped off another memory for Jenna.

“How long ago was it when he came through here?” she asked. “Was it about five years ago?”

Frank leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing slightly as though sifting through memories again. “No,” he replied after a pause. “It was almost exactly ten years ago when we went fishing.”

“Ten years...” Jenna echoed. “That’s strange. In the dream, he kept talking about ‘five years.’ He mentioned that number more than once, but he never explained it.”

“Five years, huh?” Frank murmured, his gruff voice cutting through Jenna’s contemplation. “I guess it could’ve been some personal milestone or deadline he set for himself.”

“Maybe...” Jenna conceded, not entirely convinced. “Those words just feel significant, like it’s a clue or a message that I’m missing.”

“Or maybe it’s nothing at all,” Frank added, the lines on his face deepening with concern. “You know, these dreams of yours can be cryptic, to say the least. We’re treading into speculation. And speculation doesn’t bring folks home.”

“True,” Jenna admitted, her voice trailing off uncertainly. But deep down, she sensed this piece of the puzzle was important. Mark’s urgent tone, the repeated phrase... five years .

The dead who spoke to her in dreams could be hard to understand, but they didn’t just show up for no reason. She was sure that when Mark Reeves’s spirit sought her out, it had to be for a reason. She was used to trying to decipher the supernatural elements of her dreams, but this time it felt especially urgent.

Then Frank seemed lost in thought for a long moment. “Jenna,” he began, breaking the silence, “I reckon the timing of all this isn’t lost on you, is it? Twenty years since Piper...” He let the sentence trail off, an unspoken acknowledgment of the disappearance of Jenna’s twin sister.

She felt a familiar tightness grip her chest, the old wound of Piper’s absence opening just a fraction. She nodded slightly, the gratitude for Frank’s remembrance of the date warming her. “Yeah, twenty years ago yesterday,” she confirmed.

“Has Piper... Well, has she ever come to you in your dreams?” Frank asked carefully, his question probing the depths of Jenna’s private torment.

“No,” Jenna replied. “She hasn’t.”

Her eyes clouded over as she contemplated the meaning behind Piper’s continued silence in her subconscious realm. It was a silence that left room for hope—hope that somewhere, somehow, Piper was still out there alive. But she couldn’t be sure. There were too many things she didn’t understand about her dreams.

“Until I have evidence to the contrary,” she said, “I’ve got to assume that Piper is still alive.”

Jenna’s gaze drifted to the view outside—a tableau of small-town tranquility so sharply at odds with the turmoil within her. As often happened, her mind was making connections faster than she could voice them clearly. “Do you suppose Mark’s appearance right now might have anything to do with Sarah Thompson’s disappearance?”

Frank’s nod was slow, contemplative. “I guess it might,” he conceded. “But Sarah hasn’t appeared to you in a dream, has she?”

“No, she hasn’t,” Jenna admitted. “And I want to believe that means she’s still out there... still alive.”

“Even if the chances are slim?” Frank asked gently, already knowing the answer.

“Even then.” Jenna’s eyes held a flicker of vulnerability. “Slim chances haven’t stopped me before. They’re not going to stop me now.”

“Of course they won’t,” Frank said, a note of admiration in his voice for the resolve that defined his successor and protégée.

Sure that the man in her dream had told her something more, she leaned forward and put her head in her hands, closing her eyes, trying to remember. Then it was as though she heard again those chilling words that Mark Reeves had spoken with such conviction.

“He said that no one could help him now,” she said.

“Well, I guess not,” Frank said sadly.

“But he did tell me that ‘someone else is in terrible danger.’ And it was then that he said, ‘there isn’t much time.’”

“There’s that word again, ‘time,’” Frank muttered. “Jenna, if you’re going to unravel this mystery about Mark Reeves, you’ll need to dig into his past, anything that can be found out about him. And there’s no one better at uncovering that kind of history than Emily Carson.”

Jenna tilted her head in acknowledgment, the librarian’s reputation for being a human archive of Trentville well known to her. “Yeah, that makes sense,” she mused. “Emily got a mind like a steel trap for details. I’ll pay her a visit right away.”

Rising from the table, she gathered the plates and utensils, her movements efficient and purposeful. She placed the dishes in the sink, her thoughts already on whatever information Emily could potentially provide.

“Thank you again, Frank. For breakfast and for... everything.” She glanced at him, her eyes conveying gratitude deeper than words could express.

“Always here for you, kid,” Frank replied, his gruff voice tinged with concern. “And remember, I’m here if you need anything.”

“Will do,” Jenna promised, stepping outside where her patrol car waited dutifully by the curb. The morning air embraced her with a comforting warmth.

Her hand rested on the door handle of her car, hesitant for just a moment as she allowed herself to feel the full weight of her responsibility—not just as the sheriff, but as a sister still searching for answers. Every fiber of her being told her there was an unseen link between the fates of Mark and Sarah—and for all she could guess, even Piper. Talking to the librarian was now her top priority.

She pulled open the car door and slid behind the wheel. No sooner had she buckled her seat belt than her phone rang, its insistent tone jarring her from her thoughts. “Damn,” she muttered under her breath, glancing at the caller ID. It was Mayor Claire Simmons.

Jenna exhaled slowly before picking up the device. Reluctance gave way to duty as she pressed the answer button, bringing the phone to her ear.

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Steeling herself, Jenna answered her phone. “Sheriff Graves.”

“Jenna, I need you in my office. Now.” The mayor’s voice was terse, the command clipped and final.

“Is there something specific...” Jenna began, but the line went dead before she could finish.

She exhaled slowly, sure that she already knew what this was about. Sarah Thompson’s disappearance had thrust Trentville into an unwelcome spotlight, and the mayor was not one to tolerate disruptions to her carefully curated image of small-town tranquility. And now, the mayor was ready to blame Jenna for any damage to their charming image.

Of course, as sheriff, Jenna had been elected to office just as the mayor had, and she could ignore the mayor’s summons. She could still stand her ground and refuse the mayor’s orders—after all, she still had almost two years left in office. But Jenna knew that a power struggle would only make her job harder in the long run.

As she navigated the familiar streets of Trentville, her mind replayed the conversation with Frank Doyle. He had identified the man in her lucid dream as an aspiring writer who had drifted into their small town a decade earlier and then seemed to vanish. Was it really possible that this long-gone stranger had returned to give her some key to Sarah Thompson’s disappearance?

“Focus,” Jenna muttered to herself, willing her thoughts away from questions about the supernatural. But the logical part of her—the sheriff trained in facts and

evidence—refused to ignore the potential relevance of her dream. She needed to get to the library to draw on Emily Carson’s extensive research abilities. After that, Jenna probably needed to join her deputy in the continuing search through Whispering Pines Forest.

“Jake,” she murmured to herself, envisioning his sandy hair and the earnest look that came into his eyes whenever he said he trusted her methods. She’d never disclosed her gift to anyone she worked with, not even Jake. He’d accepted that she had unusual intuitions, but this was something else entirely. How could she explain that her leads came from dreams where the dead sought her out? What might admitting the truth do to the delicate balance between them? Would he see her as the same competent sheriff, or would he begin to doubt her sanity?

The urgency pressing on her conscience made her consider the risk. If her gift could help find Sarah Thompson, then perhaps it was time to tell him.

“Focus on Sarah, not on your fears,” Jenna reminded herself as she pulled into a parking space outside City Hall.

The stern facade of the granite building reflected none of the warmth typically found within the town’s borders. When she left her cruiser and pushed open the heavy door to City Hall, the coolness of the air-conditioned interior brushed against her skin. She didn’t pause to admire the well-polished floors or the historical photographs lining the walls. Instead, each displayed slice of Trentville’s past seemed to scrutinize her as she passed, silently questioning her motives. Jenna’s shoes clicked a steady rhythm as she passed the reception desk with only a cursory nod to the clerk, who was buried in paperwork.

The corridor led straight to the mayor’s office, where the door stood ominously ajar, an unspoken invitation to enter. Pushing it open, Jenna was greeted by the scent of wood polish and the sight of dark mahogany furniture that looked older than the town

itself. Heavy drapes were pulled back to let in the morning sun, which lit up an array of plaques and certificates lining the walls. The room was meticulously organized—a reflection of Claire Simmons’s need for order and control. Even the fresh flowers on the mayor’s oversized desk were symmetrically arranged.

Mayor Simmons sat behind a fortress of documents and city seals. Her tailored suit was pressed to perfection, her posture rigid as she leafed through paperwork. She didn’t look up immediately, allowing the silence to swell uncomfortably before acknowledging Jenna’s presence with a curt gesture toward the chair opposite her.

“Sit,” she commanded, finally locking her gaze on Jenna. The mayor’s eyes were sharp, like those of a raptor, missing nothing.

Jenna remained standing, preferring the equal footing it afforded her. “What seems to be the problem, Mayor?” she asked. “I don’t have much time,”

Mayor Simmons slid a copy of the Trentville Gazette across the desk. “Look at this,” she said tersely, tapping her fingernail against two headlines.

Jenna leaned over and looked at the newspaper, her eyes scanning the printed words. One headline was quaintly charming: “Cyril the Parrot: A Feathery Tale of Escape and Return.” It was a simple story that painted Trentville as a place where the most dramatic event could be the temporary loss of a talkative bird.

The other headline cut straight to the grim reality that dogged Jenna’s thoughts: “Statewide Alert: Schoolteacher Sarah Thompson Missing in Whispering Pines.” The accompanying article detailed how the Missouri Highway Patrol had joined the search and outlined the growing concern for the young woman’s safety.

Mayor Simmons’s lips pressed into a thin line as she tapped the newspaper with manicured nails, her gaze never leaving Jenna. “This,” she said, pointing to the story

about Cyril, “this is what people like to read with their morning coffee. It’s wholesome, it’s endearing. It’s Trentville.”

She paused as if for emphasis.

“However,” Mayor Simmons continued, her voice taking on an edge, “this media circus over Sarah Thompson is causing unnecessary distress. It’s unseemly for our town. It paints us in a bad light. I take it that it was your idea to bring the Highway Patrol into the equation.”

“Of course it was,” Jenna replied. “Mayor Simmons, my priority is the safety and well-being of our community. If there’s even the slightest chance that Sarah is in danger—”

“Of course,” Simmons said with a hard smile. “But we can’t have Trentville known as the town of disappearances and wild goose chases, now, can we?”

Jenna felt a familiar surge of frustration. While Cyril the parrot had been safely returned to his perch, Sarah’s empty car in Whispering Pines told a different and direr story—one that couldn’t be ignored for the sake of appearances.

Mayor Simmons leaned back in her chair. She steepled her fingers and regarded Jenna with a look that suggested she was about to impart wisdom of great import. “I know a few things about Sarah Thompson,” she began, her tone taking on the cadence of practiced diplomacy. “She left her childhood home in Gildner and hasn’t looked back. The girl is estranged from her parents, Jenna. It’s entirely possible that she simply succumbed to another bout of wanderlust.”

“I have to disagree, Mayor,” Jenna replied. “Sarah’s car was found abandoned in Whispering Pines Forest. That doesn’t suggest wanderlust; it suggests abduction, foul play perhaps.”



Simmons's mouth thinned into a straight line, a clear indicator that Jenna's point was not well received. The mayor's eyes remained fixed on Jenna's face, searching for a weakness, a sign of capitulation that would not come.

"Look, Jenna," she said, "Sarah Thompson is a grown woman. It's entirely plausible that she left her car to start anew—away from the expectations, away from her old life in Gildner."

Jenna noted the mayor's attempt at rationalization—the way she grasped at straws to explain away the disquieting evidence, to construct a narrative that would sit well with the townsfolk and media.

"Abandoning one's car in the middle of Whispering Pines doesn't exactly scream voluntary departure," Jenna replied, keeping her tone measured despite her rising impatience. "It's dubious at best, Mayor."

The edges of Simmons's mouth drew down in displeasure. "You've brought too much attention to Trentville, Sheriff," she said curtly. "Headlines should be about bake sales and charity drives, not stirring up fear over an incident that's likely a simple case of cold feet."

"Sarah Thompson deserves our thorough investigation," Jenna countered, feeling the pressure to maintain decorum in the increasingly tense office.

"Enough," snapped Mayor Simmons, her hand slicing through the air like a blade. "Dial things back, Jenna. I won't have this town thrown into chaos over your hunches."

"Dial things back?" she echoed, incredulity sharpening her tone. "I don't even know what that means. And with all due respect, Claire, you can't order me what to do or not to do."

“I wonder,” Simmons said, her eyes narrowing with precision, “if your overreaction isn’t just about Sarah Thompson. It’s been twenty years, Jenna. Are you sure you’re not letting your sister’s disappearance cloud your judgment now?”

Jenna went completely still, feeling the blood leave her face.

“Mayor,” Jenna said, enunciating each syllable, “Piper’s case has no bearing on how I conduct my investigations. And Sarah Thompson’s disappearance deserves more than speculation and dismissive assumptions.”

“Of course,” the mayor said, her voice dripping with condescension. She steeped her fingers and regarded Jenna over the rims of her glasses. “But you must understand, Sheriff Graves, that your... emotional involvement could be seen as compromising your professional judgment.”

“Mayor Simmons,” Jenna said, her tone measured but ice cold, “I assure you my judgment is not clouded by the past. My concern for Sarah’s well-being is based on facts and evidence. And I need to go now to follow up on that investigation.”

Simmons sighed, a practiced sound of disappointment. “If you continue to pursue this case with such fervor, there will be repercussions, Jenna. I hope you realize that. I am not without influence ...”

“I’m here to protect our community, not to play politics or manage appearances,” Jenna snapped, her voice devoid of fear. “If that means facing consequences, then that’s fine with me. And don’t forget, I’m an elected official. You’re not my boss. The people of Trentville are.”

Without waiting for a response, Jenna turned on her heel and strode out of the office.

As she stepped back into the sunlight, Jenna’s mind shifted gears, leaving behind the

suffocating atmosphere of the office. She wasn't going to be derailed by threats or personal attacks—not when lives might hang in the balance.

With each step toward her patrol car, Jenna cast off the weight of Simmons's words, focusing instead on the path ahead. It led to the library, to Emily Carson, and to the possible answers she might help uncover.

Jenna's hand gripped the door handle, the metal cool and yielding beneath her touch. The encounter with Mayor Claire Simmons left a bitter aftertaste, but as she slid behind the wheel, the tang of confrontation began to fade, replaced by a gnawing sense of urgency.

She couldn't deny that there was at least a little truth to the mayor's assertion that Piper's absence was on her mind. It was a constant undertow in Jenna's existence, tugging at her decisions, coloring her perceptions, especially on a day like today. Yet now, as she considered the case of Sarah Thompson, Jenna couldn't shake the feeling that this coloration wasn't just a distortion—it was an illumination.

It was true that Piper's vanishing had affected her work. It had honed Jenna's instincts, sharpened her intuition. It made her look closer, question deeper, and fight harder. And if those same instincts were telling her that Sarah's disappearance was more than it seemed, then she owed it to both women to pursue every possible lead.

The engine of the patrol car hummed to life, a familiar vibration that grounded her resolve. With a turn of the steering wheel, Jenna backed out of the parking space and out of the lot, her focus narrowing on the road ahead. There was no time to waste. The margins of the investigation were closing in, the leads and hunches weaving a web that might ensnare a truth long buried.

The drive was short, yet each second seemed to stretch, laden with the gravity of what might lie ahead. The library loomed in the distance, its quiet facade belying the

secrets it housed. Jenna's grip on the steering wheel tightened, a silent vow etched into the motion. She would find the answers, for Sarah, for Mark Reeves, and for a twin sister whose voice still echoed in her soul.

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Jenna eased her patrol car into a spot opposite the Trentville Public Library, its familiar red-brick facade a piece of Trentville history standing in the late-morning sun. The building's dignified architecture, with its white-trimmed windows and the modest plaque by the door commemorating its founding year, had always been a sanctuary for Jenna. As a child, she had escaped here to the world of books. That need had increased after Piper's disappearance when she was sixteen. During all those years, the same librarian, Emily Carson, had been both an anchor and a supporter of her intellectual curiosity.

She pushed open the door, the sudden coolness of air-conditioned silence enveloping her. A few patrons were scattered among the shelves, their low murmurs and the soft rustle of turning pages the only sounds in the near-empty space. Emily Carson stood behind the circulation desk, her silver hair pulled back in a stern bun. Her sturdy frame was slightly bent as she attended to the only patron at the checkout counter—a young boy clutching a stack of adventure novels. Jenna lingered, observing how Emily's stern expression softened as she placed the books into his eager hands. With the transaction complete, the boy scampered away.

Emily looked up to see if anyone else needed help. "Jenna, it's good to see you," she said very softly. "What brings you here today?"

"Work, I'm afraid," Jenna replied, her tone apologetic. "Can we talk in your office?"

"Of course," Emily said, gesturing for Jenna to follow.

They wound through the narrow corridors flanked by towering bookshelves until they reached a small, unassuming door marked "Private." Inside, the office was a

reflection of Emily herself—organized and functional amid the room’s orderly chaos of books and papers.

As soon as they sat down, Emily asked, “Is there any word on Sarah Thompson? I heard she disappeared yesterday, but I haven’t heard any details.”

Jenna knew the bond between the librarian and the town schoolteacher was more than just professional; they were friends who shared a love of imparting knowledge. “I’m afraid there’s not any news,” she replied. “Sarah seems to have disappeared the day before last while hiking in Whispering Pines Forest.”

“How awful,” Emily said sadly. “I hike there sometimes myself. It’s so easy to take a wrong turn or miss your footing on those trails. Do you have a team searching for her?”

“We do,” Jenna assured her. “So far, they’ve found no sign.”

“Sarah was...is impulsive at times,” Emily said with a sigh as she leaned back in her chair, fingers absently tapping against the desk. “The two of us have talked about being cautious out there. And about not going alone. But she has this adventurous streak—sometimes I think she believes she’s invincible.”

“It could be worse than we first assumed,” Jenna said. “Sarah’s car was found abandoned at the trailhead. It’s possible that she didn’t just get lost or injured.”

“Her car, abandoned?” Emily echoed, concern etching deeper lines around her eyes. “Jenna, what can I do? How can I help?”

“Let’s start with what you might know about someone from the past,” Jenna began cautiously, aware of how strange her inquiry might sound. “A writer named Mark Reeves who passed through Trentville about ten years ago.”

“Mark Reeves...” Emily repeated thoughtfully, her curiosity piqued. “That name doesn’t ring a bell. What’s his connection to Sarah?”

“I don’t yet know for sure if there is a connection,” Jenna admitted, her response evasive even to her own ears.

“Is he a suspect?”

“I don’t think so. Frank Doyle told me that he met him. Frank said the young man was a promising young writer, traveling across the country in search of American stories.”

Emily’s brow furrowed as she processed the information. “That’s quite poetic, but also vague.”

Jenna’s thoughts flitted back to the lost-looking figure with the angelic wing tattoo on his hand, the one who had vanished like smoke.

“Maybe he was actually searching for a sense of belonging,” Jenna said.

“But why come to Trentville?” Emily mused. “We’re hardly on the map.”

“Sometimes the smallest places hold the biggest secrets,” Jenna replied. “Or maybe the best stories.”

She wondered whether Mark Reeves had stumbled upon something in Trentville, some hidden secret that had led to his disappearance. And now, with another person missing, Jenna couldn’t shake the feeling that the fate of Sarah Thompson might somehow be connected with him.

Emily studied her for a moment, then turned to the computer on her desk, the click-

clack of keys filling the space between them. “Let’s see what we can find on this Mark Reeves.”

They both watched the screen as names and faces flashed by, a multitude of Mark Reeveses appearing before them. One after another, they were discounted—until one particular entry seemed to freeze time.

“Here,” Emily said, pointing to a profile. “This must be about him.”

The librarian’s search had brought them to several small literary websites where Mark’s work had once been featured— a scattering of poems here, short stories there. His writing was evocative, rife with imagery that spoke of loss and searching, themes that resonated with Jenna more than she cared to admit. She had to hide her reaction when she saw the image on one of the sites. It was the red-bearded man from her dream.

“Look at this,” Emily said, pulling up a bio attached to a particularly haunting piece of poetry. The text on the screen revealed a glimpse into the young writer’s life: Mark Reeves, a foster child turned literary prodigy. His early success had been notable, his talent undeniable.

“From foster homes to literary promise...” Jenna murmured, tracing the arc of Mark’s brief public life with her eyes. “To think someone so gifted passed through our little town.”

“This bio says he graduated from the University of Florida in Gainesville,” Emily read aloud from her computer screen. “He got a Creative Writing degree there. It also says he had plans for a master’s at the University of Oregon in Eugene.”

Emily’s fingers flew over the keys in search of any trace of Mark’s existence beyond his Florida graduation. Minutes ticked by, each one stretching longer than the last.



Jenna watched the screen flicker with images and text, but the search proved fruitless; Mark Reeves seemed to have vanished from the literary world shortly after earning his degree. The dates he'd been seen here in Trentville seemed to align ominously with his disappearance from the literary scene.

"Strange," Emily murmured, echoing Jenna's thoughts. "No further publications, no articles... It's like he disappeared off the face of the earth."

"Could you call the University of Oregon? We need to find out if he ever went to graduate school there."

"Of course," Emily agreed without hesitation. She found the number for the admissions department and dialed it, putting the call on speakerphone.

"University of Oregon, Eugene, admissions office," came a clear, professional voice.

"Hi, my name is Emily Carson, calling from Trentville Public Library. We're trying to verify if a Mark Reeves attended your university for a Graduate Teaching Fellowship about ten years ago."

There was a pause as the clacking of computer keys traveled through the speaker. Jenna leaned forward, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, eyes fixed on the phone as if willing it to divulge its secrets.

"Mark Reeves... Yes, he was awarded a fellowship here, but there's a note in his file." The staffer's tone held a hint of confusion. "He never arrived on campus, and we don't have any further records of him after that. It's quite unusual."

"Are you certain there's no mistake?" Emily pressed.

"Positive. It looks as though he must have changed his mind and simply decided not

to come here, but he didn't bother to explain why. He just never showed up. I'm sorry, but that's all the information we have."

"Thank you," Emily said as Jenna absorbed the news.

The static crackle of the speakerphone fell silent as Emily ended the call, leaving a stillness in her office that seemed to amplify Jenna's unease.

The speaker's low hum was replaced by an oppressive silence.

"So he never got to Eugene," Jenna repeated.

It did, indeed, seem strange. A promising writer, set for a new chapter in his life, gone without a trace—just like Sarah Thompson might be now. Jenna's instincts screamed at her: there were patterns here, sinister echoes reverberating through time and memory.

"Emily, I can't thank you enough for your help," she said, offering a rueful smile.

"Of course, Jenna. But you still haven't told me ... what does this Mark Reeves have to do with Sarah Thompson or with any of us?" Emily's voice held a mixture of concern and curiosity.

Jenna hesitated. She wanted to confide in Emily, to pour out everything about the lucid dreams that had led her here, but it was too complicated to get into, and she doubted very much whether Emily could accept the truth.

"I wish I could explain, Emily, but I'm still piecing things together. Just know that any connection I find could be important."

"Anything else I can do?" Emily offered, looking concerned.

“Stay alert,” Jenna advised as she rose from her chair. “And if you hear anything about Sarah... or if anything occurs to you ...”

“I’ll call you immediately,” Emily assured her, and Jenna believed her. In Trentville, the librarian was as much a guardian of secrets as she was of books.

“Thank you. And I’ll keep you posted on Sarah,” Jenna replied as she turned toward the door, the weight of her investigation settling heavier on her shoulders with each step through the old library. Outside, the sunlight seemed to be harsher now, the town’s tranquility at odds with the turmoil she felt brewing beneath its surface.

Jenna pulled out her phone as she walked down the library steps, pressing Jake’s number into the touch screen with practiced ease. The call connected just as she reached her patrol car, the metal heating beneath her hand.

“Jake, it’s Jenna. Any updates from Whispering Pines?” She braced for his response.

“We’re still searching,” came Jake’s reply, tinged with frustration. “We’ve combed through every trail Sarah might have taken. It’s like she just... vanished. We’re not giving up, but it doesn’t look good.”

Jenna’s grip on her phone tightened, the plastic creaking. This echoed the disappearance of Mark Reeves—a pattern emerging that chilled her to the core. A writer and a hiker, both seemingly swallowed by thin air, and the link between them tugging at the edges of her intuition.

“Keep me informed, Jake. Every second counts.” Jenna’s command was firm, yet she could hear the underlying note of desperation in her own voice.

“Will do, Sheriff. You gonna be okay?” Jake’s concern was audible; he knew her well enough to sense when her resolve wavered.

Jenna pressed the phone to her ear, her other hand gripping the steering wheel of her patrol car.

“Jake, I’m on my way to Whispering Pines. I’ll join the search,” she said, a decisive edge cutting through the midday silence that enveloped her.

“Alright, Sheriff. We could use your insight,” Jake responded, his voice crackling over the line with an undercurrent of urgency.

She ended the call and slid the phone into her pocket, her mind racing faster than the engine of her car as she turned the keys in the ignition. Jenna navigated through the streets of Trentville, the quaint houses blurring past her window as she headed for Whispering Pines Forest. As she drove, the memory seeped back into her consciousness.

In the haunting clarity of her dream, Mark Reeves stood immobile before the yawning door of a bus, an invisible force anchoring him to the spot while freedom beckoned just steps away. It was only now, with the fresh knowledge of his disappearance, that the true weight of the vision pressed down upon her.

The symbolism was stark—Mark, unable to leave Trentville, not because he didn’t want to, but because something—or someone—had prevented him. Her intuition told her that this was no mere accident. It suggested a fate far more sinister, and Jenna felt a chill despite the summer heat. Had something like that happened to Sarah? If so, what did it mean that Sarah hadn’t yet reached out to her? Jenna could only hope it meant that Sarah was still alive.

Her grip on the steering wheel tightened, and she focused on the road ahead, willing herself to stay grounded in the present. The trees of Whispering Pines loomed in the distance, their dark silhouettes hinting at the many secrets they surely kept. Jenna’s resolve flared; if there were answers to be found within those woods, she would

uncover them. For Sarah. For Mark. For all the lost souls waiting for someone to listen.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

When Jenna stepped inside the ranger's station at the edge of Whispering Pines Forest, the deputy on duty glanced up from the radio console, his face set in grim lines of concentration.

"Graves," he greeted, tipping his hat in an understated salute.

"Status?" Jenna asked, her voice all business.

"Search is ongoing; no sign of Sarah Thompson yet," the deputy replied, handing her a radio. "Your second-in-command is out there solo."

"Thanks," Jenna acknowledged, clipping the radio to her belt. Her eyes swept the room, taking in the maps plastered along the walls, trails marked with pins and strings—a web of possibilities where Sarah might be found. But nothing marked any discovery that might lead the searchers to her.

Stepping back outside, Jenna took out her smartphone and pulled up the GPS application. An overlay of the forest's topography filled the display, dotted with the moving blips representing searchers. She zoomed in, looking for Jake's identifier among the cluster of signals.

There it was—a solitary dot, apart from the rest, deeper in the woods than the rest. Her thumb pressed against the screen, expanding the image to reveal the exact coordinates. She memorized the location, then locked her phone and clipped it onto her belt next to the radio, ready to head into the depths of the forest.

She got back into her car to follow the narrow road that snaked through the woods as

far as it would take her in the direction of Jake's location. The car hugged a curve, and Trentville became a memory behind her, its small-town charm replaced by the wild embrace of nature.

Finally, the GPS showed her that Jake was still about a quarter of a mile away, and she could get no closer to him by vehicle. She stopped the car and shut it off, then retrieved her hiking boots from the backseat, lacing them up with practiced efficiency. Her backpack followed, filled with essentials—water, first aid kit, flashlight, and more. Each item was a small comfort against the unknown.

She set off through the forest at a brisk pace, her strides deliberate. In a short time the terrain grew steeper, the trail more obscured. With each step, her senses sharpened, attuned to every rustle and snap in the underbrush.

When the shrill ring of her phone broke through the forest sounds, she pulled the device from her pocket without breaking stride and glanced at the caller ID. To her surprise, Emily Carson's name flashed across the screen.

"Emily." Jenna kept moving as she answered. "What have you got?"

"Jenna, I've been racking my brain since you left the library." Emily's voice was urgent. "Something just clicked. I remembered Sarah talked about hiking in Whispering Pines the last time I saw her."

"Did she mention anything specific?" Jenna prodded, her pace slowing as she navigated a particularly steep incline.

"Indeed, she did," Emily continued. "She was curious about an old trail she'd heard mentioned by some of the town elders. A path not kept open for years, maybe even decades."

Jenna paused to lean against a tree, processing this new information. “Do you know which trail she was referring to?”

“Only that it’s steeped in local folklore and largely forgotten,” Emily said. “I told her it didn’t sound safe, especially not to hike that trail alone. But Sarah has a wild streak. Maybe she went anyway.”

“Thanks, Emily. This could be the lead we need.”

The call ended, and Jenna’s thoughts lingered on the implications. The notion of an abandoned trail in Whispering Pines played into the pattern of a woman seeking the thrill of discovery, perhaps lured by the romance of uncovering something hidden by time.

Then she recalled the conversation she’d had with Sarah’s mother. The woman’s eyes had held a well of sorrow as she spoke of her daughter. “Sarah always took the road less traveled,” she had said, her voice a blend of pride and trepidation. The memory now seemed prophetic.

It sounded just like Sarah to be drawn to something forbidden or forgotten, Jenna thought. The young teacher’s spirit resonated with an innate curiosity and a hunger for change. Jenna couldn’t shake the feeling that this was more than just a routine disappearance. It felt personal, as though the forest itself had reached out and claimed Sarah for its own mysterious reasons.

She lifted her phone again and punched in another number.

“Ranger Schmitt,” came the gruff answer.

“Billy, it’s Jenna Graves,” she said. “I’m here in Whispering Pines, and I’ve joined the search. I need to know about a trail in the forest that hasn’t been used for a



while—one that might not even be on our maps anymore.”

There was a brief pause, then a reply. “That would be the Beauford Ridge Trail. Runs through some rough terrain, hasn’t been maintained for, oh, I’d say forty years or more. I’ve never had cause to walk it myself, and we don’t give that location to hikers. There used to be an old road through there, but I don’t expect that to be passable now. Your deputy has a map with him that will show where it is, or was.”

“Thanks, Billy. That could be vital.”

As she moved forward again, Jenna considered this new lead, assessing probabilities and risks. The Beauford Ridge Trail was an unknown variable, a hidden crease on the map of this case that required exploration. If Sarah had indeed ventured there, the consequences could still be a simple misadventure rather than something more sinister. Maybe the schoolteacher was lying hurt somewhere, unable to phone for help, perhaps unconscious.

She quickened her pace, her thoughts focused on reaching Jake and sharing this new information.

“Jake,” she called out as she approached his position.

Hearing his name, Jake turned from his contemplation of the forest around him and offered a small smile. “Jenna,” he acknowledged.

“Billy mentioned a trail that’s been untouched for decades—Beauford Ridge. It could be where Sarah went. Can you check your map?”

Jake unfurled a paper map against the trunk of a tree, his fingers tracing lines and symbols until they settled on a narrow, dashed line snaking away from the main trails. “Here,” he said, pointing. “It’s not far. Maybe half a mile in that direction.”

“Let’s go,” Jenna replied without hesitation.

Together, they navigated through the underbrush, their steps muffled by the thick carpet of moss and fallen leaves. The forest seemed to close in on them, whispering secrets as ancient as its towering trees. Jenna’s mind cataloged every sound and movement, her senses on high alert.

As they approached the Beauford Ridge Trail, the signs of human passage became evident in the overgrown path. A broken branch here, a footprint there, barely discernible but unmistakable to a trained eye. The foliage was trampled down in places, suggesting recent activity.

“Look at this,” Jenna said, crouching to examine a piece of bright material entwined with the undergrowth. “It’s fresh. Someone has definitely passed through here recently.”

“Could be Sarah,” Jake murmured, scanning the surroundings with renewed intensity.

“Or someone else,” Jenna added, her intuition prickling uneasily.

They pushed forward, following the subtle signs of passage that wove through the overgrown trail. The air was still, the silence broken only by the occasional call of a distant bird or the rustle of leaves underfoot. Jenna’s green eyes swept the terrain searching for any clue, any indication that Sarah had passed this way.

“Here,” Jenna said abruptly, her voice low and even. She pointed to a series of indentations in the ground, nestled among the roots of an ancient oak. A patterned sole had left its mark, pressed deep into the dirt—a woman’s hiking boot, size seven, possibly.

“Sarah,” Jake said. “But look, she actually left the path here. Why would she do

that?”

They followed the faint trail to a place where the earth was disturbed, churned up in a way that spoke of sudden movement, a scuffle.

“Looks like there was a struggle,” Jake observed, his tone mirroring Jenna’s—professional, devoid of panic.

Pushing aside a heavy bough, they followed the marks of disturbed earth and foliage. It was clear that something—or someone—had been dragged through the dense underbrush, the trajectory marked by snapped twigs and crushed ferns. Every so often, a droplet of crimson marred the greenery, stark and accusing.

“Blood,” Jenna acknowledged, kneeling to examine a particularly bright splash on a fallen log. It could be Sarah’s, or it could belong to whatever wildlife roamed these woods. But deep down, her intuition insisted that this was no animal’s doing.

“Let’s keep moving,” Jenna said, rising to her feet. Her gaze met Jake’s, and in his eyes, she saw a reflection of her own resolve. They were not just deputies performing a duty; they were the lifeline to a missing soul, perhaps the only hope Sarah had left.

The signs of struggle they were tracking grew more chaotic, then suddenly the chaos tapered off. They had arrived at the edge of a dirt road that cut through the forest like a scar. It was old, seldom used, its surface littered with leaves and debris from countless seasons past. But weeds growing in that road had been recently mashed down; something had been dragged along here.

In just a short distance, they encountered a tree trunk fallen over the road, and on the far side of that they found the unmistakable indentation of tire tracks. Some sort of vehicle—a Jeep, an SUV, or a small truck—had driven in here as far as it could, and something had been dragged to it.

“Tracks look fairly fresh,” Jake murmured, crouching to look. He ran his fingers over the packed earth, tracing the outline where rubber had pressed into the ground.

Carefully, Jenna also examined the tracks, searching for any distinctive patterns or markings that might be of use. But the soil was loose, the impressions lacking the clarity needed for a thorough analysis. She straightened up, feeling a mix of frustration and urgency tightening in her chest.

“Can’t make out the tread exactly,” she said, meeting Jake’s gaze. “But you’re right, someone has driven in and out of here recently.”

Jake nodded, his expression grim. “Abduction,” he concluded, voicing the thought that hung heavily between them. Sarah hadn’t just wandered off the trail; she had been taken, and the perpetrator had left frustratingly little behind. Jenna’s mind raced with possibilities, each more unsettling than the last. They needed to act fast; every minute mattered when a life hung in the balance.

“Let’s radio Billy,” Jake suggested. “He needs to know about this.”

“Agreed,” Jenna said, reaching for her radio. As she prepared to deliver the news, her thoughts lingered on Sarah—on the fear and confusion she must have felt, on the desperate hope that they weren’t too late. The weight of responsibility was heavy, but this was what she was trained for: bringing the lost back home, restoring peace to the troubled streets of Trentville.

Jenna pressed the radio to her lips, her thumb depressing the call button. “Billy,” she said. “This is Sheriff Graves. Jake and I have got something you need to see. We need you and your deputies at our location immediately.”

Static crackled over the line before the ranger’s voice responded, clear and questioning. “Sheriff? What’s the situation?”

“We have signs of an abduction. The trail ends at a dirt road with recent tire tracks. Our search for Sarah in the forest—it’s over.”

There was a pause, then the sound of Ranger Billy Schmitt exhaling slowly. “Copy that, Sheriff. We’re on our way. “

“Schmitt, be advised, we’ll need to secure the area for forensics,” Jenna spoke into the radio, thinking ahead to the investigation that would follow. “And alert the necessary agencies—FBI included.”

“Understood, Sheriff,” came the reply, brisk and businesslike.

Jenna turned to Jake, nodding toward the disturbed earth where the struggle had ended. “Let’s make sure nothing else gets contaminated.”

Together they worked, marking the boundaries of the scene with red tape. They moved in sync, a silent agreement between them that no stone would be left unturned, no clue overlooked.

“We should make sure we haven’t missed anything,” Jake suggested. He had seen enough in his career to know that time was not on their side.

Then they walked the road to see if there were other signs but found nothing except the faint marks of the vehicle that had recently retreated. The forest around them seemed to mutter dark secrets as the wind carried soft sounds through the trees.

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Jenna stood motionless, her gaze fixed on Billy Schmitt and his deputies as they canvassed the churned earth by the side of the dirt road, reading the remnants of a struggle. She felt a chill despite the June warmth, knowing this was where Sarah Thompson's fate had turned.

"Ranger, make sure every inch is photographed before anyone else steps in," Jenna told him.

"Got it, Sheriff," Billy replied with a nod, his deputies already snapping pictures.

"Secure the outermost perimeter," he directed his men. The rangers focused on their work, the silence broken only by the occasional crackle of branches underfoot and the distant call of a lone bird. Their expressions were grim as they methodically marked off a large area with yellow tape.

"Jenna?" Jake's voice pulled her back from her observations. "We should head back to the office and regroup."

She turned to face him, the short strands of her hair fluttering slightly as a breeze swept through the pines. "You're right," she replied. "There's nothing more we can do here. Let's get back to Trentville and start connecting the dots."

They trudged back to the ranger's station where their separate vehicles were parked, but before they parted, Jenna pulled out her phone.

"You go on ahead," she told Jake. "I'm going to call Colonel Spelling. He needs to know what we've found."

“Of course,” Jake replied. His eyes met hers briefly, a silent nod passing between them—a shared understanding that boiled beneath the surface of their professional rapport.

“Tell you what,” Jake said. “I’ll pick us up something to eat on the way back. All that hiking has made me hungry.” With a grin, he got into his car and drove away.

Jenna hit the speed dial for Colonel Spelling of the Missouri State Highway Patrol. The ringing tone echoed hollowly before the familiar voice answered.

“Colonel, it’s Jenna Graves,” she reported. “We’ve found the spot in Whispering Pines where Sarah Thompson was taken. There’s no doubt in my mind—it was an abduction. She didn’t just wander off the trail or succumb to an accident. This was intentional.”

“Understood, Sheriff Graves,” came the eventual reply. “Sorry to hear it, but I’ll send a team to Whispering Pines. Is that all you need for now?”

Jenna hesitated, the line crackling with anticipation. There was something else, an intuition she couldn’t shake.

“Actually, Colonel,” she started, “I think this case might be part of something ongoing. An aspiring writer, Mark Reeves, disappeared from Trentville a decade ago. No trace of him since. I’m starting to think these aren’t isolated incidents.” She could almost hear Spelling’s mental gears grinding, processing her suspicion.

“You think there’s a connection?”

“Instincts say yes,” Jenna admitted. “It’s a hunch, but my gut’s telling me we’re looking at something bigger—a pattern we’ve overlooked.”

“Mark Reeves, you said?” Spelling’s tone was now laced with concern.

“Yes, but I don’t think you’ll find any records on him. He wasn’t from around these parts. He was just traveling through Trentville when something seems to have happened to him. As far as I know, he was never reported missing. But even so ...”

Her voice faded, and she paused, trying to frame the request she was about to make.

“I need a comprehensive list of missing persons in Missouri,” she finally said.

There was a brief silence on the line, then Spelling’s reply came. “That’s a hefty request, Jenna. How far back are we talking?”

Jenna paused, considering that Mark Reeves’s decade-old disappearance could very well be a piece of a larger, darker puzzle. If there were others, they needed to know. And then she considered the span of years since Piper had vanished.

“Twenty years,” she finally said, her decision made. “I need to see everything.”

“Twenty years?” Spelling repeated, his tone revealing his astonishment. “You realize the active list alone is—”

“Yes, there must be hundreds of names, just the active ones,” she affirmed, the gravity of the situation pressing down on her. “But I believe there might be others before Reeves. Can you do it?”

“Of course,” Spelling conceded after a moment. “It may take a little while to compile, but you’ll have it. But Jenna, what are you looking for?”

“Patterns,” she answered succinctly, her gaze drifting to the spot where Sarah had vanished, now cordoned off by the diligent deputies. “Connections that might have



been overlooked.” Her mind already began sifting through potential correlations, her analysis as instinctual as breathing.

“Patterns...” Spelling repeated, the word sounding like a puzzle yet to be solved. “Alright, I’ll get my people on it. You’ll have your list.”

“Thank you, Colonel. This could be critical.” Jenna ended the call, her thumb lingering on the disconnect button as she felt the magnitude of what she’d just set into motion. Twenty years of names, lives interrupted, families waiting for closure—she was about to dive into a sea of lost souls.

She took a moment, standing alone by her patrol car, feeling the vastness of the task ahead. The air was thick with heat and the scent of pine needles baking on the forest floor. Jenna could feel the beginnings of an ache at the back of her skull, a reminder that lucid dreams often left her more exhausted than rested.

Her drive back to headquarters in Trentville was a blur of green foliage and dusty roads, the hum of the tires a monotonous drone beneath the turmoil of her thoughts. When Jenna pushed through the door of the building, the cool blast of air from the struggling AC unit was a momentary reprieve from the June afternoon.

The front area was empty except for a lone receptionist who greeted her cheerfully and then went back to whatever she was reading on her cell phone.

In her office, Jenna found Jake seated beside her desk. His cheeseburger was half eaten, and another one was waiting there for her, along with a shake. Even though she’d had a big breakfast, Jenna realized she was hungry, and she started eating before she fired up her computer and clicked on her inbox.

She was surprised to see that Colonel Spelling had already sent her a list. When she loaded it onto her screen, rows upon rows of names filled the monitor, names

cascading down like a waterfall. She scrolled through the entries, her eyes catching dates and locations, but it was the sheer volume that staggered her—tens of thousands of names.

“What’s this?” Jake asked.

“It’s a list of people who’ve gone missing in Missouri during the last twenty years,” Jenna said. “Colonel Spelling sent it at my request. I think there might be something here.”

“How are we supposed to work with this?” Jake muttered from over her shoulder. “Where do we even start?”

Jenna leaned back in her chair. “We look for patterns, connections, anything that ties back to Trentville.”

“Patterns?” Jake echoed, skepticism laced with concern. “That’s like finding a needle in a dozen haystacks, Jenna. Even with the entire department on it, it could take—”

“We don’t need the whole department,” she interrupted. “Just us.”

Jenna’s fingers hovered over the keyboard as she considered how much to tell him. Her dreams were hers alone, a private counsel that she had never shared with anyone except Frank, certainly not with Jake. But how could they work with each other as a team without him knowing the full truth?

Her hands moved of their own accord, opening a new document and beginning to type criteria for sorting the list.

“We’ll start narrowing our focus,” Jenna said, her tone more assured than she felt. “First, we’ll look for a pattern based on periods of time. Ten years ago, a

writer—Mark Reeves—visited Trentville. He wasn't a local, but he disappeared here. I think... it's possible he met the same fate as Sarah."

"Same perpetrator?" Jake asked, skepticism evident in his eyes.

"Perhaps," Jenna replied, her intuition screaming silently about the connection. "It's a lead worth following. We need to look for similar patterns of disappearances."

She could feel Jake's eyes on her as she fell silent again.

"Well, how can we narrow down the names?" Jake's question was both practical and daunting.

"Focus on outsiders, individuals who came to Trentville and never left—at least not willingly." She decided to once again omit mentioning how her dreams guided her thoughts; some things were better kept close until she could make sense of them herself.

"Okay," Jake said after a moment. "Outsiders." He ran a hand through his sandy hair. "You realize this could take us hours, right? Maybe days."

Jenna bit her lip, wrestling with the urge to divulge the full extent of her suspicions—suspicions born from dreams and the hints of intuition. Instead, she leaned into her analytical side, the side that had earned the trust of her peers. Despite his initial astonishment, she knew Jake would follow her lead, just as he always did. Jenna was grateful for that—it meant she didn't have to navigate the murky waters of this investigation alone.

But Jake was right about the overwhelming magnitude of their task. She simply had to figure out how to narrow down their search even further.

Then, as if in reply to her unspoken query, she remembered something that Mark Reeves had said to her in her dream—something that hadn't made sense, at least maybe until now.

“Five years,” Mark had said to her. “It’s always five years.”

“Five years,” she said. It was at least an anchor point in the sea of names and dates that threatened to drag her down.

Jake folded his arms, looking over at her. “You think there’s something about five years we should be considering?”

“Maybe,” Jenna replied, pulling herself back to the present. In her dream, Mark had spoken those words with a sense of urgency, as though he was trying to impart a critical message from beyond. “There could be a cycle to these abductions.”

Her fingers hesitated over the keyboard, her gaze fixed on the sea of names that swam before her eyes. Each one bore a weight, a silent plea for discovery, but she sought patterns within the chaos, markers that would lead them to answers.

“We should start by searching through names over intervals of five years,” she said, without looking at her deputy. “We can start by searching through names of people that went missing five years ago. And then ...”

“And then what?”

Jenna shook her head with frustration.

“I wish I could give you something more concrete, but all I’ve got are instincts.” The words felt inadequate even as they hung in the air.

Jake leaned against the edge of Jenna's cluttered desk, his arms folded across his chest. Bafflement etched his features as he watched her struggle with the enormity of their task.

"Alright then, every five years..." Jake echoed, mulling over the concept. He might not see the same visions or dream the same dreams, but he did trust both her intelligence and her intuition.

The room fell quiet, save for the hum of the aging air conditioner and the faint tap-tap of keys as Jenna resumed her methodical search while Jake watched on. She filtered the list by dates, setting parameters around every fifth year, hoping patterns would emerge like stars in the night sky.

As she worked, a gnawing seed of self-doubt sprouted within her. Jenna knew her intuition had led her down the right paths before, yet the ambiguity of her dreams left her grappling with uncertainty.

Jake didn't question her; he simply trusted her. But as they delved into the depths of the list, Jenna couldn't help but wonder—how could she expect him to trust her when she wrestled with trusting herself? She sometimes questioned the rationale of chasing specters when tangible evidence should be her guide. How much could she rely on these visitations from the departed? And how much could she burden Jake with this inexplicable sense of knowing that defied logic?

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“Anything?” Jenna’s voice broke the silence, more out of habit than hope, as her tired eyes scanned line after line of text on the screen. The digital records that Colonel Spelling had sent still seemed to stretch into infinity.

“Nothing,” Jake replied, his tone flat. “It seems to me that we’ve cross-referenced every possible angle.”

Jenna’s fingers paused on the keyboard, her eyes scanning endless rows of names that flickered across the screen. Each line represented a life, a story, a tragedy, but she and Jake had found nothing that connected their fates to any single cause or place.

Hours had folded into each other, and it was well into the night now. Outside her closed office door, the building sat silent and still. All the staff had left hours ago, leaving Jenna and her deputy alone. Any incoming emergency calls would now be forwarded to the receiver designated for the long night ahead.

Jenna appreciated Jake’s quiet perseverance, though it did little to ease the growing sense of futility that gnawed at her. Each name they discounted felt like a step backward, away from the answers she sought. The reality that their efforts might yield nothing was a bitter pill, one she wasn’t ready to swallow just yet. But the worry that they were looking in all the wrong places lingered.

Jake leaned back in his chair, “Jenna, this isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“I know,” she admitted. She couldn’t shake the nagging sensation that they were missing something crucial. She rubbed her weary eyes. They had tried different years, different demographics, anything that could point them toward the pattern she was

sure must be there. But the search felt like following mirages, each one dissipating upon contact.

“Could be right under our noses,” Jake mused, his voice low.

“Or it could be nowhere at all,” Jenna added quietly. The silence that followed was heavy, filled with the unspoken thoughts that haunted both their minds.

Her eyes scanned a list of names they had pulled out of the mass. Each of those was linked to Trentville by some distant thread—a cousin who once attended the local high school, a friend of a friend who frequented the annual county fair. Every lead seemed to dissolve under scrutiny.

“We’ve found connections, but nothing really leading back here to Trentville,” Jenna said, her frustration mounting. “Friends, family in Trentville, but these people vanished in other places.” Their exhaustive search had yielded no one who had disappeared within the town limits.

She considered again the common ties that bound the victims she knew—Sarah Thompson, Mark Reeves, and her sister Piper. Their sometime presence in Trentville was the only tangible link, yet they had found nothing beyond that fact. And Mark Reeves’s name didn’t even appear on the colonel’s computerized list.

Mark Reeves wasn’t from Missouri, she reminded herself. Someone like Mark, who wasn’t from Missouri but was taken while passing through Trentville, maybe their disappearance went entirely unnoticed—the same as Mark’s disappearance had gone unnoticed except in her own lucid dream. Someone like that wouldn’t be on the Missouri state missing persons list. Their absence would be a ghost note, unheard amidst the cacophony of local disappearances.

She glanced at Jake, his silhouette framed by the dim light. His patience was a silent

anchor in the chaos of Jenna's thoughts.

"Jake," said, "I appreciate you sticking with me through this."

He turned, offering her a nod that conveyed understanding. "We'll find something if it's here to be found."

Her gaze lingered on the digital clock in the corner of the computer monitor. The numbers mocked her, each minute slipping by without progress.

"Okay, Jake, let's take a breather," she suggested, pushing back her chair and rubbing her temples.

"Sure," Jake agreed, standing and stretching his arms above his head, muscles shifting beneath his shirt. Jenna watched him for a moment, feeling the stiffness in her own limbs. She studied Jake's profile, the set of his jaw reflecting his dedication. It comforted her to have him there, steadfast in the face of their shared uncertainty.

Jake's gaze met hers. "We've been at this for hours, Jenna. One thing I need to understand—where did you come up with this name Mark Reeves? What's the connection to Sarah Thompson's case?"

Jenna hesitated, her pulse quickening. She'd managed to dodge this question so far. "Mark Reeves..." she began. "He vanished without a trace. Like Sarah, he was here one moment, gone the next."

"How did you even know about him?"

"Frank Doyle and I had breakfast together this morning and ... his name came up."

"And Frank just brought up this story from ten years ago?"



She hesitated, unable to explain why the topic of Mark had been part of that discussion. “Well ... uh ... he just mentioned meeting Mark Reeves when he came through Trentville. They actually went fishing together. Said he seemed like a bright kid, passionate about literature, about life. But after that day, he heard no word from him ever again.”

“And you think this is connected to Sarah how?” Jake asked, trying to piece together Jenna’s thoughts.

“Maybe the possibility just struck me because of Sarah’s disappearance. Two people, full of dreams, both vanishing from our little town.”

She shifted in her chair, feeling the weariness of hours spent searching names that led nowhere. “There’s more,” she continued. “I got help from Emily Carson at the library. We dug into Mark Reeves’s background further.”

“And?” Jake’s eyebrows rose.

“Turns out he’d just finished his undergrad at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Was supposed to be on his way to something bigger, brighter.”

“An aspiring writer on the cusp of a new life chapter,” Jake mused.

“Yes, exactly. His whole future ahead of him, and then...” Jenna trailed off, shaking her head. The image of Mark standing desolate outside Hank’s Derby flickered in her mind—a vision she couldn’t share. “He was enrolled for grad school at the University of Oregon in Eugene. Supposed to start a work-study program.”

“Did he ever make it there?” Jake’s voice was cautious.

Jenna shook her head. “No. The admissions office confirmed it. He was expected, but

he never arrived. It's like he just vanished after leaving here."

"Disappeared into thin air," Jake concluded, filling the silence Jenna left behind. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, the stubble there a testament to the long day's work. "So, where does that leave us, Jenna? Why do you think Mark disappeared during his stay here?" he asked, leaning forward again. "He was traveling across the country. Could've vanished anywhere between Trentville and Eugene."

Jenna hesitated, feeling the weight of his question. The logical part of her agreed; Mark Reeves's disappearance could have occurred at any point along his journey. Yet, she remained tethered to the belief that Trentville held the answer. However, without revealing her unique connection to the dead—without confessing her dreams—she found herself floundering for an explanation that would satisfy Jake's skepticism.

"We've seen it before," she said, grasping to find an analytical approach. "Small towns... they have a way of drawing things to them, keeping secrets. Trentville is no different."

"Don't you think we need to recap what we're actually looking for?" Jake suggested, though his question seemed rhetorical, his brow creased with concern for Jenna.

Jenna exhaled deeply, feeling the weight of the search pressing down on her. "I wish I knew, Jake. We need a connection to Trentville, but..." She trailed off, knowing full well that her secret kept her from being truly transparent with her partner.

"Sometimes a hunch is all we have," she added, hoping to placate his curiosity.

Jake nodded slowly, though his eyes still searched hers for something more. The silence stretched between them, laden with unspoken questions and the weight of countless dead ends.

“Alright, Jenna,” he conceded after a moment, “I trust your instincts. But if we’re missing something...”

She met his gaze squarely, willing him to trust her despite the gaps in her story. In her mind’s eye, she saw Mark again, as vivid as in her dream—a figure standing outside Hank’s Derby, his duffel bag slung over one shoulder, a look of confusion etched on his face as the bus pulled away without him. That dream of the man unable to embark on the bus—it was all she had. It was this vision that held her fast to the belief that Mark’s journey had ended here. But how could she explain the inexplicable? How could she justify her instincts when they were woven from the fabric of dreams?

And perhaps she was wrong about what had happened to him.

Although she believed that only the dead appeared in her lucid dreams, could there be some exception she hadn’t recognized? Could it be Mark had simply continued on his journey, disappearing somewhere beyond the borders of Trentville, or maybe not even disappearing at all? Instead, maybe he’d changed names, started a whole new life. She couldn’t imagine why. But of course, if that were true, it would be none of her business, and it would certainly be irrelevant to the case at hand.

But if that were true, then ... the very thought made her heart sink. If Mark was actually still alive, then Jenna couldn’t be so certain that Piper was still alive just because she’d never visited one of those dreams.

“Jenna?” Jake’s concern pierced through her reverie, reminding her of the partnership they shared, built on trust—even when understanding eluded them both.

“Sorry,” Jenna muttered, rubbing at her eyes. “Just thinking. Let’s take a real break.”

Jenna pushed away from the desk, stood and stretched, her muscles protesting the long hours of immobility. She walked over to the window and peered out into the

night, the town of Trentville bathed in the soft glow of streetlights. It was peaceful, almost idyllic, and for a moment she allowed herself the luxury of considering a different reality—one where disappearances were just stories, and dreams were never prophetic.

“Maybe we’re going about this all wrong,” Jenna spoke aloud, more to herself than to Jake. Perhaps there was no thread connecting Mark Reeves to Trentville, no sinister force snatching souls beneath its homely veneer. And yet...

“So where do we go from here?” Jake asked.

Then two words flashed through her mind, as if lit by neon lights.

“Twilight Inn,” Jenna said abruptly, turning toward Jake, her green eyes alight. The name had been echoing in her mind, a call she could no longer ignore. It was another piece of Trentville’s puzzle that beckoned to her.

“Wait, what?” Jake looked at her sharply.

“The Twilight Inn,” she repeated, “We need to take a look around there.”

The Twilight Inn—a place time seemed to have forgotten, its neon sign flickering like a beacon for weary travelers and lost souls. It sat on the outskirts of town right across the highway from Hank’s Derby, a sentinel watching over the comings and goings of those who sought its refuge.

“Why there?” Jake asked, but Jenna could see the readiness in his posture.

“Frank told me Mark stayed at the Twilight Inn during his visit here,” Jenna clarified, her eyes snapping open with renewed focus. “There’s something there, I can feel it. We need to go now.”

Together, they grabbed their notepads and cell phones and locked up the office. They left the building in silence, their steps synchronized as they descended the stairs. Outside, the night was cool and pleasant, the sky overhead a canvas of stars. Jenna led the way to the cruiser, her mind racing ahead to the Twilight Inn—a place that felt like a scrap of the past clinging to the present. She could almost picture it in the darkness, waiting for them with its untold stories, and perhaps holding the key to the riddle that had consumed so many of Jenna’s waking thoughts.

“Anything I should know before we go poking around there?” Jake asked as they drove, the road stretching out before them like a black ribbon.

“Keep your eyes open,” Jenna said, her hands tight on the wheel. “And trust your gut.”

As the cruiser’s headlights cut through the night, illuminating the path toward the decrepit motel, Jenna felt a shiver run through her body. Whether it was anticipation or foreboding, she couldn’t say. Whatever awaited them at the Twilight Inn, she could only hope that it would bring them closer to the answers she was searching for.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Jenna guided the patrol car into a space in front of the Twilight Inn, its neon sign flickering weakly against the nighttime sky. The building hunched beneath the weight of years, paint peeling like sunburnt skin, windows reflecting streetlights with a tired gaze—a relic from an era when such places thrived on the hopes of passing travelers. She killed the engine, the sudden silence pressing in on her. What secrets did this old place hold within its worn walls? Could it harbor clues to a mystery that eluded her so relentlessly?

Her hand rested on the ignition key for a moment longer than necessary, her mind racing through the possible outcomes of this impromptu visit. Jenna's intuition, that unspoken companion, murmured softly, urging her forward even as her rational mind cataloged the odds stacked against them.

Jake made no comment, but she could feel his gaze on her profile, his features undoubtedly mirroring the questions she sensed from him.

“Something on your mind, Jake?” she asked, preempting his questions.

“Well, you could say that,” he replied wryly, though his tone carried an undercurrent of concern. “Now that we’re here, I’m not convinced that this establishment is likely to keep much in the way of records. We could be just wasting our time.”

“Well, besides what Frank told me, let’s just say I have a hunch,” she said, finally turning to meet his questioning eyes. “And you know better than anyone, my hunches often turn out to be right.”

Jake nodded, the corners of his mouth lifting in a half-smile. He trusted her, but his

need for logical explanations pressed heavily between them. “Then let’s see where this hunch leads us,” he said, and they both stepped out into the cool night air.

The door to the front office creaked as Jenna pushed it open, a bell above announcing their entrance. Dust swirled in the air, visible in the sparse illumination provided by a solitary light fixture hanging from the ceiling. Behind the desk, an elderly man sat hunched over a crossword puzzle, his silver hair thinning and his glasses perched precariously on the bridge of his nose. His gaze lifted from the newspaper, and his weathered face creased into a semblance of a smile—or perhaps a grimace—as he took in the sight of the uniformed sheriff and her deputy.

“Evening,” he greeted, his voice rough like sandpaper. “What can I do for you, officers of the law?”

“Good evening,” Jenna replied, her tone professional. “I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves, and this is Deputy Hawkins. We’re looking for information about a guest who might have stayed here around ten years ago.”

The manager’s face was a canvas of years spent overseeing the comings and goings of countless guests, and the lines seemed to deepen as he contemplated her question. His bushy eyebrows rose slightly, skepticism etched in the deep lines of his face. He leaned back in his chair, which groaned under his weight, and regarded her with curiosity.

“Ten years is a long stretch,” he said slowly. “A lot of people come and go. Memories fade.”

Jenna nodded, understanding the difficulty of what she was asking. But she had learned long ago that the past could speak volumes if one knew how to listen—and she had come here hoping that the echoes of history would yield something, anything, to help solve this mystery. Her gift had led her into this line of investigation, and she

needed to follow up on it.

Her voice betrayed none of the urgency that pulsed beneath her skin. “I understand that, sir. But by any chance, do you still have records from back then? People who signed in and out?”

The man’s scoff sent a ripple through the musty air of the Twilight Inn’s front office, and he shook his head as if in disbelief. “Nope,” he grunted with a dismissive wave of his hand, as if trying to swat away the absurdity of her request. “No such thing here. Paper gets old, space runs out. We don’t hold onto things nobody comes back for.”

He glared at her, his posture unyielding against the backdrop of yellowed wallpaper and faded tourism brochures.

Jenna masked her disappointment with a practiced nod. The absence of records was a setback, yet not an unanticipated one. As a small-town sheriff, she had learned to navigate the often-frustrating voids in data that rural recordkeeping presented. If the physical evidence had long been discarded, perhaps human memory would prove more durable.

“You seem to know this place well,” she commented, her tone more casual and chatty. “Were you perhaps working here during that time? Your familiarity with this place could be very helpful.”

The man paused, his eyes narrowing as he appraised her once more. He seemed to weigh the merit of engaging further, the creak of his chair marking the passage of silent seconds. Finally, he conceded with a slight tilt of his head, “Yeah, I’ve been managing this place since before the turn of the century.”

Jenna felt a flicker of relief. Her intuition, that strange internal compass honed through years of navigating the blurred lines between dreams and reality, suggested



she was on the right track. This man was a living archive, a potential key to unlocking tales of the past. Now all she needed was for the man's recollections to emerge from the fog of a decade's worth of guests and transients who had passed through the doors of the Twilight Inn.

"I'm hoping you might remember a particular guest—Mark Reeves." She watched for any flicker of recognition that might cross the man's features. As she spoke, she summoned the image of Mark from her dream: the buzz cut, the red beard, and especially the tattoo—an intricate pair of wings etched into his skin.

"Medium height, buzz cut, red beard," Jenna continued methodically, as if presenting evidence to a jury. "He had this distinctive tattoo of wings on his forearm." She paused, letting the details sink in, then added, "He was a memorable character, a writer, one who probably had stories to tell. Just traveling through, but he did some fishing while he was in Trentville."

"How do you know ...?" Jake hissed, and she glanced at him in time to see the surprise on his face at the vividness of her description.

"Frank described him to me," she explained quickly.

The manager leaned back in his chair, which groaned under his weight. His eyes seemed to drift into the past as he considered her words. Jenna held her breath, hoping for at least a small shard of memory that could be the key to unlocking a door long sealed shut.

"Reeves," the man behind the desk murmured, his voice a low rumble that barely rose above the hum of the aged air-conditioning unit. A frown creased his brow as he delved into the recesses of his mind, sifting through transitory faces and forgotten names.

Jenna remained silent, giving him space to recall, hoping beyond hope that the name and description would dredge up more than just a passing recollection. She needed a breakthrough, something concrete to grasp onto in the ever-twisting maze of her investigation. Mark Reeves was a piece of the puzzle—a vital one—and she couldn't afford to let it slip through her fingers.

The manager's eyes widened as recognition flickered behind his spectacles. "Red beard, right. Reeves," he said with a note of surprise that made Jenna lean in closer. "I remember him, alright. Didn't pay his bill, left a bunch of his things behind in the room. A green duffel bag and an old fishing rod, if memory serves."

Jenna's heart skipped at the confirmation—not only had Mark Reeves been here, but his personal effects had been abandoned at this old motel. That was a strong indication that their owner might have disappeared in Trentville, as she had suspected. Besides that, the belongings could hold vital clues or maybe even fingerprints, something tangible to link the past to her present search. "Did you keep those belongings?" she asked, her voice tight with restrained excitement.

Again, the manager's scoff sliced through the brief silence that followed Jenna's question. "Keep them? Certainly not," he grumbled, his aged hands fidgeting with a pen on the countertop. "Those items were taking up valuable space. And why would I store someone's belongings when they skipped out on their bill?" His gaze held hers for a moment, as if the very idea was preposterous.

Jenna felt the disappointment seep in, a cold undercurrent beneath her initial surge of excitement. She knew better than to expect favors from a man who dealt in nightly transactions rather than sentimental keepsakes. The possibility of Mark Reeves's duffel bag and fishing rod revealing something crucial now seemed to evaporate into the musty air of the Twilight Inn's front office.

"Fair enough," she conceded, masking her dismay with a nod of understanding. "It

was a long shot, but worth asking.”

Before another word could be exchanged, the front door creaked open, admitting a weary traveler dragging a suitcase behind him. The man’s entrance was a reminder of the endless turnover of guests, each with their own stories, none lingering longer than necessary.

“Excuse me,” the newcomer said, approaching the desk. “I need to check in.”

“Of course,” the manager replied, turning his attention to the new arrival with practiced ease.

“Thanks for your time,” Jenna said, offering a polite smile to the manager before motioning to Jake. They stepped out into the night, leaving the dimly lit office behind. The air outside was thick with the scent of summer foliage, and the chirping of crickets accompanied their walk back to the patrol car.

“Leaving his stuff here, that does seem to support your suspicions that this guy might never have left Trentville alive,” Jake remarked quietly as they neared the vehicle, his voice tinted with the frustration Jenna herself felt. “Of course, we still have no proof of anything, nothing really to go on. The old guy’s memory could even be wrong, or he could have been misleading us.”

Jenna was silent for a moment. Jake’s silhouette stiffened beside her, his confusion palpable in the dim light.

“But I still don’t get it, Jenna. Why are you so fixated on this Reeves guy, anyhow? He didn’t even show up in the database of the missing or dead.”

“Sarah and Mark are pieces of the same puzzle,” she insisted. “I can feel it. We’re still missing something crucial here.”

She stared at Jake for a moment. He was rational, grounded in the tangible world, while she navigated realms that defied explanation. They had already searched for tangible leads, grasped at the wisps of decade-old memories, and they hadn't turned up the evidence they needed. Now Jenna was sure that the truth they sought lay just beyond the reach of conventional investigation.

"Look, I deserve a better explanation than that," Jake said.

Jenna realized he was right. It was time to open the door to her most closely guarded secret, her gift that blurred the lines between the living and the dead. She hoped Jake would understand, despite the invisible walls that secrecy had built between them.

"Jake," she began, "there are some things I've never told you. But now, it's critical you know ... well, everything."

She watched him, a frown on his brow as he waited for her to continue. Jenna took a deep breath; the moment of revelation, once so daunting, now seemed like the only path forward. But not here, standing in a motel parking lot. Without another word, she motioned across the desolate road toward the neon lights of Hank's Derby truck stop.

"Let's go over there," she suggested. "I'll tell you everything—over coffee. All your questions, every doubt you have, I'll lay it all out."

She was aware that once she started to share her secret, there would be no turning back. Her fate and Jake's, their ability to work together or maintain any relationship at all, hung on his reaction. And she could not tell what that was going to be.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Jenna led the way as she and Jake left the dimly lit parking lot of the Twilight Inn. Across the road, Hank's Derby beckoned them with its warm glow. When they pushed through the door of the truck stop café, the familiar clang of the entrance bell noted their arrival. With a checkerboard floor, red vinyl booths, and a counter lined with chrome-edged stools, it was a place that seemed untouched by time, much like Trentville itself.

They slid into a booth, and Jenna signaled to the waitress. Although hours had passed since their burgers back at the office, neither of them felt like having a full meal. The waitress set two coffees before them and took their orders for slices of apple pie.

Jenna observed Jake as he settled into the booth, his posture relaxed. Maybe this would be as good a time as any, she thought.

"Jake," she began, "there's something I need to tell you."

He leaned forward to listen, but now that the moment was here, Jenna found herself unsure where to start. At the very beginning, she decided.

"Have you ever heard of lucid dreaming?" she asked.

Jake shook his head, confusion knitting his brows together. "Can't say that I have. The words sound contradictory."

"It's a state of dreaming where you're aware that you're dreaming," Jenna began, her tone clinical, detached. "You can often control the dream, make decisions in it without waking up. It's a scientifically recognized phenomenon, nothing supernatural

about it, in and of itself.”

Jake leaned back in the booth, intrigued by the turn the conversation had taken. “So, are you saying you can do this? Lucid dream?”

“I do. Frequently. Ever since Piper vanished...” Jenna hesitated, glancing away for a moment, collecting herself before she continued.

“That’s ... sort of interesting, I guess,” he muttered.

Jenna almost regretted opening this door, but secrets were heavy burdens, and Jake had become more than just a deputy to her. He deserved the truth.

“But there’s more you need to know,” she told him, “about my lucid dreams.”

She saw that he was waiting for her to explain, so she blurted, “Sometimes, I’m visited by the dead.”

“Visited?” he echoed, his voice a notch lower than usual.

“Not in the way you might think—not voices echoing from beyond or anything quite so dramatic. It’s through those dreams, lucid dreams, where I can interact with them, ask questions.”

When he made no reply but just sat there looking skeptical, Jenna continued, “Take the night before last. My father came to see me in a dream. He didn’t say much, nothing really that made sense or seemed relevant. But it was definitely him.”

His eyes studied her silently. “Your dad?” he finally asked. “And you think these visitations are... real?”

The waitress arrived, placing the plates in front of them, but Jenna barely registered their presence. She drew in a deep breath, fortifying her will to continue. After the waitress said some cheerful words and went on her way, Jake silently urged Jenna on with a nod.

“Yes, they are real,” she replied to his question, her eyes not wavering. “They come to me, communicate things... It’s unpredictable and always cryptic, but it happens.”

Silence settled over them as Jenna watched Jake process her words. She saw the gears turning behind his eyes, saw a momentary flicker of understanding before it vanished.

“Jake?” Jenna prodded gently after a moment, breaking the silence that had stretched a little too long. “I need you to say something. Anything.”

“How does it work?” he asked with a frown.

Jenna pushed her pie aside, its sweetness forgotten in the gravity of the moment. She watched Jake trying to reconcile what he knew of her as a sheriff with this stranger who spoke with the dead.

She chose her words carefully. “You know we’ve reached dead ends sometimes, only to find a breakthrough after I’ve slept on it. Literally.” She offered a wry smile, hoping to lighten the gravity of her revelation. “It’s like having an extra tool in my kit.”

“You mean to tell me those weren’t just great hunches? Are you saying these dreams actually help you solve cases?” His voice was low as he attempted to understand.

“Yes,” Jenna affirmed. “It’s how we cracked the Shannon Mine case.”

“I always wondered how you zeroed in on that place. It was like you had a map no

one else could read.”

Jenna’s lips pressed together briefly before she responded. “I didn’t have a map, Jake. But something... someone... gave me directions.”

“Someone?” he repeated, leaning forward, elbows on the table.

“Someone who wasn’t alive,” Jenna clarified softly. “A miner, long since dead, came to me in a dream. He wore an old-fashioned helmet with a dim lamp, face smeared with coal dust... I could feel the chill of the underground air he brought with him.”

Jake’s expression was unreadable. “You’re saying a ghost led you to the stolen goods?”

“No, not directly,” Jenna replied, taking a small sip of her coffee to buy time to make sure her next words were as clear and concise as possible. “The dead don’t just hand over information. They communicate... differently. Sometimes in riddles, impressions, feelings that I have to interpret.”

She watched Jake process this, noting the slight tension in his jaw, the way his fingers wrapped tightly around his mug. He was grappling with the thought of reality being broader than what could be seen or touched—or else the possibility that his friend and partner was insane.

“Then how did you know where to find the goods?” he asked.

“The miner didn’t tell me outright,” Jenna explained. “He just kept making gestures I had to interpret.”

Jake’s head shook in disbelief, a wry smile barely masking the storm of emotions she knew were brewing inside him. “Am I dreaming right now?” His tone held an edge of



incredulity that made Jenna flinch.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Jenna began, sensing Jake’s skepticism like a heavy fog.

A low whistle escaped Jake, mingling with the scent of coffee and pie, his disbelief palpable. “That’s putting it mildly,” he muttered, frustration evident as he raked a hand through his sandy hair.

“Please say you believe me,” Jenna implored, desperation creeping into her voice.

“Jenna, I’m—I’m trying,” Jake stammered, his attempt at understanding overshadowed by mounting frustration. “I’m trying to get my head around this.”

“You must think I’m crazy,” Jenna whispered, her voice tinged with regret.

“I didn’t say that,” Jake snapped, his patience wearing thin.

A silence fell between them. Jenna knew that it was taking all of Jake’s self-control—and all his kindness—not to explode into a tirade of disbelief, or of skepticism at the very least.

“Okay,” Jake finally said. “So, what does this mean for our work? For example, the case we have now, Sarah Thompson, or even Mark Reeves?”

“Last night,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt, “Mark Reeves came to me in a dream.”

Jake leaned forward slightly, his interest piqued despite the doubts that still lingered.

“He was waiting for a bus just outside, right there.” Jenna gestured toward the window beside their booth. “But when the bus arrived...he couldn’t get on.”

The weight of the moment settled between them, and Jenna could see Jake processing, trying to fit this piece into the puzzle.

“I believe the dream is a clue,” she continued. “He wanted to be on his way, but he couldn’t leave. It suggests that Mark’s life might have ended right here.”

“Does that dream seem to prove to you that Mark’s disappearance is connected to Sarah’s?” he asked, not dismissing her outright—a response Jenna counted as a win given the circumstances.

“Perhaps not directly,” Jenna admitted, her voice dropping as she leaned closer, “but it’s a pattern. And patterns are the language of investigation.”

A heavy silence descended between them again, like a thick fog rolling over the Ozarks. Jake seemed to be working to absorb the information, his eyes still reflecting concern.

“Does anyone else know about this... gift of yours?” he finally asked.

Jenna hesitated, looking away toward the dark outline of the Ozark Plateau. “Frank knows,” she admitted. “He’s the only one. I talked to him about my recent dream, and he recognized my description as a man he’d met ten years ago, an aspiring writer named Mark Reeves.”

“And I guess you told the librarian, too? When you got her to check out the records?”

“No, I just asked her to help me look up Mark Reeves.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” he asked, his tone revealing a sense of betrayal. His features reflected a quiet hurt, the kind that came from unexpected exclusion. “Is there some reason you didn’t trust me with this?”

Jenna met his gaze, her green eyes reflecting the pale light. “I was worried,” she confessed. “Worried you’d see me differently. That it might change things between us.”

“Wouldn’t that be my call to make?” Jake pressed, his shoulders tense.

“Perhaps,” Jenna conceded, feeling the weight of her decision. “But Jake, you have to understand—I couldn’t risk losing your trust. Not when we’ve come so far together.”

Jake looked down at his empty pie plate. “Yeah, I get it,” he muttered, more to himself than to her. “It’s just... surprising, is all. And I ... well, I still don’t know what to think.”

He set his fork down with a click, pushing the plate away. “I guess you were right to worry,” he said, his voice carrying an edge of something Jenna couldn’t quite define. It was disappointment, maybe, or the echo of a trust strained almost to breaking. “I just... I don’t know where this leaves us. As a team. As friends.”

Her heart sank. The hurt in his words was unmistakable, and it mirrored the ache in her own chest. She had hoped for understanding, for acceptance, but she hadn’t been naive enough to expect it. “I can’t blame you for how you feel,” she said quietly. They finished their coffee in silence, the warmth from the mugs doing nothing to thaw the chill that had settled over them.

The diner’s clock ticked on, marking time that seemed to stretch and warp around them, until Jake finally broke the quiet. “What’s our next step with our current case, then?” His question was practical and grounding, pulling them back to the reality they were tangled in.

“We still have a lot of unanswered questions,” she replied. “A lot of ordinary investigation to do.”

Jake nodded slowly as if that alone lent some solidity to the shaken ground beneath their partnership. It was a small comfort to Jenna, a reminder that even when personal understanding faltered, the resolve to seek justice remained unbroken.

They rose from the booth, leaving behind his empty plate and her nibbled-at pie, the remnants of a conversation that would linger long after the flavors had faded. With the bill paid, Jenna led the way out of Hank's Derby into the cool night air of Trentville. A huge truck rumbled away from the gas pumps, then everything was silent around them.

Back in the Twilight Inn parking lot, Jenna's fingers fumbled with the keys before she could unlock the car and get it started. Jake settled into the passenger seat, sitting there stiffly. The drive was silent, except for the soft murmur of the car gliding over asphalt. Jenna's mind churned. A partnership once grounded in unspoken understanding now teetered on the brink of uncertainty, and she thought she could feel the distance between them growing.

As she navigated the quiet streets of Trentville toward headquarters, where Jake's car was still parked, a sense of trepidation settled over her. She knew that revealing her secret—a truth she had held close for years—had altered something fundamental. It wasn't just the look of skepticism that had flickered across Jake's face or the heavy silence that followed; it was the knowledge that she had unveiled a part of herself that couldn't be unseen or forgotten.

Each turn brought them closer to headquarters, and with it, the end of their journey for the night. Finally, breaking the silence like a crack through ice, Jake spoke. "Jenna, has Piper ever come to you in a dream?" His voice was hesitant, almost fearful of the answer.

Jenna felt her heart skip a beat. She swallowed hard before responding, her voice soft. "No," she admitted. "And that's one reason why I still hold out hope that she's alive."

“Because if she was... gone, you’d know,” Jake finished for her, his tone now more understanding, yet filled with a profound sadness. Jenna nodded, eyes never leaving the road, yet seeing so much more than the path ahead. In the silence that followed, Jenna could almost hear the echo of her sister’s laughter, a sound that had once filled their shared childhood room. She clung to the belief that the absence of Piper in her dreams meant something—that her twin was still alive somewhere.

Jenna glanced sideways at Jake, trying to gauge his feelings. She needed him, not just as her deputy, but as the steadfast friend who had always been by her side.

Jake got out of the car with a grim smile and only brief words. “Goodnight, Jenna.” She sat there watching him go to his car and drive away.

Something vital had changed tonight. Jenna had revealed her soul’s hidden corners to someone she trusted, yet now she had to wait to discover the consequences.

Although Jake hadn’t said so, she knew he still didn’t quite believe her. Maybe he thought she was out of her mind—a thought which sometimes occurred even to her. Would Jake ever look at her the same way? Could he accept this part of her, or would it forever be a barrier between them?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Consciousness crept back to Sarah Thompson, slipping into her awareness only to reveal the bleak darkness that still surrounded her. Her eyelids fluttered open, yet there was nothing to see—no comforting light or familiar shape—just that oppressive blackness that had swallowed every hope she might have harbored. She shifted on the hard, cold ground, the concrete beneath her offering no solace to her aching body. Grogginess clung to her mind, and with it, a pang of hunger gnawed at her insides. But the worst thing was that overwhelming thirst; her tongue felt like sandpaper, her throat a barren ravine begging for the mercy of water.

As she lay there, trying to piece together the fragments of memory, the silence of her prison was abruptly shattered. Panic seized her at the nightmarish repetition—a door creaking open, then footsteps descending stairs, silence, then the sense of something moving toward her. Sarah wanted to scream, to demand answers, but the dryness of her mouth smothered the impulse. She lay still, the prey pretending death in the face of a predator.

Then again the stark beam of the penlight and the clink of ceramic on concrete. In the harsh circle of light, a new plate materialized, holding the same meager offering as before: a slice of bread and a piece of cheese. The new plate sat near the untouched one from earlier, that bread now hard, the cheese dried and curling at the edges. Then the penlight flicked off, abandoning Sarah to the consuming shadows once more.

Her body craved sustenance, but the desert in her mouth made swallowing merely a dream. Sarah's hunger was a primitive ache that paled in comparison to the arid burn in her throat. A single bite would turn to ash without moisture to aid it down her constricting throat.

“Please,” she rasped, the word barely escaping her lips, “water.”

Her plea dissolved into the void, unanswered. She strained against her restraints, the clank of metal echoing in a cruel imitation of her fruitless efforts. In the silence that followed, Sarah realized the true nature of her plight—not just a struggle for freedom, but a primal fight for the most basic elements of life. This mockery of care, this semblance of feeding, was a psychological barb from someone who knew the body’s needs and relished in their denial.

The light snapped off as abruptly as it had come, plunging Sarah back into darkness. The absence of the penlight was almost a physical blow, the sudden return to blindness disorientating. She heard the figure’s footsteps, heavy and deliberate on the wooden stairs, each step creaking under their weight. The sound receded, growing fainter until it disappeared entirely with the soft thud of an unseen door closing upstairs.

Sarah inhaled slowly, trying to steady her racing heart. She closed her eyes, though it made no difference in the darkness, and pictured the clear, cool water of a stream she used to visit on hikes through Whispering Pines Forest.

Her mind wandered to the classroom where she taught, the eager faces of students. Sarah wondered if they asked about her, if they missed the lessons she brought to life with stories from her childhood on the farm. Those thoughts brought a fresh wave of fear—how long would it be before someone found her? Would they find her at all?

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Jenna found herself in the entryway of a tiny rural home, where a middle-aged woman stood with three packed suitcases. The cases, a trio of battered veterans, sat starkly against the polished hardwood floor. Their once vibrant colors had faded into a uniform hue of weary brown, the fabric worn thin and frayed at the edges. The

medium-sized suitcase was missing one corner entirely, replaced by an inelegant patchwork of duct tape that did little to conceal the underlying damage. Its handle was also wrapped, a makeshift solution to prevent further unraveling. The smallest suitcase had lost its original shape entirely; it bulged oddly on one side where the internal frame had given way under some unspoken strain.

The woman herself was a portrait of time and hardship. Her muted brown hair, now streaked with stubborn strands of silver, barely hinted at its original dark shade. The lines on her face were deep, each one telling a story of years spent working under an unforgiving sun and harsh winters. Her eyes, a dull green, held a tired resignation. They had seen too much yet expected so little, speaking volumes about the woman she had become.

She was lean and wiry from years of laborious work, her hands calloused. The dress she wore was plain and practical; its faded floral pattern barely visible beneath layers of wear and washings. Yet beneath this facade of rural resignation lay an undercurrent of determination. Her posture held an air of defiance despite the weight pressing down on her shoulders—an unyielding testament to her resilience.

“I’m going,” the woman said, looking Jenna straight in the eye.

Still unsure where she was or what was going on, Jenna asked, “You’re going where?”

“It doesn’t matter,” the woman said. “I’m getting out of here while the going is good.”

Suddenly Jenna was plunged into darkness—suffocating, absolute, as if she were buried deep with layers of earth and secrets above her. Her breath came out in shallow bursts, misting in the cold air she couldn’t see. Then, from somewhere in the blackness, a voice rasped like dry leaves skittering over gravestones.



“I’m so thirsty.”

The words lingered in the oppressive darkness, echoing in Jenna’s mind. She strained her ears for any hint of movement, any sign of presence other than her own. “Who’s there?” Jenna called out, her voice steely despite the prickle of fear.

There was a pause, the sort that suffused the humid Missouri summer nights when even the crickets held their breath. Then, a small circle of light pierced the void. A penlight flickered on, and within its narrow beam emerged the face of the same woman she had seen a moment before.

“Who are you?” the woman asked, her eyes searching Jenna’s face with confusion and desperation. Her lips were chapped, and her voice carried the weight of exhaustion and an unquenched thirst.

Jenna straightened her posture. “I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves,” she declared.

The woman’s eyes widened with disbelief. “No,” she retorted, “Frank Doyle is the sheriff. He’s the one who can help me.”

The woman’s misplaced certainty startled Jenna, a puzzle piece that didn’t fit. Her lucidity was growing, her mind sharpening with the realization that this encounter was a contact from someone who was gone from her waking world.

As if sensing the shift in Jenna’s perception, the woman turned the light downward, illuminating an open book resting haphazardly on the floor. With feverish urgency, she flipped through the pages, each turn sending a flutter of paper and a waft of musty air through the darkness. There was desperation in her actions, the rapid turning of pages like a search for answers within a timeline slipping away.

Jenna watched, understanding that the book—an ordinary object out of place in this

extraordinary context—was somehow symbolic. More than paper and ink, this book was an image of something unfulfilled, a quest not yet completed that anchored the woman to this place. Its secrets demanded to be understood, even as the woman's frantic searching underscored the fleeting nature of their encounter.

The penlight's beam quivered as the woman's voice broke the silence, a statement punctuated by urgency. "This book is overdue," she said, her tone laced with an anxiety that Jenna felt in her own chest. "I've got to return it."

The pages continued to turn silently until a sudden noise shattered the illusion of isolation—a voice, not from the woman in front of Jenna, but a disembodied male voice, shouting and saturated with malice. "Birdie." It sounded like a threat. "Birdie ... Birdie ... Birdie ..."

Jenna's pulse quickened. She could almost taste the fear that suddenly rattled through the dream. "He hates me," the woman confided, her eyes wide with terror even as they remained fixed on the text before her. "One of these days he's going to kill me."

Jenna knew that this encounter was no mere figment of her imagination. This was a cry for help, a plea carried across boundaries by a soul that had perhaps already succumbed to its fate.

"Who are you?" Jenna's voice was firm despite the eerie chill of the dark room. "And who is this man you're speaking of?"

The woman remained silent, her fingers fluttering over the pages like a moth trapped and desperate for escape. The silence between them stretched on, laden with unspoken dread.

"Please," Jenna implored, struggling for clues to this puzzle whose pieces were scattered across the canvas of dreams and reality. But the woman was lost within her

own world, or perhaps even consciously choosing to withhold information. Her lack of response puzzled Jenna, the absence of words as telling as any confession.

Then the woman said again, “I’m thirsty.” And at that very split second, there was a bright flash of light, like a camera flashbulb. Jenna thought she could almost make out a shape, like a subliminal image in a movie—something spinning, like a child’s toy pinwheel. Then darkness crashed down again.

“I’m thirsty,” the woman repeated yet again. Then came that flash again, and Jenna could see that it wasn’t a toy at all. It was a windmill water pump, like the kind that dotted the countryside in this part of Missouri. Then darkness crashed down one final time, illuminated only by the light held in the woman’s hand.

Jenna watched as the woman flipped through the book again. The beam of the penlight appeared to tremble slightly, casting erratic shadows across the woman’s drawn features. She repeated her earlier statement: “This book is overdue.”

She paused, a flicker of urgency crossing her face as if punctuating the gravity of her next words. “It’s been five years,” she added, with both desperation and resignation in her voice.

Five years—the words struck Jenna with an icy grip. Before she could ask anything more, the woman spoke again.

“She’s a reader too.”

“Who’s a reader?” Jenna asked.

“The other. The one who’s in danger. She’s a reader too. And it’s been five years.”

“Five years,” Jenna repeated. This was a message that she had to remember, every

word upon waking. But right now, she wanted to ask ...

The piercing trill of the alarm clock cut through the silence, a harsh siren that dragged Jenna from the depths of her dream. She gasped, her body jolting upright in bed as if she had been submerged underwater and was fighting her way to the surface. As the remnants of sleep fell away, a phrase looped in her mind like a broken record: "It's been five years." The same words Mark Reeves had uttered in another dream, now resonating with ominous familiarity.

Her fingers fumbled for the alarm clock, silencing its clamor. Eyes wide in the dim light of dawn, she scanned the familiar confines of her bedroom as if searching for something out of place, something that would explain the unnerving echo between dreams. What did the five-year mark signify? There were patterns here, clues that begged to be pieced together.

She reached for her phone on the nightstand and dialed Jake's number. She heard it starting to ring before she remembered the awkwardness that had settled between them after their last conversation, when she'd told him about dreams just like the one she'd just experienced. She suddenly felt unsure about what to expect from him.

When his familiar voice answered, it sounded tentative.

"Jake, it's Jenna," she said unnecessarily, since he had surely seen her ID.

"Morning, Jenna," he replied, a hint of hesitation, the memory of last night's conversation lingering unspoken.

"Listen, I need your help," Jenna cut through the tension. "Something important... It's a lead, I'm sure of it."

"From ...?" He left the question unfinished.

“Yes, it came from a dream. A lucid dream, like I explained ...”

After what seemed to her like a long silence, Jake responded. “Alright, what do you need?”

“We need to visit Frank Doyle,” she stated firmly, leaving no room for doubt. Her instincts were flaring, and every second felt like an eternity slipping away.

“Frank?” Surprise colored Jake’s tone. “What’s this about?”

“It’s complicated. Too much to explain over the phone. I’ll drive by and pick you up in ten minutes.” She heard the sound of hope in her own voice.

“Sure thing, Jenna,” Jake consented, rustling sounds indicating he was already in motion. “Ten minutes.”

With a sense of gratitude, Jenna ended the call and started to get dressed. Yet, she still struggled with an undercurrent of unease. Things were going to be different with Jake now that he knew the truth about her lucid dreams. Starting today, they would be plunged into a whole new chapter in both of their lives.

But was Jake ready to deal with it? Was she?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

The toot of a car horn cut through the morning stillness, pulling Jake from his thoughts. He glanced out the window to see the familiar patrol car parked at the curb. With a last look at the quiet order of his living room, he grabbed his keys and stepped outside. The air was fresh with the scent of dew on grass, typical for a June morning in Trentville.

As Jake approached the car, he saw Jenna was sitting rather stiffly behind the wheel, her gaze fixed straight ahead. Without a word, he opened the passenger door and slid into the seat beside her.

“Morning,” he offered, as the door closed with a solid thunk.

“Morning, Jake,” Jenna replied, her tone even. She pulled away from the curb, her hands steady on the wheel.

The silence between them was charged with an unspoken awareness that lingered from last night’s conversation, that moment when Jenna had confided in him about her lucid dreams. “Sometimes, I’m visited by the dead,” she had said matter-of-factly. Those words still echoed in his mind, refusing to be dismissed as mere fantasy.

Jake turned his head slightly, studying her profile. Her eyes remained focused on the road, but there was something haunting in her gaze, something that told him those words were more than just a claim. He realized that they were a burden she carried, a window to a world he couldn’t begin to understand. He couldn’t help but wish he could shield her from whatever pain those dreams brought with them.

He had seen a lot during his years as a beat cop in Kansas City, witnessed human

behavior in its rawest forms, but this—this gift of Jenna’s—it was beyond his realm of experience. Doubt still mixed with his curiosity, yet he knew better than to dismiss her outright. Jenna was perceptive, analytical, and her intuition had proven itself time and again.

“About last night—” he started, only to be interrupted by Jenna’s swift shake of her head.

“Let’s talk at Frank’s,” she said, cutting off the conversation decisively.

Jake nodded, settling back into the seat. The drive to Frank Doyle’s house would be short, but in that brief span, his mind raced. Whatever Jenna had experienced in her dream, it was significant enough to bring them here, and as much as he wrestled with belief, he did trust her. He trusted her instincts and her dedication. He tried to reconcile the woman he knew—the sharp-shooting sheriff, the relentless investigator—with someone who claimed communion with the departed. He was trained to trust evidence, procedure, and what he could see with his own eyes.

The silence in the car settled between them like a third passenger. He stole a glance at her, noting the rigid set of her shoulders as she focused on the road ahead. It struck him that, despite working so closely together, there were layers to Jenna he hadn’t even begun to peel back. And now, with this revelation about her dreams, it felt as though an unbridgeable gap had opened up between them.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, trying to think of something, anything, to say that might ease the atmosphere. But every potential opener seemed either too trivial or too probing, so he remained silent, watching the familiar storefronts of Trentville pass by in a blur. The drive was mercifully brief, yet Jake felt each second elongate as he grappled with his own thoughts.

His mind wandered unconsciously to the feel of Jenna’s hand accidentally brushing

against his. The memory sent an unexpected jolt through him, and he clenched his fist to chase away the sensation. He had always admired her—the sharpness of her intellect, the dedication she brought to every case. But lately, his feelings had edged into territory he hadn't intended to explore, especially not with his superior, his friend. He wondered if she noticed the way his gaze lingered a moment too long, or how his voice sometimes softened when he spoke to her.

“Almost there,” Jenna said suddenly, breaking into his thoughts. Her voice was neutral, but he could sense an undercurrent of... something. Nerves, perhaps? Anticipation?

They pulled into Frank's driveway, and as Jenna parked the car, he braced himself for what was to come. Not just the discussion of her dream, but the navigation of this new, delicate dynamic that had sprung up between them. He didn't know what Jenna's dream entailed, but he was certain of one thing: life in Trentville was far from the simplicity he had sought when leaving Kansas City behind.

Jake knocked firmly on the door of Frank Doyle's modest home, aware of Jenna standing awkwardly beside him. The door swung open, revealing Frank in a spattered apron. “Well, you two couldn't have timed it better,” he said with a gruff chuckle. “Was just about to dig into some scrambled eggs. I'll throw a few more on the skillet.”

“Thanks, Frank,” Jake replied, and the two of them stepped inside. As they moved through the small hallway, Frank commented with a knowing tilt to his eyebrows, “Jenna, you look like you've seen a ghost.”

“Actually, I did,” she replied, unsmiling, her green eyes reservoirs of secrets too heavy for one person to carry alone. “That's why we're here.”

Frank's expression sobered. With a quick glance at Jake, he nodded slowly,



understanding the gravity of her words.

Watching this exchange, Jake felt like the outsider in the room. He observed the ease with which Frank handled the news, not with disbelief, but with a readiness to accept what others would scoff at. In this strange town where he'd sought refuge, Jake was beginning to understand that the line between the living and the dead was not as clear-cut as his training had led him to believe.

"Let's get those eggs before they burn," Frank suggested, leading them into the heart of his home.

Jake leaned against the doorframe, his gaze flitting between Jenna and Frank as they navigated Frank's kitchen with a familiarity that made his own presence feel superfluous. Jenna cracked another egg with one hand, deftly tossing the shell aside. As the eggs cooked, she flipped them skillfully, but Jake caught the briefest hesitation in her movement—a vulnerability he'd never seen in her at a crime scene.

In Kansas City, Jake had known every street corner like the back of his hand, but here in this unassuming kitchen he was the outsider, an observer to a dynamic that had been forged without him. His thoughts drifted to the day he had packed up his life and traded relentless sirens for the tranquil sounds of the Ozarks. He'd sought solitude, a respite from the ceaseless demands of urban policing. But now, standing on the periphery of Jenna and Frank's easy rapport, he couldn't help but wonder how many mysteries the tranquility of Trentville kept covered.

"Jenna, you told him about your dreams?" Frank asked with a sideways glance, as he whisked the eggs in the pan.

She nodded, her gaze meeting Jake's for a brief moment before shifting back to Frank. "Yes, I did."

“Jake,” he said, not without empathy, “you’ll get used to it. These things... they’re part of the fabric here. We’ll talk about it over breakfast, like old times.” His chuckle was meant to ease the mood, but it did little to dispel the knot in Jake’s stomach.

“Y’know, Jake,” Frank continued as the sizzle of eggs in the pan mingled with the scent of coffee brewing in the background. “I remember when I first cottoned onto Jenna’s... let’s say, unique knack for solving mysteries.”

Jake watched Jenna pause, her eyes flickering toward Frank before returning to her task.

“Old Miles Patterson,” Frank continued, “as stingy as they come. Passed without a will, and not a soul could find his fortune. We turned that house upside down more times than I care to count. Then Jenna here walks in, straight to a wall in the living room, and tells me to pull off the paneling.” Frank chuckled, shaking his head. “Sure enough, behind a false section—stacks of cash, dusty as old bones.”

“Instinct,” Jake offered, trying to keep his tone light.

“More than instinct,” Frank replied, locking eyes with Jake. “She admitted it to me when I pressed her. She said Old Miles told her about the stash himself. She said the dead speak to her sometimes, in dreams.”

The kitchen seemed to fall silent for a moment. “Frank,” Jenna said, as she got three plates out of the dish cabinet. “Let’s not make it sound more mysterious than it is. It’s just another tool in the kit.”

Jake watched as Jenna ladled the fluffy eggs onto each plate, her movements deft but with an edge of concentration that suggested her mind was elsewhere.

Frank, leaning against the counter, broke the silence again. “I wasn’t altogether taken

aback by Jenna's... abilities." He glanced at Jake, perhaps gauging his reaction. "My own grandmother had a touch of the sight herself. Called it a burden and a blessing in equal measure."

The revelation hung in the air, mingling with the scent of breakfast as Jenna finished filling the plates. It gave Jake something new to consider—was this sort of thing inherited? Was there a lineage of people in Trentville touched by the supernatural?

"Come on, let's eat before it gets cold," Jenna said, her voice bringing Jake back from his thoughts.

They gathered around Frank's small kitchen table, a relic from another era with its worn surface and mismatched chairs. The morning light streamed through the window, dappling the tabletop and glinting off cutlery.

Jake took his seat, the chair creaking slightly under his weight. He noticed the practiced way Jenna avoided meeting his gaze, focusing instead on distributing the plates with a clinical precision. He glanced around the room that seemed to hold more secrets than any interrogation room he'd ever been in. He remembered his first day in this town, how the landscapes had seemed to hold promises of peace. Yet now he sat among people who dealt with the dead in ways that defied his understanding.

"Pass the salt, will you, Jake?" Frank's voice pulled him out of his contemplation. Jake complied, reaching for the shaker and handing it over, trying to ground himself in the normalcy of breakfast routines.

"Thanks," Frank said, his eyes twinkling under bushy brows.

The eggs were perfectly cooked, and Jake had to admit that despite the oddness of the morning's conversation, the food was a welcome comfort. He tried to concentrate on the flavors, the homeliness of the scene, but his mind was inevitably drawn back to

Jenna's confession about the dead reaching out through the veil of sleep. Even now, as she ate with an almost mechanical efficiency, her eyes held a faraway look that spoke of trials Jake was only just beginning to comprehend. She was an enigma, this sheriff—a woman whose depths he was only beginning to glimpse.

Frank's voice brought him back again, the former sheriff recounting some small-town anecdote with a chuckle that failed to pierce the morning's tension. Jake managed a smile, nodding along, but his thoughts remained on Jenna and the strangeness that seemed woven into the very fabric of Trentville.

When the remnants of breakfast lay scattered across the table, Frank leaned back in his chair, a gesture that seemed to beckon the room into silence. Jake felt an odd stillness settle over the kitchen; even the tick of the clock on the wall seemed to hold its breath. He observed Jenna's posture straighten, the look in her eyes signaling a shift in conversation.

"Jenna," Frank said quietly, "why don't you tell us about your dream?" His expectant look held an understanding that came from years of witnessing Jenna's gift.

Jenna took a deep breath, her hands steadying as she looked up from her plate. Jake watched her intently, the air thick with anticipation for what she was about to reveal. There was something special in the way she silently prepared to recount her nocturnal visitation, gathering fragments of story from a narrative only she could see.

As she cleared her throat, ready to unveil the secrets of her slumbering mind, Jake knew that whatever she was about to say could change everything. Their cases had sometimes been bizarre before, but the inclusion of Jenna's dreams both fascinated and terrified him. He readied himself to listen, to support, to learn how to delve into the unknown alongside her.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

“Jake?” Jenna prodded gently, watching him closely, searching for a sign of acceptance or disbelief. She saw no derision there, just a cautious curiosity that she thought might be asking, Are you both out of your minds?

“I’m listening,” he assured her, the corners of his mouth betraying a hint of strain.

Jenna leaned forward, resting her elbows on the kitchen table as she shared the details of her dream with Frank and Jake. Her voice conveyed facts, not fear.

“It started in this narrow hallway,” she began, fixing her gaze on a knot in the wooden table as if it were a portal to her memory. “There was a woman—agitated, hurried. Three suitcases lay at her feet, each one looking like it had seen better days.” Jenna traced the knot’s edges with her index finger. “She said she needed to get out while the going is good.”

Jenna thought for a moment.

“Then it shifted,” she continued. “The light... it just drained from the space until we were in darkness.” Her voice remained matter-of-fact, even as she recounted the chilling details. “The same woman was there, but now she sat on the floor, barely visible. She complained that she was thirsty. She said that several times before I woke up. And I remember she held a little light on a book she was reading.”

Jake asked softly, “Could you see what book it was?”

“No, but she was worried that it was overdue. She had to return it to the library. And she said something about five years.”

“Just like Mark did,” Frank muttered.

“At one point a man’s voice was calling her by name, and the woman was terrified,” Jenna said. “He sounded angry. She said she was afraid he was going to kill her.”

Jenna cleared her throat, the tightness there a reminder of the tension she felt. “The woman in my dream, she mentioned that another woman was also in danger. She said—and I remember this vividly—‘She’s a reader too.’ But she wouldn’t tell me her name.”

“Anything else about this other woman?” Frank prodded gently, aware of the delicate thread they were following.

“Only that she seemed truly worried for her,” Jenna replied. “It was more than just concern; it was fear.”

As she spoke, Jenna could feel the lingering remnants of the dream—a sense of urgency, a need to warn, to protect.

“Then,” Jenna continued, drawing in a deep breath as she prepared to relay the final pieces of her nocturnal vision, “there were these glimpses of a wind-powered water pump. They were fleeting, like snapshots flashing before my eyes. I couldn’t tell you where, but it seemed significant to whatever danger this woman is facing.”

“Water pump...” Jake murmured, almost to himself, his posture shifting as though he were piecing together a puzzle only he could see.

“Then I woke up,” Jenna concluded, feeling their gazes upon her. There was no need for embellishment or dramatic pauses; the facts of her experience were stark enough. As Jenna had detailed her dream, she’d watched, seeking any signs of doubt. Jake’s expression remained carefully neutral, giving nothing away, yet his focus never

wavered from her narrative. The morning sun streamed through the window, casting a warm glow over the kitchen table, but the atmosphere was charged with an undercurrent of tension.

“Have you both always believed in... this sort of thing?” Jake finally asked.

“Belief didn’t come easy,” Jenna admitted, her voice low. “And anyway, it’s not about believing. It’s about accepting what’s there, even when it doesn’t make sense.” Her hands rested on the table, fingers laced tightly together, betraying her anxiety about his judgment.

Frank nodded, his gray eyes locking onto Jake’s. “I’ve seen enough in my time to know the world’s got layers most folks don’t see. Jenna’s gift peeled back some of those layers.”

Jake let out a slow breath, his previous skepticism seemingly suspended in favor of the evidence before him: the conviction of two people he respected. He leaned back in his chair, still processing, the furrow in his brow less pronounced. Jenna felt a cautious relief. Jake might not be ready to believe, but he was trying to understand, and for now, that was enough.

“Oh, and Frank,” Jenna remembered, “when I told her I was the sheriff, she said no, that the sheriff was you.”

Frank leaned back in his chair, a frown creasing his brow as he sorted through the implications. “Can you describe the woman from your dream for me?” he asked, shifting his focus back to Jenna.

She closed her eyes briefly, summoning the image of the woman with the three suitcases. “She had brown hair streaked with silver, worn long and loose. Her eyes were a dull green, tired but resilient. She dressed plainly, like she’d seen hard work

and didn't care much for appearances. There was this... strength about her, despite the fear."

"And you said a man was calling out to her by name," Frank said. "What did he call her?"

Jenna thought hard, then she said, "Birdie," the name she'd heard shouted in the dream.

Frank's expression shifted subtly, an edge of recognition dawning. "That sounds like Melissa Brennan," he said slowly, as if testing the name against the image Jenna had painted. "Lucas Brennan's wife. They live—or lived—on a farm not far from Trentville. He's a bit of a survivalist, keeps to himself mostly. I saw only Melissa a few times when Lucas came into town for supplies. She was like a shadow behind him, you know? He called her Birdie."

"Lucas Brennan," Jenna murmured, the name familiar, like a bitter aftertaste. "I remember hearing about him. His wife vanished five years ago." Her voice trailed off as she considered the implications, the puzzle pieces starting to align with an ominous click. "That was back when you were still sheriff, Frank," she added. "Lucas Brennan told everyone that Birdie had packed up and left, didn't he? He claimed he didn't know where she'd gone."

"That's right. Lucas was adamant that Birdie just up and decided to leave Trentville. No note, no warnings... nothing."

"Yet," Jenna pressed on, feeling the threads of the past weaving through the present, "Lucas has a history, doesn't he? Assault charges that paint a picture of a man quick to anger."

"More than just charges," Frank admitted with a heavy sigh. "Violence follows some



men like a curse. He was arrested several times. Each incident more violent than the last. The town's been gossiping about it for years." He paused, his expression darkening. "The rumors around here... they say he might have done something terrible to Melissa. That maybe she never left at all."

"Rumors sometimes hold a fraction of truth," Jenna mused. She knew how tales spread through the tight-knit fabric of Trentville, taking root in the fertile ground of imagination and growing wild and untamed. But if Melissa's disappearance was not voluntary, then every suspicion took on a sinister new meaning.

"Lucas insisted she just up and left," Frank said, rubbing his thumb along the edge of his coffee mug. "No note, no calls after. Nothing."

"But you never opened an investigation?" Jake asked.

Frank shook his head slowly. "We checked what we could. There wasn't a shred of evidence to suggest anything other than what Lucas claimed. No signs of a struggle, no financial anomalies, no witnesses. Just a husband saying his wife took off."

"Given his history..." Jake's voice trailed off.

"Exactly," Frank agreed with a sigh. "But suspicion isn't enough to warrant destroying a man's life. We needed cause, and at the time, there was none we could find."

"Sarah Thompson disappeared the night before last, and Reeves ten years ago," Jake said, his mind ticking over the timeline. "If Melissa's disappearance five years ago is tied to theirs, we're looking at a pattern. And," he added hesitantly, looking at Jenna, "it does seem to match the time frame you heard in your dreams."

A contemplative silence fell over the kitchen, and then Frank spoke up again. "Jenna,

if Melissa Brennan is indeed tangled up in all of this, it's time to check out her husband again. I think that you and Jake need to pay Lucas a visit." His eyes, sharp as they were with age, held a glint of caution. "But be careful. Lucas has always been rough around the edges—violent and paranoid. It's going to be tricky."

"We can handle that," Jake told him. This sounded more like the kind of investigation the former city cop had some experience with.

"Maybe so," Frank conceded, his fingers tapping a staccato rhythm on the table. "But tread lightly. Lucas isn't a man to take kindly to accusations, especially from law enforcement."

Jenna knew Frank's warnings were not to be dismissed; the prospect of confronting Lucas Brennan brought a familiar surge of adrenaline. "We'll be on our guard," she assured him.

"Good. And keep me posted. Anything feels off, you get out of there, understand?" His tone was firm, protective like that of a father ensuring his child remembered to look both ways before crossing the street.

"Understood," Jenna confirmed. Jake echoed her sentiment with a nod, his expression mirroring the seriousness of the situation even though he hadn't had much time to adjust to the source of their information.

The remnants of breakfast lay forgotten on the plates as the gravity of their next steps turned away from the comfort of the meal. Jenna pushed back from the table, her chair making a soft sound against the linoleum floor.

"Thanks for the breakfast, Frank. And for the advice," Jenna said, her gratitude evident in her eyes. She appreciated more than just the food; Frank's insights were invaluable, his experience a guiding light in the murky waters they were about to

navigate.

“Anytime, Jenna,” Frank replied, standing up to see them off. He clasped her shoulder briefly—a gesture of reassurance.

Jake stood as well, his movements collected and purposeful. He muttered a thanks to Frank too, and they shook hands. Then Jake and Jenna left the kitchen together, stepping out of Frank’s house into the pleasant June day.

Jenna felt the early sun on her face, its rays doing little to ease the chill of uncertainty of this morning’s conversation. As she and her deputy walked to their patrol car, the frontier between the safety of the known and the perils of the unseen seemed to her to still be a bit shaky. She glanced over at Jake, wondering if he truly comprehended the depth of what lay before them, approaching a suspect with only evidence from a dream in hand.

“Are you okay to drive?” Jake asked, his voice tinged with concern.

Jenna gave a curt nod, sliding behind the wheel. The keys jangled as she inserted them into the ignition, the sound oddly piercing in the silence between them. She started the engine, the familiar rumble offering a semblance of normalcy in the chaos of her thoughts.

As Jenna began to drive toward Lucas Brennan’s home, the reality of what lay ahead settled in. The confrontation with Lucas, unpredictable and dangerous, loomed large. But it was the uncertainty in Jake’s silence that unsettled her most. Did he believe her? Could he accept the supernatural thread woven into the fabric of their investigation?

The gravel crunched beneath the tires as they made their way down the driveway that would lead them away from Frank’s home and toward Lucas Brennan’s secluded

farm. Jenna kept her eyes fixed on the winding road, but her mind wandered. She was not only thinking of the confrontation with a man whose reputation was as wild and unforgiving as the surrounding Ozark hills, but also about the precarious balance of trust between her and Jake. He sat beside her quietly, without comment, and every mile closer to Lucas Brennan's home amplified her concern.

A glance Jake's way found him gazing out the window, his expression unreadable. His profile was set in a contemplative stillness, leaving Jenna to wonder if he was piecing together the fragments of her dream or simply absorbing the reality of her gift. Did he believe now in the messages from beyond that guided her actions, or did skepticism still cloud his judgment?

She felt the familiar itch to ask questions, to fill the void with words and seek reassurance, but she held back. Although he seemed to have respected the story she'd told them, she couldn't help but wonder how the truth of her psychic abilities would weigh on their partnership. Would Jake see her gift as a tool for investigation, or as a wedge driving a gap between them? Her doubt left her feeling isolated within the confines of the patrol car, even with Jake mere inches away.

As the trees lining the road blurred past, Jenna turned her focus back to the road, the solid reality of asphalt under tires grounding her racing thoughts. It was up to her to prove the worth of her abilities. Today her first job was to face Lucas Brennan, no matter what kind of threat he might pose.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

As Jenna guided the cruiser along a narrow dirt road, the setting seemed all too familiar. They passed by rows of crops in neat lines—a tribute to someone’s dedication, but not different from many small farms in the area. But when a tiny house came into view, its porch wrapped around it like an afterthought, she had a strong feeling that this was the very place she had visited in her lucid dream.

“Looks like we found Lucas Brennan’s place,” Jake remarked, breaking the silence. Jenna nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line, acknowledging the obvious without diverting her focus. Then she saw it, the thing that was an exact match for what she’d seen, not just the vague sensation that she’d been here before.

A short distance from the house, an old windmill water pump stood against the sky, its blades motionless in the still air. Jenna gasped, for this was not just any windmill—it was the exact one from her dream, the very same structure she had seen amid warnings of danger and pleas of the dead. She felt a pull toward it, an ethereal tether that left no room for doubt. They were exactly where they needed to be.

“Jake, the windmill,” Jenna said softly. “It’s the same one.”

He followed her gaze, remembering her description. His nod was all the confirmation she needed—they were on the right track.

“Let’s hope we’re not too late,” Jake replied, expressing their fears as Jenna eased the cruiser to a stop, gravel crunching beneath the tires. The pickup truck in the driveway was impossible to miss. Its faded blue paint was chipped and peeling, and one of the headlights was cracked, like a spiderweb woven from neglect.

“Looks like he might be home,” Jake murmured, his gaze fixed on the house that seemed too small to hold any secrets.

Jenna scanned the perimeter, her trained eyes searching for signs of disturbance or recent activity. But there was nothing—only the oppressive silence that wrapped around the farm. They stepped out of the cruiser, and together they approached the front door, its paint weathered by time and the harsh Missouri elements. Jenna lifted her hand and rapped sharply on the wooden surface, sounding hollowly through the air. There was no response, no rustling from inside, no shadow moving behind the threadbare curtains.

“Lucas Brennan!” she called out firmly, her voice carrying authority and an undercurrent of urgency. “Sheriff’s Office, we need to speak with you.”

Still, no answer came. Jenna met Jake’s eyes, and they shared a look that spoke volumes without words. Her intuition that had guided her so often before hummed with alertness. She squared her shoulders, taking a breath of the still, humid air that hung thick over the farm. She raised her hand once more, rapping against the wood with deliberate force. “Lucas Brennan,” she called out again, this time with an added edge of command. “This is Sheriff Jenna Graves. I need to speak with you.”

The quiet that answered seemed to mock her attempt at authority. She glanced back at the pickup truck, its presence a silent assertion that Lucas was almost certainly around there somewhere, perhaps watching them with wary eyes. The morning sun cast a warm glow over the fields nearby, but no one moved anywhere in view.

The suspicion that had been simmering in her gut now bubbled to the surface; it was unlike anyone in Trentville not to answer, especially with law enforcement on their doorstep.

“Something’s not right,” Jenna murmured, turning to face Jake. With a nod toward

the side of the house, they agreed wordlessly to begin their search for answers.

As they circled around the quaint structure, Jenna kept her senses sharp, her gaze sweeping across each visible inch of the property. Here, away from the front door's false promise of hospitality, the scene felt different—more real, more raw. She noted the way the long grass was trampled in spots, how the windmill's odd shadow seemed to point accusingly at the earth.

“Look here,” Jake said, indicating a set of footprints that led around to the back of the house. They were fresh, the edges sharp in the soft soil. This was no old trail; someone had passed by recently.

“Lucas?” Jenna's voice was strong as she called out, but the only answer was the distant caw of a crow. She exchanged another glance with Jake. They had come looking for answers, and they would not be deterred by silence or evasion.

She paused, her attention drawn to a particular feature at the back of the house—an angled pair of metal doors set flush with the ground. They were weathered, with peeling paint that hinted at neglect, and a heavy padlock hung open, suggesting it was more for show than security.

“Looks like a basement entrance,” Jake observed, stepping beside her. Jenna nodded, taking in the details—the rust along the edges, the way one door sat slightly ajar as if inviting them to uncover its secrets. Her intuition flared, a feeling of deep recognition settling over her.

“Basements...” she murmured, an image flashing before her eyes—a woman, fearful and lost. “It could be that dark place I saw in my dream.”

Jake looked at her, skepticism playing on his face, but by now he knew better than to dismiss her insights. Jenna moved closer, her gaze fixed on the gap between the

doors. If her dreams were a bridge to another realm, then this basement might hold answers to questions they hadn't yet thought to ask.

She reached out, her hand hovering over the cold metal, hesitant. Could the woman from her dream have been trapped here five years ago? Might the one who was missing right now be locked up somewhere below?

"The woman from my dream, she could have been here," she said. "This is the kind of place where she could have been locked away five years ago. And maybe Sarah Thompson is down there right now."

"We need to find out," Jake said.

"Without a warrant?" Jenna questioned, though her gut screamed urgency.

"Jenna, we both know this could be a matter of life or death. The doors aren't locked." Jake's tone was firm. He was ready to cross that line if it meant saving a life. A nod passed between them, a silent agreement in the face of potential peril.

"Let's do this," she hissed. His hand met the other door, and together they pulled the heavy slabs open, unveiling the gaping maw of the basement beyond.

"Stay close," Jake murmured, the unspoken promise to protect her evident in his gaze.

Stepping into the unknown, they descended. The air turned musty, thick with secrets as they left the safety of daylight behind.

The daylight dimmed as they descended creaking wooden steps, a thick stillness enveloping them. Jenna's senses were heightened, her every nerve primed for discovery. The musty smell of the basement spoke of years without visitors, or so it



seemed. But then she felt a sudden wave of alarm when her gaze settled on the objects just within the reach of the light spilling in from the open doors. There, standing solemnly on the concrete floor, were three old suitcases, their colors dulled by time and neglect.

The sight of the luggage startled Jenna, jolting the ethereal images from her dreams into stark reality right in front of her. Their presence was a grim punctuation in the quiet of the basement, a visible echo of the fear that had prickled her subconscious in her dream. These were no ordinary travel remnants; their presence here suggested a tale of a journey uncompleted.

As she stepped closer to the battered forms, the air felt heavier around her, laden with the question of what those cases might contain—or what they signified. As Jenna's hand hovered over the suitcases, recognition flared within her—a flash of the dream that had disturbed her sleep, where Melissa Brennan, known as Birdie, stood clutching these same cases, her voice urgent yet resigned. “I’m leaving while the going is good,” she had said, an ominous farewell hanging between them.

“Jake,” Jenna murmured, “these are the ones. The suitcases from my dream. The ones that Melissa Brennan had packed.” Her words helped bring the vision back with piercing clarity. “In my dream, these felt like a warning—like she knew something was going to happen.”

“Frank mentioned that Lucas spun a tale about Birdie packing up and leaving him, said it was five years ago.”

“Yes, Lucas told people she left him,” Jenna echoed, the memory surfacing. She studied the suitcases, the wear and tear speaking volumes.

There was more to uncover, and every fiber in Jenna's being urged her to follow up on this mystery, the specter of Birdie's fate urging her on. She circled the suitcases,

her hand hovering above them as if she could divine their secrets through touch. The dusty patina on the leather spoke of years spent in this dim, musty basement, and not on the road where Melissa Brennan might have sought a new life.

“Jake,” Jenna’s voice broke the silence, “these haven’t been moved for a long time.”

Jake surveyed the faded luggage. He stepped closer, then reached out and gingerly pulled up on a handle, checking the weight. “Still packed with something,” he said. “It seems like Birdie was definitely planning to leave, but didn’t. As if...she never got the chance to actually go anywhere.”

“Exactly.” Jenna’s finger traced the handle of one suitcase. “You think Lucas kept her here? That maybe Birdie never walked out that door of her own free will?”

“Let’s remember we’re also looking for Sarah Thompson,” Jake said.

“Do you suppose she was brought here, maybe held here against her will?” Jenna asked. “And how about Mark Reeves?”

“I don’t know, Jenna,” Jake said with a shake of his head. “This basement isn’t exactly airtight or escape-proof. It wouldn’t be easy to hold anyone captive here, the way Birdie seemed to be in your dream.”

“Sarah’s still out there somewhere,” Jenna said. Her intuition screamed that time was running out, that Sarah’s window was closing just as surely as Birdie’s had shut years ago.

“Then we need to find her, fast,” Jake agreed. “Before she becomes another ghost story in this town.”

Jenna nodded, her resolve hardening. She couldn’t let another family suffer as her

own had, not when she was this close to uncovering the truth. The connection between the disappearances prickled at her senses, urging her deeper into the mystery that shrouded this small mountain town.

Jenna stepped back from the trio of old suitcases, but a quick search of the basement revealed no other rooms, no place where anyone might be hidden now, whether living or dead.

“We can’t spend more time here,” she said urgently. “There’s more to this property.”

“Agreed,” Jake replied, his gaze sweeping the dimly lit space one last time before following Jenna up the concrete steps.

Outside, the air was thick with the scent of turned earth and growing things—a stark reminder that life continued above ground, even as dark secrets festered beneath. The farm’s expanse beckoned, holding potential clues in its grasp.

“Let’s check the perimeter of the property,” Jenna suggested, her eyes scanning the horizon past the tiny house and farm, looking for anything amiss. Her hand rested on the service weapon at her hip, an instinct honed by her years in law enforcement.

Jake nodded, and side by side, they moved cautiously, circling the house. Jenna’s mind raced, piecing together fragments of her vision—Melissa “Birdie” Brennan’s desperate plea; Mark Reeves, long vanished without a trace; and the missing Sarah Thompson. Each step felt like a move on a chessboard, where the next could reveal either a hidden trap or a path to the truth.

The silence of the morning was abruptly shattered by a loud blast splitting the air. The sound of the shot ricocheted off the walls of the small house and set birds erupting from the nearby trees in a flurry of panic.

Jenna automatically whipped out her weapon and stepped behind the blue truck in the driveway for shelter. She turned toward the source of the sound, eyes wide and alert, her body tensed for action. Jake was instantly by her side, his own weapon drawn. There was no need for words; they both knew the stakes had just been raised.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

“Stay down!” Jenna hissed, ducking down behind the blue truck. Sparing only a moment to catch her breath, she peered around the vehicle, waiting for the shooter to reveal himself.

“He’s not going to shoot up his truck,” Jake commented, actually looking relaxed. Before Jenna could reply, the sound of another blast came, striking farther away this time, then silence. Their assailant was firing a shotgun and might be reloading, she thought.

“Jenna.” Jake’s voice cut through her focus, startling her out of her defensive stance. “We’re safe.”

“Safe?” Jenna spat the word out like a curse, her emerald eyes still scanning the shadows. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because,” Jake said with assurance, “those shots were a warning, not an attack. Whoever’s out there isn’t aiming at us. Not even the first time he fired. He would have hit us then if he’d really intended to. He’s close enough, and we were sitting ducks. He’s just trying to scare us into leaving.”

She looked at her deputy then—really looked, noting the calm set of his shoulders, the steady gaze that met hers. This was the demeanor of a man who had faced down the barrel of various guns more times than he cared to count, whose instincts had been honed in the crucible of urban crime. She was familiar with the variety of weapons used in the farmlands, but had seldom faced any of them turning on her.

“Experience,” he elaborated, almost reading her thoughts. “In Kansas City, it was a

tactic—scare off the nosy before they get too close. It’s intimidation, nothing more.”

Jenna allowed herself a fraction of a second to absorb this, to let the logic seep in past the instinctive surge of adrenaline. Yet, despite Jake’s conviction, unease remained lodged in her gut.

“Okay,” she finally conceded. “But if this is someone’s idea of warning shots, I want to know exactly what they’re trying to hide.”

Her breath caught as Jake straightened with a fluid motion that seemed at odds with the tension gripping the air. He stepped out from behind the truck holding the gun aloft—an unexpected offering to an unseen adversary. His voice resonated against the stillness. “We’re not here for trouble. Sheriff Graves and I just want to talk.” He put his weapon down on the ground and backed away from it.

Silence followed; neither gunfire nor words came in reply. Jenna felt an odd sense of dislocation wash over her. Jake turned toward her, a silent command in his eyes. Trust warred with apprehension as she followed his lead, her own gun feeling foreign in her hand as she set it down on the earth.

She couldn’t shake the surreal nature of the moment—their weapons lying inert on the ground as if they were atoning for sins not yet committed. Jenna’s senses remained heightened, her mind taut with the anticipation of what might unfold from this gamble.

The rustle of leaves preceded the appearance of a man whose presence seemed wrought from the very soil of the land. Lucas Brennan emerged, his stance echoing the rugged terrain of Genesius County itself—unyielding and worn. His hair, a blend of silver and brown, hung loosely around his shoulders, streaked by the passage of time. His face was a topography of life lived hard and long, each line and wrinkle etched deeply into his weathered skin.

The shotgun held in his hands bore testament to recent use, but had it been reloaded?

“Who are you, really?” His voice was gravel, each word a stone thrown into the calm pond of their surrender.

Jake replied, “This is Sheriff Graves, and I’m Deputy Hawkins.”

Lucas Brennan’s skepticism was visible, his eyes flicking between Jake and Jenna like a wary animal. “Don’t lie to me,” he challenged. “Frank Doyle’s still sheriff ’round these parts, ain’t he?”

Jenna stepped forward, her shadow falling across the discarded weapons on the ground, signaling a peace offering. “Frank Doyle retired two years ago. I was his deputy, and I’m Sheriff Jenna Graves now,” she explained, her tone matter-of-fact.

The news seemed to take a moment to reach the recesses of the man’s guarded mind, as if he were piecing together a puzzle. Jenna could almost see the wheels turning in his head, the isolation of his life here churning with the paranoia that had clearly been his companion for too long.

“Times change, Mr. Brennan,” Jenna continued, her eyes not leaving his. She knew the importance of maintaining a connection, however frayed, in moments like this.

Lucas’s grip on the shotgun loosened ever so slightly, a subtle shift in the standoff that surrounded them. “Why’re you here?” he grumbled, suspicion still coloring his tone.

“We need to talk about Sarah Thompson,” Jake said. “She’s gone missing.”

Recognition sparked in Lucas’s eyes, and with it, a flash of genuine surprise. “Sarah? What happened to her?”

“Disappeared the day before last,” Jenna said, watching him closely. “But we also want to know more about your wife, Melissa. About what happened five years ago.”

For a fleeting second, Jenna saw the walls around Lucas waver. The mention of his wife, a wound time had failed to close, drew out a vulnerability she hadn’t expected to see.

“Melissa?” His voice broke, roughened by sorrow that seemed to well up from the depths of his being. It was a response that spoke volumes, a crack in the facade of the reclusive man before them. It hinted at a story left untold, buried beneath layers of silence and regret.

“We saw her packed bags just now in your basement,” Jenna said. “We know she didn’t leave you—or at least not the way you said she did.”

Lucas exhaled a weary sound that hung in the damp morning air. He stepped forward, his movements deliberate, and picked up Jake’s gun by the grip, then held it with an outstretched hand. “Here,” he said, his voice devoid of hostility.

Jenna watched as Jake accepted his weapon, the metal glinting briefly in the sunlight. Lucas then nodded toward Jenna’s sidearm, still lying on the ground where she’d set it moments before. She picked it up, the familiar weight settling into her palm like a silent promise of safety. Despite the urge to snap handcuffs around this man’s wrists for the pain he might have caused Melissa—and Sarah—she was aware of Jake’s reluctance to escalate the situation. Trusting his judgment, she holstered her gun, her gaze never leaving Lucas.

“Alright, Lucas,” Jenna began, her voice steady, “let’s talk.”

The farmhouse porch creaked as Lucas led them to a trio of mismatched chairs, remnants of a life once shared. Jenna’s eyes swept over the small homestead, the



rows of crops beyond speaking of solitary toil. The humid June breeze carried the scent of earth and growing things, a stark counterpoint to the sounds that had shattered that tranquility.

“Lucas,” Jenna started, her tone even but firm, “you told people Melissa left you. That was five years ago. What really happened to her?”

“That’s... complicated,” Lucas admitted, his gaze distant. “She did pack her bags. Said she couldn’t stand me anymore. But she didn’t leave—not at first, anyway.”

“Go on,” Jenna urged, her mind piecing together the fragments of Melissa Brennan’s last known day.

“Melissa had this library book, see?” Lucas continued, pointing in the general direction of Trentville. “It was overdue. She wouldn’t leave without returning it. Took the bus into town.”

Jenna’s breath hitched sharply. Those words sounded like an echo from her dream. “This book is overdue,” the woman had said. “I’ve got to return it.”

“And then?” Jenna prompted, sensing there was more he wasn’t saying.

Lucas’s hands clenched involuntarily. “She never came home.” His eyes met Jenna’s, and for a moment, she glimpsed the raw edge of his uncertainty. “I’ve kept her suitcases... just in case.”

Jenna leaned back in her chair, her emerald eyes reflecting the morning light. There was something true here, buried beneath layers of regret and silence.

“Lucas,” she addressed the man sitting across from her on the creaky porch, “why didn’t you tell Sheriff Doyle the truth about Melissa’s disappearance?”

Lucas Brennan shifted, his chair groaning under his wiry frame. “Doyle and I—we’ve had our differences.” His voice was gruff, with an undercurrent of defiance. “Arrests for assault, misunderstandings... He wouldn’t have believed me if I told him Birdie just vanished.”

Jenna observed Lucas closely, noting the way his jaw clenched when he spoke of the former sheriff. Doyle had been her mentor, but she knew his relationship with the townsfolk could sometimes be fraught. She also understood the weight of suspicion that could fall on a man with Lucas’s history.

“Out of fear, then,” Jenna surmised, “you chose silence.”

Lucas looked away, his gaze settling on the distant tree line as if searching for something only he could see. “I told everyone she left, because in a way, she did. Said it straight out—she was leaving me.” A shadow of vulnerability crossed his weather-beaten face. “The truth is, I’m still waiting for her to walk back through that door.”

Jenna’s intuition flickered, a silent pulse at the back of her mind. It wasn’t evidence, nothing concrete, yet there was something in Lucas’s demeanor that suggested genuine loss rather than guilt—and also shame at his cowardice for never telling the truth until now. Beside her, Jake remained quiet, his expression unreadable, but she could sense his belief in Lucas’s words.

“Lucas,” she began, her voice softer now, “if there’s anything else you remember about that day, anything at all, it might help us find out what happened to both Melissa and Sarah Thompson.”

But Lucas merely shook his head.

“Where were you the afternoon and evening before last, Lucas?” Jake asked. “When

Sarah Thompson disappeared.”

“Right here,” Lucas replied, a defiant note in his tone. “But there ain’t no one to vouch for me.” His eyes flickered briefly to Jenna.

Jenna’s gaze never wavered from Lucas as she posed her next question. “How do you know Sarah Thompson?”

“Through Birdie,” he answered, a softness entering his voice. “They met not long before Birdie disappeared. Must have been right around the time Sarah moved to Trentville. They’d spend hours together, mostly at the library. Books were their thing, not mine.”

The simplicity in his response gnawed at Jenna’s intuition. It wasn’t a confession, nor a solid alibi, but rather a glimpse into a shared history between the missing women. Jenna filed away this detail; such connections often formed the crux of unsolved cases.

“Thank you for your time, Lucas,” Jake said, extending a courteous nod. “We’ll be on our way now.”

As they retreated to the safety of their vehicle, Jenna wrestled with her frustration and confusion. She slid behind the wheel while Jake settled into the passenger seat.

“Alright, Jake, why? Why are you so sure he didn’t do it?” she asked, flicking a glance his way.

“Because that man never killed anyone,” Jake replied calmly, a certainty in his voice that belied his easy demeanor.

Jenna furrowed her brow, not entirely convinced. “And how can you be so sure about

that?” There was an edge to her voice—an impatience for logic amid the chaos of her thoughts.

Jake turned to her, his sandy hair catching the light as he flashed a playful, knowing smile. “Come on, Jenna. You’re not the only one around here who has instincts.”

The remark elicited a half-smile from Jenna, despite the frustration nipping at her heels. It was true; Jake had proven himself more than once since leaving Kansas City behind for the quiet rhythm of Trentville, Missouri. His words resonated with a part of her psyche that she couldn’t ignore—the same part that told her Piper was still out there somewhere.

“Okay, then, Mr. I-Know-What-I’m-Doing-Better-Than-My-Boss,” Jenna conceded, not willing to let her pride cloud her judgment. “What do we do next?”

Jake leaned back, contemplating their next move. The silence stretched between them, giving way to the hum of the engine and the rustle of leaves in the summer breeze. Then he looked at her expectantly, passing the decision back into her hands.

“We head back to headquarters,” Jenna said decisively. “We regroup.”

“Sounds like a plan. Or as close as we’ve got to a plan.”

Jake’s words resonated with her own instincts, yet Jenna couldn’t shake the feeling that something critical was slipping through their grasp. With a sigh, she started the engine and maneuvered the car onto the dirt road, the dust settling slowly in their wake as they headed back toward headquarters.

As she navigated the familiar route to the Genesius County Sheriff’s Office, Jenna’s mind raced through the events of the morning. They had gone to Lucas Brennan’s with questions and left with even more. Now, it was time to sift through what they

knew, to find the way out of this tangled web.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

As Jenna maneuvered the cruiser along the winding roads back to Trentville, she had to wonder where everything stood now between her and Jake. Jake had said nothing at all since they left Lucas Brennan's farm. He was just methodically scanning their surroundings as they passed through the countryside. But their case was as full of questions as ever.

"Jake, you really don't think Lucas is our guy, do you?" she asked.

He turned his gaze from the window, his expression inscrutable for a moment before he shook his head. "No, I don't. And I'm guessing that you don't either."

"True," Jenna affirmed, letting out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Lucas's place... it's too ordinary, too open. Hardly the lair of a serial killer. That basement where we saw the suitcases wasn't even locked up. We need to restart our thinking, go over everything from the beginning."

"Seems like it," Jake agreed. "We don't have a suspect, but we do have a pattern. Three disappearances in ten years, five years apart, no bodies, no ransom notes, nothing. That length of time must have some significance to the killer."

"So you think the victims could be someone who just turned up at the wrong time, chosen at random?"

"Possible, but there's likely to be some other kind of connection, maybe someone they all offended. Or maybe they had something specific in common that we haven't spotted yet."

“Nothing except a trail of questions and ghosts,” Jenna muttered, her eyes fixed on the road ahead while her mind raced through the possibilities. “In my lucid dreams, Birdie Brennan complained of thirst, and so did Mark Reeves. It’s my guess that Sarah is experiencing the same kind of pain. If she is, she can’t last very long.”

“For most people, about three days is the most they can live without water. Of course it varies, a few will go longer, and it also depends on the specific conditions.”

“Then if we don’t find Sarah soon ...” Jenna whispered sadly.

“We’ve got to find her, Jenna. As soon as possible.”

Trentville was quiet as Jenna drove through it. The people out on the streets looked peaceful, and no raucous escaped pets broke the peace. She glanced at Jake, his profile set in concentration as they rounded the corner to the sheriff’s office.

“We’ve got Mark and Birdie, now Sarah in the pattern,” he said in a cautious tone. “What about before that—say twenty years ago?”

She exhaled slowly. “You mean ... could my sister Piper be part of this pattern? You know, I’ve wondered about that too.”

The question seemed especially dire now. Had her twin sister suffered that terrible helplessness? Had she died deprived of water? Yet, despite the dread that filled Jenna’s mind, one belief remained unshaken. “But I still feel Piper’s out there, alive, because she’s never visited me in a lucid dream. It’s the same reason that I believe we can still rescue Sarah, but time for her survival is closing up on us. She’s the one we need to focus on.”

She slowed the car to a stop outside the Genesius County Sheriff’s Office, the engine ticking as it cooled. Jenna’s gaze lingered on the building’s aged brick facade,

considering their next move. Many kinds of answers were hidden among the shadows and dust of old records and forgotten stories in that building.

“Let’s go over everything again inside,” Jake suggested. “We might be missing something, a detail that could blow this whole case open. We should be able to track something on your computer.”

It sounded like a good idea, although Jenna couldn’t imagine where they’d start their search.

A fleeting shadow passed over her vision as they went into her office. She blinked it away, attributing it to weariness, but the sensation lingered, a whisper in the recesses of her mind. Then the vague, nagging feeling grew stronger. It was an itch, a puzzle piece waiting to be placed. But it was there—a link, a clue that taunted her with its obscurity.

“Jake,” she started, her tone hesitant, “Birdie’s overdue book. And what Lucas said about Birdie and Sarah being readers, always at the library.” A pause; Jenna searched for the elusive thought that seemed just out of reach. “And then there’s Mark Reeves, aspiring writer, lover of words.”

“Are you thinking there’s a connection with books?” Jake queried.

Jenna nodded, her gaze distant. It seemed too significant to ignore—the passion for reading binding the victims together in a macabre tapestry.

“Emily Carson,” Jenna murmured. “The library... there has to be a connection with the books.” Her thoughts were like leaves caught in a whirlwind, each one fluttering close to revelation but never quite landing.

Jake’s presence was a grounding force, and he turned to her, his eyes encouraging her



to continue. “You’re on to something. What is it?”

She hesitated, biting her lower lip. “I’m thinking we should revisit the library, get Emily’s help once more.” But Jenna’s voice trailed off, a sudden doubt clouding her judgment. Why did a terrible uncertainty nudge at her now? She cleared her throat, trying to dispel the fog of confusion.

“Go on,” Jake prompted, adjusting his posture to face her more directly.

“Looking back,” Jenna started again, slower this time, “there’s something off about Emily’s behavior. She reached out to me at Whispering Pines with information, pinpointing where Sarah might have been taken.” Jenna paused, grappling with the implication. “It was almost too precise, as if she knew more than she should have.”

“You suspect the librarian?”

Jenna swallowed down a knot of anxiety.

“No, that would be crazy,” Jenna said, trying to sound steadier than she felt. “Emily has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. She was always there in the library, pushing me towards new books, challenging me to explore different worlds through reading. It’s absurd to think she could be connected to this... madness.” Yet the seed of doubt had been planted, sitting in her gut like a dead weight of irrational dread, and it refused to be ignored.

Jake, seated beside her, considered her words with a measured calmness. “Look, the hunches we don’t like, the ones we wish we didn’t have—well, in my experience, they’re the ones we’ve really got to listen to. You’ve got to trust that instinct of yours.” His eyes met hers briefly before returning to the road ahead. “It’s gotten us this far, hasn’t it?”

Jenna let out a deep breath and nodded. Jake's faith in her intuition was a steady force. But right now, she wished her intuition was telling her anything but this.

Jake continued, his voice carrying the weight of experience. "Back in Kansas City, I came across all kinds—people who hid their true selves behind masks of charm and goodwill. Some of them turned out to be the most skilled manipulators, sociopaths who had fooled everyone for years. Tell me, what do you know about Emily's past? Has she always lived here in Trentville?"

The question sent a shiver down Jenna's spine. "No, she moved to Trentville from somewhere else, but I never really knew about her life before that."

"Maybe it's time we look into it," Jake suggested gently, his gaze lingering on Jenna with an unspoken understanding. They were crossing into territory where neither of them wanted to tread, but the path of duty was rarely a comfortable one.

She and Jake stepped out of the car into the warmth of the late morning, the sun high above Trentville, offering no reprieve from the relentless churn of their thoughts.

They entered the office, stepping into the familiar hum of air conditioning and the automatic greetings of those manning the front room. Jenna made her way to her private office, the room small but functional. Jake moved past her to boot up the computer, his fingers deftly moving across the keyboard as he navigated through security protocols he understood better than she did.

"Let's start with public records, social media footprints, anything that predates her move to Trentville," Jake suggested, his voice steady and methodical. Jenna watched as he opened multiple windows, his approach systematic yet swift. It was digital sleuthing—public databases queried, social networks skimmed, background check services engaged. His familiarity with the virtual trails left by human lives was something she admired, even envied at times.

“Here we go,” Jake murmured, adjusting his posture as he zeroed in on a particular entry. A news archive site yielded results, displaying a headline that caused Jenna’s heart to skip a beat. It was an article dating back decades, detailing an appalling case of child abuse in Detroit.

The screen showed a grainy image of a young girl, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and defiance. The accompanying story chronicled the harrowing ordeal of Emily Carson, just ten years old at the time, who had suffered at the hands of her own parents. Chained in the basement without water, she had been left to endure an unimaginable nightmare before her rescue.

“Four days...” Jenna whispered, her voice trailing off as she absorbed the information. The article went on to describe how Emily had nearly succumbed to dehydration, the brink of death averted only by the timely intervention of authorities. The revelation of foster care and the conviction of her parents for child endangerment added layers of background. The story also indicated that the child had possibly been mistreated before. The social workers had been contacted five years earlier when a neighbor had noticed the child’s seeming absence and her parents’ apparent avoidance of the topic. That time she had been rescued from what had seemed to be accidental entrapment in a room in the parents’ basement, with no real evidence to the contrary.

The article on the screen was a window into a past so bleak it seemed to cast shadows in the bright confines of Jenna’s office. Jake watched from over her shoulder, his presence a silent support she hadn’t realized she needed until now.

“Jake,” she started, her voice barely audible, “could Emily be...?” She couldn’t finish the question, the implication too monstrous to give voice to.

“Jenna,” Jake said, his tone measured, “we can’t jump to conclusions. But this—it could be significant. Childhood trauma, especially that severe, it can leave marks on a

person. Marks that don't always fade."

She nodded, but her mind churned with turmoil. Emily Carson had been a fixture in Jenna's life, a constant since those early days when Piper would drag her along to the library. To think of that gentle librarian, who had sown seeds of curiosity and knowledge in so many young minds, as a killer was almost beyond comprehension. And yet, the pattern—the victims, all lovers of literature, all connected to the library in some way—it was a path that twisted back toward Emily, no matter how much Jenna wanted to look away.

"Let's keep digging," Jenna decided, her voice steadier now. "If there's more, we need to find it."

"Right," Jake agreed. "I'll see what else I can uncover about her time before Trentville."

They worked on, the silence punctuated only by the clicks of the mouse and the soft hum of the computer. Jenna's gaze kept sliding back to the grainy photograph of a young Emily, her eyes hauntingly familiar. The feeling of betrayal sat heavy in her chest, like a stone dropped into still water, sending ripples through her entire being.

"Look at this," Jake said after a while, breaking the silence. He'd pulled up records tracing Emily's journey after foster care—schools, a scholarship, a move to Trentville where she seemingly remade her life. It was the story of someone who had overcome incredible adversity—but now with a sinister undertone.

"Any criminal records?" Jenna asked, hoping for a clean slate that might dispel her doubts.

"Nothing," he replied. "Clean as they come."

“Of course,” Jenna murmured. “You wouldn’t expect less from a sociopath, would you?”

“Jenna...” Jake began, but she held up a hand.

“Let’s not kid ourselves, Jake. If Emily is our perpetrator, then she’s been hiding in plain sight, manipulating everyone around her for a long time. Including me.” Jenna’s voice cracked, the weight of her realization threatening to shatter her composure.

“Jenna, let’s step back,” Jake suggested softly. “Emotions are high, and we’re dealing with a lot of ‘ifs’ here. We need concrete evidence before we can proceed.”

She knew he was right. They needed more than a tragic childhood and a series of coincidences to make an accusation. But they had to find out quickly if they were going to save Sarah Thompson from a horrible fate.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

The loud ticking of a nearby clock seemed almost to have faded from Sarah Thompson's consciousness through sheer monotony and repetition. Her wrists were raw from her struggle against the chains that held her. They wouldn't give way at all, but she thought she was making some progress against the pipe the chain looped around. Ancient and rusted, it was finally groaning and bending under her persistent tugging. She didn't know how long she had been chained to that pipe—a couple of days at least—but she had never given up her struggle, at least not when she was alone.

Then she felt that metal pipe give way. It clattered to the concrete floor, and she held her breath, afraid that the noise might beckon the silent figure with the penlight. But everything remained quiet, and the pipe must have been no longer in use, because neither water nor steam came out of it. She felt her way along the fallen pipe until she found a break that allowed her to slip her chained hands free of it. Her throat was too dry to make a sound, but she relished this small victory in a seemingly endless night.

Sarah's hands, still fettered together, were of little use as she staggered to her feet. Each movement sent throbbing pains through her bruised body, but she willed herself to move. The dark basement held no comfort, no sign of life except for her own shallow breathing. She leaned heavily against the wall, its rough texture scraping against her skin, guiding her forward like a lifeline.

She remembered where the staircase must be, and found her way over to it. Every step was an agony, every rise a mountain to climb, but Sarah persisted. She ascended on her hands and knees, the chains around her wrists clinking morosely with each labored movement.

At the top, Sarah's trembling hand found the doorknob, twisted it, and pushed the door open with a force born of fear and hope. It led to a dimly lit hallway. Struggling to her feet, Sarah moved down the corridor, her heart pounding against her chest. The heavy door she saw at the other end looked vaguely familiar. When she got there and pushed it open, a shocking realization dawned on her. She was in the back of the Trentville Public Library, a place that had always been a favorite haunt of hers, a sanctuary. How could this be?

The library was quiet as if holding its breath as Sarah struggled trying to piece together the fragments of her predicament. The hallway, the heavy doors, the old building now took on a sinister significance. They had likely masked her weak cries from the basement. But why ...?

As she emerged into the hushed expanse of the library, the clinking of her chains was a discordant sound in the stillness. Her eyes, adjusting to the dim light, fell upon Emily Carson standing behind the circulation desk, her silver hair an austere crown in the quiet domain of books.

Sarah's strained voice broke the silence. "Emily?" she managed to croak. She staggered toward her friend, expecting safety, expecting rescue. But as she drew nearer, she saw Emily's expression shift from surprise to something unreadable. Before Sarah could process the change, Emily's strong hands seized her. The librarian's grip was unyielding as she dragged Sarah back toward the hallway, toward the basement door. Panic surged through Sarah's body, her mind reeling at the betrayal. "Emily, why?" she breathed, her voice a mere wisp of sound.

The librarian didn't answer, her face a stoic mask as she propelled Sarah with a force that belied her years. The familiarity of her touch, once comforting, now felt like iron shackles binding Sarah tighter than any chain.

Realization crashed over Sarah like a wave: Emily Carson, the trusted librarian who

had nurtured her love for literature, and had helped Sarah imbue her young pupils with that same love, was her captor. Sarah's muscles screamed in protest as she struggled against Emily's hold, but weakness from her captivity leached the strength from her limbs.

"Please," she implored, but Emily's face was set, her determination unwavering as they reached the top of the stairs. In a swift motion, Emily heaved Sarah forward, sending her tumbling back down the wooden steps.

Pain exploded in Sarah's head as it connected with the unforgiving edge of a stair, stars exploding in her vision. The world spun, and the darkness rushed in. As Sarah lay crumpled at the bottom of the staircase, the dull throb of her heartbeat was the only sound that penetrated the encroaching void, her senses slipping away as she teetered on the brink of unconsciousness.

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Emily stood at the top of the basement stairs, her narrow escape playing back in her mind: Sarah's quiet approach, the whispered plea for help, the swift motion of dragging her back into darkness—all while the library above remained deserted. It was sheer luck that no one else had been there to witness the encounter. What if someone had seen?

She flicked on the light, shut the door behind her, and descended, each step deliberate and firm. At the bottom, she surveyed the scene before her: Sarah lay crumpled on the floor, a disheveled heap. Emily frowned angrily when she saw the broken pipe where Sarah had been chained.

Sarah groaned, stirring from her place on the ground. Her voice was weak, fractured by pain and confusion. Emily approached with a calculated calmness, kneeling beside her former friend.



“I’m sorry, Sarah,” she began, her tone even, almost gentle. “I never wanted you to suffer knowing... knowing who held you here. It would’ve been kinder that way.” It was not pity that softened her features, but a clinical detachment, the kind that came from witnessing too much suffering and causing more of it herself.

A persistent ticking sliced through the silence, drawing Emily’s attention to the old clock on the wall. It was louder here, beneath the earth, a constant reminder of time slipping away. She pondered the cruel question that had become her ritual: How long can they last without water? Four days was a harrowing record that she herself had set at the age of ten—a twisted mark of resilience that none had yet surpassed. “Nobody else has lasted more than three days,” Emily told Sarah. “You should have just stayed where you were, and soon it would all have been over.”

There was no joy for her this, no satisfaction—only the fulfillment of a dark need that demanded to be quenched. An undeniable pull, an inexorable compulsion, wound itself around her every five years, compelling her to claim another victim in a sort of hideous experiment in deprivation and endurance.

She stood there, considering the new determination that would surely ignite within Sarah, a will to survive fueled by the knowledge of her captor’s identity. Emily knew all too well the strength that desperation could muster. She had felt it herself, born of thirst and helplessness in the clutches of her own parents. She had been five years old the first time they left her there, her throat parched as hours stretched into an eternity. The second time was worse; at ten, she understood the cruelty behind their actions, the punishment for some imagined sin. If not for the neighbor who heard her weak cries, she would have perished there.

“Your resolve to escape will only grow stronger,” Emily mused aloud. “You know too much about me now. This has to be ended.”

She gazed around the basement. The concrete floor stretched out, cold and

unforgiving, until it gave way to dirt—the boundary of the living and the dead in this subterranean world. Emily's gaze shifted beyond where she had meticulously prepared for the inevitable. A fresh grave, gaping and expectant, lay ready for Sarah. It was an unceremonious twin to those neighboring graves that held Mark Reeves and Melissa Brennan, whose lives had quietly been extinguished amidst the shadows and silence. They had become part of the earth, secrets buried deep within the embrace of Trentville's soil, their presence marked only by Emily's memory. Now Sarah had to join them.

A utility knife on the workbench caught her eye, its blade glinting under the harsh fluorescent light. With a sense of inevitability, Emily reached for it, her fingers closing around the cool, textured grip. Her gaze remained fixed on Sarah's prone form, whose shallow breaths sent ripples through the stillness. The blade clicked into place with an almost imperceptible sound, a sinister whisper in the quiet gloom.

She stepped closer, the knife's edge catching the sickly light as she positioned herself above Sarah, her posture rigid with resolve. "Forgive me," she murmured, though she knew forgiveness was absent in this dry chamber of horrors. "But your will to live...your knowledge of me..." Emily's voice trailed off as the stark reality of her actions crystallized in her mind; there could be no turning back now, no sliver of doubt allowed to take hold. With steely calm, she whispered her grim benediction, "I just can't let that happen."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

As Jenna parked the cruiser in front of the small, dignified brick structure that held the Trentville Public Library, she adjusted her sheriff's badge and ran a hand through her short chestnut hair. "Jake, I need you to stay put," she said, her voice firm as she unbuckled her seatbelt. "I have to do this alone."

"That would be crazy, Jenna," Jake replied sharply, "It's not safe."

She met his gaze steadily. "It's a public place, Jake. Emily won't try anything there. Besides, we don't even know for sure ..."

Her voice faded just as she was about to say they didn't even know whether Emily was guilty of murder. Whatever doubts she might still harbor, she knew that Jake was certain of Emily's guilt, and there was no point in arguing about it, much less any time for that.

Jake shook his head, his sandy hair catching the light. "You're not going in without backup. I don't care if you outrank me, I'm going in too."

They locked eyes, a silent battle of wills taking place. Jenna understood his concern. She even appreciated his desire to protect her. But she felt there was something deeply personal about this confrontation with Emily—someone who had been a part of her childhood, someone who had led both her and her lost sister into stories that reached way beyond this small-town life.

But she saw clearly that Jake was not going to give in.

"Okay," she conceded after a tense moment, "you can come in. But give me space."

I'll signal if I need you." It was a compromise, but one she could live with.

"Fine," Jake agreed reluctantly, his broad shoulders relaxing slightly now that he knew he'd be close by.

"Remember," she reminded him as they approached the entrance, "this is delicate. Emily trusts me. I might be able to get her to talk to me, or at least get her to give something away about where Sarah is hidden. So give me space."

"Understood," Jake muttered, although the set of his jaw suggested his compliance was purely for her benefit.

They entered the library, the scent of books and polished wood greeting them like an old friend. Subdued light filtered through the tall windows, casting the interior in a quiet glow that seemed at odds with the turmoil brewing in Jenna. She took a breath, steeling herself for whatever was to come.

She saw no sign of the librarian, and only one other person was in sight. At the checkout desk, an impatient patron tapped the bell. The woman glanced up at Jenna, her brow creased in confusion. "Have you seen Emily?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern. "It's not like her to just disappear."

"Emily's...indisposed at the moment," Jenna replied, offering no further explanation. "I'm afraid you'll have to come back later."

"But I wanted to check out—"

"Just go ahead and take it," Jenna told her. "It will be all right if you leave a note."

Looking confused, the woman scribbled something on a piece of paper and hurried away with her book.

“Let’s split up,” she said to Jake, her voice barely rising above the sacred silence of the library. “You need to keep out of sight if I’m going to get her to open up.”

“Got it,” Jake replied, nodding once before moving off toward the nonfiction area, looking just like an ordinary library patron casually scanning labels on the nearest selections.

Jenna moved deeper into the library, her footsteps muted against the carpeted floor. The familiar tall shelves loomed around her, filled with both true and made-up tales that had helped shape her life. Today, they felt more like witnesses to an impending revelation that could shatter the small-town aura of Trentville forever.

The building was quiet, the air still. It felt almost suffocating to Jenna as she walked amongst the towering bookcases. Silence reigned supreme, a sacred rule unbroken even by the soft echo of her footsteps. Her eyes scanned the aisles, searching for any sign of Emily, but the librarian was nowhere to be seen.

The rows of books were silent observers, their spines rigid with secrets. Each title Jenna’s gaze flitted over seemed to hold a hidden message, a story that could unravel the mystery she was desperately trying to solve. But they remained mute.

Jenna paused, feeling the weight of years spent within these walls; this place had been a sanctuary of stories and dreams, a retreat from the harsh reality that had taken her sister all those years ago. Now, it loomed over her, its shadows stretching out like specters, transforming the familiar into something far more sinister.

As she passed by the children’s section, colorful covers and illustrations appeared dulled, their vibrancy leached away by the morning’s revelations. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of thoughts that might have clouded her judgment. Emily couldn’t be the monster they were looking for, could she?

Whatever the truth was, Jenna reminded herself, it was her job to find out.

When she reached Emily's office, she knocked on the door. There was no answer, so she pushed it open. The book-lined shelves, the meticulously organized desk—everything was in its place except for the librarian herself. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, nothing hinted at where Emily might be or what had happened to her.

Turning away, Jenna made her way to the ladies' room, pushing open the door with a similar trepidation. The silence that followed was answer enough; Emily wasn't there either. A pang of frustration twisted in Jenna's chest. Where could the librarian be?

At the back end of the library, she encountered a heavy closed door, one that she thought led to a part of the building she had never visited. She approached that door and knocked sharply.

"Emily?" she called out, but there was no response.

Jenna pushed that door open and was facing a dimly lit corridor, with another heavy closed door at the far end. It was then that she heard it—a loud bump, heavy and hollow, as if something—or someone—had collided with a solid object.

Instinctively, Jenna froze, listening. Muffled noises—a scuffling, perhaps the faintest echo of a whimper?

She hurried to the second door and called out, "Emily, this is Jenna Graves. I'm coming in."

When she flung that door open, Jenna faced only darkness, but heard the unmistakable clatter of footsteps ascending stairs rapidly. Emily Carson burst forth from the blackness beyond, her silhouette framed by the void of the unlit basement.

“Jenna,” Emily gasped, her words tumbling out in a disoriented jumble. “I didn’t know you were here. I—I was just—”

“Stay back, Emily,” Jenna said as she reached for a light switch she saw on the wall. “I need to see what’s down there.” Jenna’s command was authoritative, devoid of the warmth once shared between the two women over many years of friendship.

As Jenna reached for that light switch, she was surprised by a sudden, powerful grip on her shoulder. It spun her around with surprising force, slamming her back against the cold corridor wall.

Emily was no longer the familiar face of Trentville’s literary guardian—the woman who had nurtured Jenna’s childhood curiosity with books and stories. Now, the librarian loomed with a predatory intensity that seemed alien.

“Jenna, you shouldn’t have come here,” Emily whispered, her breath hot against Jenna’s skin.

The glint of steel flashed before Jenna’s eyes as a utility knife appeared in Emily’s unwavering grip. The blade hovered at Jenna’s throat, its presence a chilling reality that Jenna could neither deny nor ignore. She had been foolish to doubt the librarian’s guilt, to give her the opportunity to strike back.

Jenna’s heart raced, but her training kicked in, keeping panic at bay. The shock of betrayal from someone she had known since grade school was secondary to the immediate threat. She found that the librarian’s strength was formidable, a fact Jenna had overlooked. Now, she felt the full gravity of Emily’s desperation. Her hand moved toward her pistol, but she didn’t draw it.

“Emily, this isn’t you,” Jenna said, trying to reach whatever part of the librarian that might still be reasoned with. “Please, put the knife down.” But she could see that her

words were futile.

With a swift calculation and efficiency, Jenna shifted her weight, feigning weakness. Emily leaned in, perhaps sensing victory, but Jenna was setting her trap. With a sudden drop of her center of gravity, Jenna executed a trip maneuver, swinging her leg to catch Emily off-balance.

Emily toppled with an unceremonious grunt, the knife clattering away from her desperate grasp. Before Emily could recover, Jenna was upon her, handcuffs drawn. She snapped them shut around Emily's wrists with practiced ease, her movements automatic, even as her heart pounded in disbelief. This was Emily Carson, the librarian who had once been a childhood anchor, now a suspect in chains.

"Jenna!" Jake's voice cut through the charged silence as he skidded into view, his eyes wide with alarm and his posture ready for conflict. He took in the scene in milliseconds—the disheveled librarian on the floor, Jenna's authoritative stance—and moved to assist without hesitation.

"Take her," Jenna commanded tersely, already turning toward the ominous door that Emily had so hastily exited. "Read her rights and secure her."

Jake nodded, his expression set in grim determination as he complied. Jenna didn't wait to see the outcome; she had another life to save.

She flicked on that light switch, revealing the steep descent into the dim space below. As she made her way down, she saw what she had both hoped for and feared. At the bottom of the stairs lay the figure of Sarah Thompson, silent and motionless.

"Sarah!" Jenna called out, her voice echoing against the walls as she descended the steps two at a time.



Reaching the bottom, Jenna knelt beside the young woman, her hands checking her throat gently for a pulse. The moan that escaped Sarah's parched lips was faint, yet it resonated with relief. For a fleeting moment, Jenna allowed herself the comfort of hope. There was life here to be saved.

"Sarah, you're safe now," Jenna assured her, her tone firm, projecting the confidence she hoped would soothe the victim's frayed nerves. Jenna's hands were steady as she stroked Sarah's head. "You're going to be all right."

Sarah's eyes flickered open, meeting Jenna's gaze. There was recognition, then disbelief, as if the promise of safety was too fragile to grasp. Jenna watched the myriad emotions dance across Sarah's face, her own heart pounding not just from adrenaline but also from a deep-rooted empathy. She had seen this look before—the expression of someone who had glimpsed the abyss and was now desperately seeking the light.

She pulled out her phone to add an ambulance to whatever help Jake might have already called for.

"Help is on the way," Jenna said as she carefully checked Sarah's still-chained wrists, noting the angry red marks but no tears. Her fingers worked deftly to assess for any fractures or deeper injuries, her touch as reassuring as the words she spoke.

As Jenna maintained her professional composure, part of her couldn't help but connect this moment to her own unresolved past. The drive that had compelled her to become sheriff, to save others in a way she couldn't save Piper, was strong. But Jenna channeled it into the task at hand, and sometimes—like right now—she won the battle.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Jenna's gaze was fixed on Mayor Claire Simmons as she and Jake stood in the mayor's office, delivering their report. "Emily Carson is in custody," Jenna began, her voice steady despite the weariness that clung to her. "She's confessed to the murders of Mark Reeves and Melissa Brennan."

Mayor Simmons leafed through the written report on her desk, her manicured nails tapping a staccato rhythm on the thick paper. The room was silent save for the sound of rustling pages and the distant murmur of City Hall outside the door. Jenna folded her arms, watching the mayor's eyes track back and forth across the text.

"Emily chose her victims with a predatory precision," Jake said, standing beside Jenna. The mayor seemed to be listening as he recounted the details methodically. "Mark Reeves was an outsider, passing through town. He met Emily at the library, they talked a bit, and later that night, she managed to abduct him outside his motel room when he stepped outside for a cigarette."

Jenna picked up the thread seamlessly. "Of course, Melissa and Sarah were local—taken shortly after they'd returned overdue books. That's all we know at this point." Her pause was heavy with implication. Though they had rescued Sarah Thompson, the thought that there could be more victims out there, buried and forgotten, weighed heavily on Jenna's mind.

"Quite the tale," Simmons finally said, her voice cool and measured. "I'll have the press release drafted immediately." She looked up, offering a tight smile. Her words were devoid of warmth, official and detached. "Congratulations to both of you on resolving this case." Then the mayor leaned back in her chair, her expression unreadable behind her fortress of paperwork.

“Thank you, Mayor,” Jenna replied, her tone equally reserved. She waited for an apology, an acknowledgment for the criticism she had endured just yesterday, but none came. Instead, the mayor simply nodded, a perfunctory gesture that closed the discussion.

Jenna turned, catching Jake’s eye as they left the office. They shared a look, an unspoken understanding that passed between them—a mutual recognition of their accomplishments without the need for any other approval.

The two investigators left City Hall, the atmosphere between them shifting from professional to personal as the door closed behind them. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the parking lot. Jenna and Jake walked in synchrony, their footsteps echoing on the pavement.

Jenna couldn’t help feeling pride for their teamwork, for the way they balanced each other out—Jake with his earthbound steadiness and city experience, herself with intuition that often reached beyond what they could actually see.

“We make a good team,” Jake said, breaking the silence with a warmth that defied the chill of the granite building behind them. His comment proved he was feeling the same, but although his smile was easy, Jenna could see concern in his eyes. He was always looking out for her, she knew, but now he also had a lot of new knowledge about her to consider.

“Best in Genesius County,” she agreed, a genuine smile gracing her face. For a moment, she allowed herself the comfort of that camaraderie. But then a shadow crossed her thoughts, darkening her features. She remembered those two graves they’d found in the dirt at the edge of the library’s concrete floor, where Mark Reeves and Melissa Brennan had been buried—and also that gaping, freshly dug hole that had been prepared for Sarah Thompson’s body.

“It’s just...” she began.

Jake paused, turning to face her. “What is it?”

“Emily confessed to two murders,” Jenna began, her voice low. “But something doesn’t sit right. Piper... my sister could have been one of her earlier victims. I know—there were only two bodies buried in that basement. But how can we be sure ...?” Her gaze drifted to the horizon, where the town’s quaint outlines blurred with the encroaching dusk.

“Without a body, there’s no way to know,” Jake said, his protective instinct surfacing in his furrowed brow.

“Exactly. And if Emily had other victims, where are they?” Jenna’s emerald eyes, usually so bright with determination, now reflected a haunted uncertainty. She feared what remained unearthed, the possibility that her sister’s fate was intertwined with the librarian’s deadly secrets.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Jake said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “We’ll investigate further, follow any lead we can come up with.”

“Right,” Jenna murmured, nodding more to herself than to him. She knew the search for Piper was far from over. That was a path she walked alone, guided by an intuition that whispered of connections yet unseen. She would continue, relentless in her pursuit of the truth, no matter how elusive it might be.

They walked side by side to the parking lot, the silence comfortable but full of unspoken thoughts.

Jenna stood by her cruiser, the cold metal of the door handle grounding her to the moment. She watched Jake stride toward his own vehicle, each step carrying the weight of the day’s revelations. His silhouette blended with the lengthening shadows as the sun dipped lower, casting an orange glow over Genesius County. She wanted to call out, to say something more, but words clung stubbornly to the back of her

throat.

An exchange of glances spoke what remained unvoiced between them; a mutual recognition of the day's strain and the bond it had forged. Jenna felt the pull of something deeper, a connection that went beyond partnership, but she held it at bay. There was too much left unresolved, not just in the case, but within herself. Jake gave a final nod before disappearing into his car, leaving Jenna in the quiet company of her thoughts.

Her hand lingered on the door, the cool air whispering through the trees. The town seemed to hold its breath, as if waiting for her to shatter the silence with a revelation of her own. But instead, she slid into the driver's seat, the soft creak of leather accompanying her movements. She closed the door, sealing herself inside, a barrier erected against the chaos of emotions threatening to spill forth.

The ignition hummed to life, but before Jenna could shift into gear, her phone vibrated against the console. Officer Dilkins's name flashed on the screen. She knew him to be on the staff at the Genesius County Jail. She answered, her voice steady despite the uncertainty that gripped her. "Graves here."

"Jenna, it's Dilkins," came the reply, laced with urgency. "Emily Carson... she's asking to see you. Face-to-face."

The request knotted Jenna's stomach. After today, the mere thought of sitting across from the woman who haunted Trentville's tranquility was almost too much to bear. Her first instinct was to refuse, to end the call and drive home without giving the request another thought. But then the image of Piper surfaced in her mind, a face frozen in time, a sister still lost. This might be Jenna's only chance to ask about Piper, maybe to finally learn something that had eluded her for far too long.

"Alright," she said, the decision carving itself into existence. "I'll come." It wasn't just about getting answers or closing a case anymore. It was about facing the past,

confronting the specter that might hold the key to her sister's fate. With a resigned exhale, Jenna put the car into drive.

She would go to the jail. She would face Emily Carson.

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Jenna trailed behind the guard, his keys jangling with each step down the sterile corridor of the Genesius County Jail. A lingering scent of bleach hung in the air, blending with a murkiness that seemed to seep from the cold concrete walls. She halted outside a cell, her gaze fixed on the woman within. Emily Carson sat calmly on the edge of a bunk, the barred door between them doing little to diminish the familiar warmth of her smile.

The guard gave Jenna a nod before departing, leaving her seated on the cold bench outside the bars that confined the town's once-trusted librarian.

"Jenna, how good of you to come," Emily greeted, rising to stand close to the bars. Her voice was as serene as Jenna recalled from those childhood afternoons spent among library stacks. It felt surreal—this poised figure before her, who had once guided her through literary worlds, now confined with such good reason within these bleak walls.

"I wish you hadn't gotten tangled in this mess," Emily said softly, her eyes reflecting a sorrow that seemed almost genuine. "I never wanted you to see this side of me."

"Excuse me?" Jenna's voice sharpened like the cut of a blade. "You orchestrated a nightmare, Emily. People are dead because of you." Her words were unadorned, carrying the weight of stark truth.

Emily sighed, a sound that held no trace of denial. "I know what I've done," she admitted. And there it was—an acknowledgment, plain and devoid of any theatrics.

They fell silent, the air between them filled with the unsaid. Jenna's gaze wandered to the barred window, where the light was beginning to fade into the early evening haze. She could hear the distant murmur of correctional officers and the occasional shuffle of inmates elsewhere in the facility, but the world seemed muted, narrowed down to this moment of disbelief and simmering anger.

"Jenna, I owe you an apology." Emily spoke abruptly, breaking the silence with the same disarming civility she had always shown amidst the stacks of well-thumbed books. "Yesterday, it completely slipped my mind... It was the anniversary of Piper's disappearance." Her voice held a note of contrition, or perhaps it was an attempt at empathy.

"I should have asked how you were holding up," Emily added softly. "I hope it wasn't too difficult a day for you."

Jenna's response lodged in her throat, unspoken. She stared at Emily, the woman who had been a fixture of her childhood, now held in the harsh light of the truth. How could such normalcy be feigned so easily? In Jenna's mind, the memories of shared book recommendations and whispered library conversations warred with the present reality. The irony of Emily's concern, genuine or not, left Jenna momentarily lost for words.

"I called you here because I know what you're thinking," Emily continued, her voice even and direct. "You wonder if I had anything to do with Piper's disappearance."

Emily's eyes held Jenna's, unflinching. "But I swear to you, Jenna, it wasn't me. I've done horrible things, yes, but harming your sister was never one of them. And in some corner of my heart, I still hope she returns to you."

The assertion crashed through Jenna's defenses, leaving her momentarily bereft of words. Logic warred with intuition, her analytical mind dissecting Emily's statement for any hint of deception. Yet something primal, that strange supernatural sense she

harbored, screamed the truth of Emily's words. The world tilted slightly, reality skewing as Jenna grappled with this new certainty.

Another silence settled between them, the air thick with the weight of confessions and the specter of hope. Then Emily's voice cut through again, soft but laden with genuine regret. "It's a tragedy, the rift between you and your mother because of Piper." She paused, looking down for a moment before meeting Jenna's eyes again. "It truly saddens me."

The mention of her mother was a catalyst, jolting Jenna from her reverie. Abruptly, she rose to her feet.

"Goodbye, Emily," Jenna managed to say, her voice strained, before turning on her heel and hastening out of the jail. Once outside, she fumbled with her car keys, then slid into the driver's seat, the interior of the car a small sanctuary. She closed her eyes, allowing the quiet hum of the engine to ground her back to reality.

After a few moments, Jenna's breathing calmed, and she opened her eyes. The weight of the conversation with Emily had left her feeling unmoored, but in its wake, a firm resolve took root. It was a decision that had been deferred for far too long, buried under layers of pain and duty, but now it beckoned her clearly. Her hand reached for her phone with a newfound purpose, dialing a number she knew by heart yet rarely called. It felt alien to initiate contact after all this time, yet necessary—like resetting a bone that had healed wrong. She pressed the call button, the dial tone stretching out like a horizon before her.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end was slurred, tinged with the unmistakable edge of inebriation.

"Mom, it's Jenna," she said, her voice low and even. There was a pause, a fumbling sound, as though the phone had almost slipped from her mother's grasp.



“Jenna? What’s... what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Jenna replied, her words deliberate. “I’ve been thinking...we should meet up. Sometime soon.”

There was a pause filled with static and a distant hum that might’ve been laughter or sobs—it was hard to tell. Her mother’s response was a delayed murmur, a half-hearted attempt at sobriety. “Sure, honey. We can do that.”

“Good,” Jenna said, a subtle tremor betraying her apparent composure. “I’ll call you tomorrow to set a time.” She didn’t wait for an answer, ending the call before the silence could stretch into discomfort.

The phone fell from her hand onto the passenger seat, the finality of the moment enveloping her. She sat there, allowing herself to absorb the stillness, the quiet resolution that promised no easy path forward, but a path nonetheless. She had made the call. It was a beginning. And like so many beginnings, she had no idea of what the end might be.

Jenna thought of the other beginnings that still remained open questions.

Was there anything to look forward to with Jake, or should she just give up on that?

When would she find any clues to the one thing she’d never, never give up on—the search for her sister?

And whose troubles would next draw on the skills she’d developed, both in the everyday world and in her lucid dreams?