

Natalie Penry

“The Appearance of a Living Ghost”

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT – RCBN CHANNEL 17 LOCAL NEWS – JUNE 12th , 2012

TOEWS: Welcome back to your evening news, I’m Andrea Toews.

ALDEN: And I’m Josh Alden.

TOEWS: Earlier today, the 47th Miss Saple Indiana was crowned at the fair, right Josh?

ALDEN: Absolutely Andrea, 17-year-old Miss Jenna Scobey walked away with top honors.

TOEWS: Which, of course, was no surprise to her friends and family!

ALDEN: Naturally! I spoke to Chelsea Miners, Jenna’s lifelong best friend and neighbor, after Jenna’s coronation, and she said “Saple couldn’t have a better representative for the next year. I’m so proud of her and so grateful she’s in my life.” Aw, now doesn’t that warm your heart?

TOEWS: It sure does, Josh. You know what else is warming up? These summer temperatures! Let’s head over to Chuck Lause for a quick weather update.

The sky was angry and throwing tantrums of tears at the windshield. Diana was still a little pissed at Chelsea for refusing to drive. Not only did she hate night driving, but her daughter needed more night hours for her license anyway. Now, she was creeping along the unlit, back country roads, inching toward Saple.

THUMP

Shit! It’s just a pothole, Diana, calm down. Focus on the road.

THUMP THUMP.

She'd really need to bring up repaving the backroads at the next town council. Kids used these roads a lot more than adults, traveling back-and-forth from the neighboring city's mall and bar scene and whatnot. It was worse in the summer, too, especially right before the Fourth.

dahDUNK.

Jesus. "Chelsea, turn the radio on. Low volume, though."

"Why?"

"Because I'm your mother and I said so."

Chelsea remained focused on her cell phone, texting like her life depended on it.

"Chelsea." Still nothing. "Good lord, Chelsea. Hello?!"

"Ohmygodmomwhat?" At least she wasn't looking at her phone anymore.

"Radio please. I need some background noise to focus."

Rolling her eyes, Chelsea turned her phone off and reached for the consol. "Whatever. I just lost signal anyways." She opted for the CD player, and Diana's homemade driving mix started. Twenty songs from the twentieth century, starting, of course, with "Waterfalls."

Her daughter was silently looking out into the black, blurring countryside. What was she thinking about? In the past year, Chelsea had gone from a happy, smiley kid to a brooding, anxious teenager. Diana didn't know if it was adolescence or high school or the Jenna Scobey of it all, but she had started to forget what her daughter's smile looked like. Two years didn't seem like a huge age gap, but Diana was very aware of the maturity gap between her daughter and

Jenna Scobey. Best friends or not, she got the feeling Chelsea wasn't totally comfortable with everything Jenna did. Not that Diana had any concrete evidence of this - Chelsea was a spaceship on the other side of the moon. Closed off and invisible to the inquiring mind.

"So Chels," she kept her eyes on the road. "Sixteen's only a couple of weeks away. Any idea what you want to do yet? Or what you want?"

"I hadn't really thought about it."

"Well, your birthday's on a Tuesday this year, so you'll probably have to wait for the weekend if you want a party. Maybe Dad and I can take you out for dinner, though?"

"Sure."

"Okay." Where are you, Chelsea? Come home.

Diana slowed to a standstill, peering out at the deserted two-way stop. It seemed like the rain would never end, just an infinite sheet of water pouring from the sky. "Waterfalls" was fading out, but Diana decided she'd rather listen to it again than Mariah Carey.

"Mom."

"Yeah honey?"

"What is your obsession with this damn song?"

"Language." Diana said it with a smile, though, to let Chelsea know she wasn't really mad. She could still be a cool mom. "It's my favorite song."

"No shit, you play it all the time."

“Well, if the only thing I teach you is the musical masterpiece of “Waterfalls, I would still die happy.”

“Whatever Mom.” Chelsea shook her head, but – There! A hint of a smile. Success.

Diana grinned at Chelsea, awash in her moment of dorkiness. She tapped on the gas. In the dark, in the rain, in the attempt of the mother-daughter bonding, Diana didn’t see that the once-empty street now had a truck barreling down the road. And maybe she would’ve seen the headlights and reacted quick enough, but this was a road frequented by kids. And in favor of getting home after curfew unnoticed, the driver had elected to fly down the backroads in stealth mode – no lights, no music, no braking. The last thing Diana Miners saw was her daughter’s face, fading from that well-earned, happy half-smile to a look of unadulterated terror as the truck slammed them onto the side of the road.

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT – RCBN CHANNEL 17 LOCAL NEWS – JULY 6th , 2012

TOEWS: Welcome back to your evening news, I’m Andrea Toews.

ALDEN: And I’m Josh Alden. We start our broadcast tonight with the continuation of the search for Jenna Scobey.

TOEWS: Scobey was last seen two days ago, parked in front of Kinsey Forest in a silver 2004 Honda Odyssey. She was wearing black jeans, a white tank top, and a navy nylon jacket with white daisies sewn on.

ALDEN: Scobey was originally reported missing by her parents after she failed to report to the county's Fourth of July fair, where she was to represent Saple as the newly crowned Miss Saple. Her car was found undisturbed in the Kinsey Forest Parking Lot.

TOEWS: Officials are urging anyone with any information on her possible location to call the tip line. Our thoughts and prayers are with her friends and family.

ALDEN: They certainly are. Pivoting a bit, several families were disappointed today when the town council denied a request for more patrol cars on 700 S. Apparently, there's been an increase in auto-accidents at night due to the lack of speed limit enforcement.

TOEWS: Yes, correct me if I'm wrong Todd, but one of these accidents ended in a fatality, killing 45-year-old Diana Miners and injuring her teenage daughter Chelsea.

ALDEN: Such a tragedy. Before we go to break, I want to remind viewers that the Jenna Scobey tip line will be displayed on the bottom of your screen for the duration of tonight's broadcast.

TOEWS: Let's help get this remarkable young lady back to her family. We'll be back after this.

The moon was full and illuminating the backyard in a perfect, coming-of-age-movie way; the top-charted hits of 2012 appeased the pulsing dance mob of semi-drunk teenagers, each eager for the opportunity to ring in the new year without adult supervision. This was one of a handful of nights every year that the high schoolers could make less-than-stellar decisions and not live to regret it the next morning. Everything was set for the perfect night, the quintessential New

Year's Eve party. And yet, Chelsea hadn't stopped thinking about her shower, her bed, and her panda bear slippers, beckoning from a mile away.

Still, she had only gotten to the party eight songs ago. She had to spend at least another half hour here before she could leave without making her friends feel guilty. Although Chelsea had told them a dozen times that they didn't owe her anything, and that she would go to the party, stay sober, and drive home when she wanted to, she could still feel Mariana's eyes tracking her every now and then, and Hallie kept coming to pick an invisible piece of dirt off her shoulder. At least Sophie had left her alone, getting three shots deep before Chelsea had absentmindedly picked the label off her water bottle. A quick scan of the scene showed Sophie thriving in the middle of the makeshift mosh pit. And all was right with the world again.

"Chels, you want another water? I'm going up there to get my second drink now." Even though she'd been expecting another Hallie interaction, it still took her a moment to smile and shake her head. No, Chelsea would not be taking water from an unvetted cooler behind Aiden Waller's shifty makeshift basement bar. Didn't people realize how easy it was to reseal bottles after spiking them? Thirty seconds on Google and you'd never sleep soundly again.

Chelsea spent an embarrassing amount of time planning for the 'what ifs' in life. What if there was an active shooter in her homeroom? Her lunch period? Where is the closest exit and how could she get there without being in the line of fire? And fire! What if her house caught on fire when she was asleep? And the fire was right outside her door? Could she fashion a rope out of bedsheets and repel out the window? And just when she'd planned for every tragedy known to man, society got a little colder and introduced another. Chelsea got intimately familiar with feeling uncomfortable. Feeling hunted. Feeling afraid.

So when that eerie, evil chill lit her nerves on fire? That was a warning sign.

What was it?

Who was it?

Hallie was in line at the coolers, texting on her phone. Safe.

Mariana was talking with her boyfriend, her first drink still unopened. Safe.

Sophie was grinding on Aiden in the mosh pit. Definitely throwing up later, but safe.

Who was in danger? Who did she need to sober out of here right away? Who needed a guardian angel before things went too far, too fast? Was it her? Did Chelsea need rescuing? Who rescues the Golden Girl? oh god not again her vision was blurring and all she could feel was the eardrum shattering bass except it didn't feel as threatening now and it all felt strangely familiar and what an odd soundtrack to die to and OH.

The music.

A throwback song. The 1994 classic "Waterfalls" by TLC.

The party went on around her, albeit a bit more subdued. The mosh pit wasn't exactly suited for 90s R&B. Hallie was second in line for a drink, so Chelsea slipped through the crowd towards her. She had tried, but really, she was ready to leave. The last thing she wanted to do was awkwardly avoid eye contact with everyone for another few hours as people got progressively drunker and bolder and sillier.

Hallie took one look at Chelsea and immediately snapped into Mom Friend Mode. "Are you ready to go back? Like now? Give me just a sec, I'll get my drink and then we'll find Mariana and get someone to cover Sophie while we walk you back, okay?"

“Hallie, geez, that’s not necessary. I’m just gonna drive back now. I’m totally sober.”

“Absolutely not Chels. We’re in this together.”

“Hallie. I’m fine.” She *was* fine. Mostly. And her un-fineness was not hindering her ability to safely drive home.

“I know you’re fine, but the classically terrible driver might-” Hallie practically bit her the tip of her tongue off, trying to shove the words out of the unspoken air.

“Might be drunk and hit me and run off and leave me bleeding in a gutter?”

Hallie nodded, cautious, but unapologetic.

“Well, Hal, lucky me, I already know how to handle that. I’m going home.” With the dexterity that her slightly buzzed friend lacked, Chelsea wove in and out of the crowd, slipping out of the party to the lines of parked cars. Though she couldn’t hear anything but the DJ as the song (finally) changed, Chelsea knew Hallie would be out the door in moments with a worried Mariana and a confused Sophie in tow, both pissed-off that they’d miss their midnight kisses.

Home was either a ten-minute or a twenty-minute drive, depending on the route. The straight shot went down 700S for about a mile before pulling off into Chelsea’s extended driveway straight down the street. Chelsea could do this drive blindfolded and make it home safe. It was nothing she hadn’t done a hundred times before. But she’d already been the 1/100... She could turn right and go the round-a-bout way, heading through Downtown Saple on Main Street before turning onto Columbine Drive. It added ten minutes to the trip, but the whole route was lit and paved and monitored. Inconvenient? Yes. Safer? Chelsea flicked on her headlights and turned right, chewing her lip until the taste of blood surprised her tongue.

The branches cracked beneath her feet. It was satisfying to break these things so easily. Chelsea's AP Environmental Science class had been trekking through Kinsey Forest for the better part of an hour. The sun shone brightly through the bare trees, but even so. It was the first day back from Winter Break and the windchill hovered around 33 degrees. Despite being double gloved, Chelsea had lost feeling in her fingertips three trail markers ago.

Hallie and Sophie were in annoyingly high spirits for the cold weather. Sophie had "tripped" and required help from Aiden Waller to get back up several times; Hallie was absolutely fascinated by the nature, like an infant discovering their toes for the first time. Chelsea smothered her ire. At least Marianna was appropriately miserable in the bitter wind; she had never quite acclimated to the Midwest winters after living in Florida for most of her life.

"Alright class! Gather round, my young samurais." Mr. Andrews was everyone's favorite teacher, despite the cruel and unusual field trips.

Marianna was shivering, two shades from de-oxygenated blue. "Mr. Andrews, please tell me we're done walking for now."

"Precisely Marianna! Split into groups of three and complete the nature scavenger hunt. Did everyone remember their worksheets?" Satisfied by the general mumblings, Mr. Andrews continued, "Alright, go forth, young scientists! Impress me."

With Sophie pulled towards the boys' group, Hallie and Marianna flanked Chelsea.

"Okay, so our first item on the list is the rotten bridge," Hallie concluded, looking at her paper. "I have no idea where any of this stuff is. I like, never go to Kinsey."

Marianna nodded in agreement. “Yeah, he took us, into No Man’s Land.”

The two of them started following the other groups as they each trickled south. Chelsea knew exactly where the rotten bridge was. It was five minutes north, maybe even closer. It was a dangerous area for her, too full of memories that pricked her – dirt under her fingernails, Jenna and the box, a hug goodbye...

Nope. No. Focus on class. Follow the crowd. Safety in numbers.

When Chelsea caught up to her friends, Hallie narrowed her eyes. “Chels, are you frostbitten? I swear there are icicles on your eyelashes.”

“Funny.”

“I’m serious. If you’re too cold, let’s talk to Mr. Andrews. I’m sure he’ll let us head back if you’re inches away from hypothermia.”

“Hallie,” Marianna interjected. “I am legitimately in danger of hypothermia. I haven’t felt my toes since we left the bus.”

“Mari, your toes are fine. Chelsea looks like the Abominable Snowman gave her a butterfly kiss.”

“Feel my nose. It’s literally freezing off. I’m going to be nose-less. I’ll have to run away and join a commune for the nose-less in Cameroon. And it’ll be your fault, Hallie.”

“Marianna, I can’t even begin to tell you how wrong that is.”

“Nose-less commune, I’m telling you. Chelsea, back me up.”

Chelsea stared at them both. “The bridge is the other way.” She turned around and headed north, her friends scrambling after her with frantic steps.

They came to the rotten remnants of the bridge, a forlorn landmark in the blurring mess of trees. The only movement, the only sense of purpose was the water. The creek wouldn’t freeze over for another few weeks, but it was still chilly enough to ruin Chelsea’s day should she slip in. She stood, hypnotized by the rhythm of the water, trying to tune out the bickering beside her.

“Okay! Rotten bridge. Marianna, what’s next?” Hallie had no appreciation for this place.

“A cool rock. From near the bridge”

“Mari. Seriously.”

“I am serious Hallie, look at the sheet yourself.”

“Oh wow. Okay, um, look, cool rock. We bring that back to Mr. Andrews?”

“Apparently he has to certify that it’s a cool rock.”

“Ugh, fine. C’mon Chelsea.”

Chelsea glanced at the two of them. They didn’t belong here, not at Jenna’s spot. “I, um, have to pee. Walk like three minutes and then wait for me.”

Hallie frowned. “I don’t know whether I should be impressed or disappointed that you’re comfortable doing that here.”

Chelsea stared her down. “Some of us aren’t nature virgins, Hallie. I used to meet Jenna here like, every day.”

Her words had the intended. Evoking the ghost story sent Double Trouble tramping through the woods. And finally, she was alone, hypnotized again by the river.

gurglegurglegurglegurgle

Nothing stopped its course. She threw a pebble into the creek.

gurglegurglegurgleplinkgurgle

The river just kept going. She palmed a rock the size of her fist.

GurglegurglegurglePLUNKgurgle

A bigger rock, then. The size of her head. She threw it overhead like a soccer ball. The rock soared over the water and hit the far side of the creek bed with a CRACK.

That was not the noise a rock makes when it hits a pile of decomposing leaves. It was still hidden then, under the creek bed debris. Chelsea drew closer to the edge of the creek. There, the half-submerged rocks they always used as stepping stones. Then, the far side of the creek bed. She walked three steps. And started to dig, clawing at the ground with her fingertips. This was insane. What was she doing here? She knew exactly what she would find, and it wasn't going to help anything. Her fingers scraped on something hard. The polished wooden box. Jenna's hand-picked mini-coffin.

The wood was cold and dirty, but the inside was still pristine. A smushed, rolled-up nylon jacket with daisies, two un-used joints in the pocket. The "Best" half of a "Best Friends" necklace. One weathered polaroid showing Jenna and Chelsea in the leaves, high as kites, laughing and falling over each other. Happy. The photo was labeled in Jenna's handwriting:

RIP JENNA SCOBEEY (but call me when you get cell service girl)

“You’re really doing this, Jenna? Running away?” Chelsea coughed, smoke escaping from her lips. She was on her back, staring at the marshmallow clouds in the sky, waiting for the anxiety to melt away with the help of Mary Jane.

“Ugh, Chels, don’t ruin the high. I’m not running away from anything; I’m running towards something.” Jenna was next to her, blowing smoke rings.

“Someone.”

“Exactly.” Jenna flashed Chelsea her signature smile, devious and genuine. “Someone’s gotta shake this place up, even if it means you lose your smoking buddy.”

“Bitch, the hike back. I’d be-”

“High off your ass in the middle of the forest!” Jenna cracked up. “Promise me you’ll do that once, just once. And tell me all about it.”

Chelsea sat up, dizzy. “Jenna how the hell am I going to get in touch with you?”

Jenna grinned. “I’m so glad you asked. A parting gift, from me to you. Besides the extra joints.” She laid out a postcard, depicting a corn field in Des Moines. On the back, there was a phone number. “It’s Kenny’s burner phone. If you need me, just call the number, except wait a few months for the first time. Just in case someone like, looks at your phone records. Anytime we move around, I’ll send you a new card, so you know kinda where we are.”

Chelsea folded the card into the pocket of her shorts. “You’re sure you wanna go?”

Jenna shrugged casually. “Think of all the fun I’ll have in a place with more than 2,000 people. With like, actually interesting people. Now stop moping and help me bury this stuff.” She gestured to the pile of personal artifacts near the creek bed.

“Long live Jenna Scobey. Let’s hurry, it’s gonna rain soon and I don’t want my mom to make me drive home from your house in the dark.”

When she was a child, Chelsea used to get in trouble at school for lying. Her teachers would call home, very concerned about child endangerment, until they realized that there was no tightrope from the roof to the oak tree and her mother certainly didn’t feed her alligator because Chelsea was a self-proclaimed vegetarian and how does one even get alligator in the middle of nowhere? Chelsea’s dad would ground her, locking her inside and away from the pull of the untamed outdoors and imaginary circuses, but Chelsea’s mom understood. Some things are so real, so solid, so tantalizing vivid, that you can’t help but accept it into your own reality. She never thought she was lying. Those stories, they were real to her.

She stopped daydreaming a long time ago. After the accident, her pain killers were so strong that she didn’t dream when she slept. And that was merciful. The broken bones, the liver damage – those sucked, but she could handle it. Knowing her mom was dead? There’s no medicine for that. Except for the sedatives. And when those ran out, Chelsea forced her brain to stay away from daydreaming. There was no loyalty in imagining a world where everything was okay again. She kept herself focused and present. She counted sheep until she slept, never letting her mind wander into the realm of possibility. For the past six months, she’d been doing a remarkable job of shutting it all out, keeping things locked and under control. The only moments

of weakness came from unexpected surprises, like the DJ on New Year's. Who would've predicted a TLC song at a high school house party? But that's all it took. A few lines and her subconscious surfaced from years of repression with a wallop of grief. In the aftermath of those moments, when her brain was only capable of feeling, of experiencing the moment like an unevolved humanoid, she thought of Jenna Scobey.

Jenna Scobey – make that Carter Rae – was alive and well, playing house with a 25-year-old guy in an Iowa trailer park. Whether she was unaware or uncaring of the destruction she'd left behind, Jenna had left everything behind. She wasn't dead in a ditch or being trafficked. Jenna was perfectly fine.

Diana Miners was dead. She couldn't come home again, or bug Chelsea about school or play that stupid TLC song in the car. Chelsea's mom would never get to see what came next.

And yet, she kept Jenna's secret. Chelsea couldn't bring herself to ruin the Legend of Jenna Scobey. One phone call to the sheriff, and Chelsea could drag Jenna back to Saple. Back to the sleepy small town who would treat her like a celebrity, scandal or not. Back to the perfectly ordinary family with the mother who would rain hugs and kisses on her miraculously living daughter. Back to the best friend who wouldn't make her face retribution for it, even after being unceremoniously abandoned practically on life support. Back to a life full of college applications and pageant queen priorities, as opposed to sex and drugs and adrenaline.

Would it balance the scales?

Would it help?

Producing a living ghost?