



# Dead Scared (Cold Case Psychic #34)

**Author:** Pandora Pine

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Dead Clowns Tell No Tales...

When the circus comes to town for a charity performance, Detective Ronan O'Mara hears rumors of a clown who was murdered thirty years ago during a stop in Boston. After the clown's ghost appears to tell his tale, it's up to Ronan and company to find the killer. All he has to do is overcome his paralyzing fear of clowns. Piece of cake, right?

Psychic Tennyson Grimm is being plagued by dark nightmares that make no sense. Each time he wakes, Ten is scared out of his mind and shouting his daughter's name. Unwilling to talk about the possible cause of these night terrors, he shoves the bad dreams aside to welcome his brother's family to town. What better way to entertain them than by bringing them to the circus performance?

Ronan faces his childhood fear and reluctantly dives into the cold case murder of Jumping Jack the clown. He's willing to do whatever it takes to solve Jack's murder, even if that means immersing himself in grease paint and red rubber noses to do it. When Tennyson realizes his nightmare is tied to the murder, it's an all out sprint to catch the killer before another clown bites the dust.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Ronan

February, 1995...

Today was going to be the best day of thirteen-year-old Ronan O'Mara's life. The circus was in town. For weeks now, television commercials had been advertising the seven day event. Each one getting Ronan more and more excited for the Grande Promenade, where a heard of elephants would stomp down Causeway Street on their way into the new Boston Garden, which would be their temporary home during February school vacation week.

After seemingly endless days of pestering, Ronan's mother, Erin, had finally agreed to take her son to the parade, which was how he ended up freezing his tiny ass off at the corner of Canal and Causeway waiting for the elephants. "Mom! Where are they?"

Ronan whined.

"Maybe they'd decided to stay in their warm beds, like we should have done."

Erin looked as miserable as Ronan felt. Her cheeks were bright pink with the cold. Even wrapped from head to toe in a heavy wool hat, jacket, mittens and boots, Erin O'Mara resembled a frozen fish stick.

Ronan, was a junior fish stick. Why had he thought this was going to be fun? Getting up at the ass crack of dawn like he would on a regular school day, standing in the freezing cold weather, waiting for a bunch of elephants to amble up the street. He had

to be out of his mind.

A loud squawk from down the street caught Ronan's attention. "What was that?"

"Elephants!"

Erin said, as several more trumpeted their arrival.

Ronan felt the ground shake under his feet.

Normally he would have assumed it was the subway's Green Line roaring past underfoot, but today it was something different.

Today the shaking was caused by the elephants.

His mouth hung wide open when the first huge pachyderm came into sight.

The animal was enormous! Its massive head swung back and forth as the creature eyed its adoring fans.

She trumpeted again, so loud that Ronan slapped his hands over his ears.

Perched on the elephant's shoulders was a small girl, who looked to be a few years older than Ronan.

She was dressed in a frilly red gown adorned with feathers and beads.

Her blonde hair hung in waves to the middle of her back. She was the most glamorous person Ronan had ever seen in his life.

The elephant paused in front of him.

It's trunk swung toward Ronan, sniffing at his feet before moving up his legs.

Ronan laughed when the elephant raised its trunk higher toward his face.

"Hello, beautiful."

He stroked the elephant, under his mother's watchful eye.

"Ro, look up."

Erin whispered.

The girl riding the elephant was leaning down toward him. In her hand was an envelope, which Erin reached up to retrieve. "Thank you!"

Ronan called, as the elephant moved off down the street. When the parade rounded the corner, he turned to his mother. "What is it?"

Erin handed the envelope to Ronan, who ripped it open. It was a postcard with the elephant and the beautiful rider on the front, when he flipped it over, he saw it was an invitation. "Admit two,"

Ronan read. "Come meet the stars of the show. Elephants! Lions! Tigers! Oh, my! Take photos with Ringmaster Sterling Reynolds. Ride a trick pony. Enjoy a meet and greet with the clowns. Facepainting. Games. Food and more!"

Ronan handed the card to Erin. "Can we go, Mom, can we?"

"Sure!"

Erin agreed easily. She hurried Ronan across the street, managing to avoid a massive

elephant turd, to the main entrance of the new Boston Garden. They showed the invitation at the door and they were allowed inside.

The lobby of the Garden was festooned with brightly colored balloons. Ronan could smell popcorn and cotton candy. Laughter and loud squeaks from the right caught his attention. Clowns were making balloon animals and telling jokes to the kids waiting in line. There were happy clowns and sad clowns.

One clown in particular caught Ronan's attention. The bald man must have close to six feet tall. He was dressed in a one piece outfit that was black and white, stripped in some places, polka dotted in others, with large, black pom-pom buttons. His face was painted completely white, while his mouth and eyes were ringed in black. Exaggerated eyebrows were drawn halfway up the clown's forehead, giving him a permanently sinister look, even when he laughed. The man was twisting long, black and white balloons into what looked like a segmented snake. Ronan absolutely had to have one of those.

"Mom! Can we go see the clowns? I want to meet the black and white one!"

Erin's grin turned sour. Ronan almost thought she looked afraid, but that couldn't be, Erin O'Mara wasn't afraid of anything. She looked as if the last thing she wanted to do was meet clowns. "Okay,"

she agreed sounding apprehensive.

Ronan bolted toward the dwindling line of kids waiting to meet his favorite clown. He knew his mother would catch up to him. He'd hated the scared look on Erin's face. He promised himself that he'd do the dinner dishes without complaint to thank her for everything she'd done to get him here.

Rocking back on his heels, Ronan heard the clown tell the kid in front of him that his

name was Ying Yang. He watched with fascination as the clown blew up two more balloons and deftly twisted them to make a snake. Ying Yang handed the balloon animal to the boy with a dark look. "Watch out it doesn't bite ya!"

The clown pinched the boy's left shoulder and laughed loudly, stomping his feet, and honking the bike horn attached to his hip. The boy squealed in response.

It sounded to Ronan like it was a mix of joy and terror. All of a sudden, he wasn't so keen on meeting Ying Yang. Maybe there was still time to get into another clown's line. A girl dressed from head to toe in pink was making pink poodle balloon animals for the kids in her line. He was about to step out of line when Ying Yang spoke to him.

"Hey kid! What's your name?"

The clown eyed Ronan with curiosity.

"Ronan."

"Ya like snakes, Ronan?"

Ying Yang asked.

"Yeah, they're wicked cool!"

Now that Ronan was talking to the clown, he felt more relaxed. Erin set her hand on his shoulder, which gave him even more confidence.

"I bet your Ma likes snakes too, huh?"

He waggled his exaggerated eyebrows at Erin and started blowing up balloons for

Ronan's snakes.

Ronan watched fascinated as his balloon animal took shape. As a last touch, the clown added a red sticker to the front of the snake, which looked like a forked tongue.

"Here you go, Ronan. Watch out it doesn't bite ya!"

Ying Yang pinched Ronan like he'd done to the kid who'd been in line ahead of him. Thankfully he'd known it was coming. He laughed with the clown who honked his horn.

"Let's get away from the clowns, huh, Ro?"

Erin asked.

"Sure, Mom,"

Ronan agreed easily. "Why don't we get something to eat?"

Erin nodded and smiled at her son. "I think someone else wants to meet you first."

She angled her chin to indicate Ronan should turn around.

Standing behind Ronan was the girl in red who'd ridden the lead elephant. "Hi! I'm Ronan."

She was even more beautiful up close. Her hair looked like it was spun from corn silk, while her vibrant blue eyes were ringed in black, making the color pop. Ronan couldn't help but wonder if eyeliner would do the same for his eyes.

"I'm Celestina. Do you want to meet my special friends?"

Her smile lit up her entire face.

Ronan turned to his mother. He had no idea what special friends Celestina was talking about, they could have been axe murderers. What he knew for certain was that he would follow this girl anywhere, especially if she let him try on her sparkling red feather boa. “Can we?”

“Sure thing!”

Erin agreed easily.

Ronan had a feeling his mother would have agreed to anything, eating fire, juggling with swords, or even being shot out of a cannon, so long as it got her away from the clowns.

“Come with me.”

Celestina held her hand out to Ronan, who quickly took it.

Ronan couldn't help noticing the angry look on Ying Yang's face. He looked like he was about to rip Ronan away from the girl. The clown flashed his sharp teeth and took a step toward Ronan before Celestina tugged his hand, jerking his attention back to her.

Together, they cut through the crowds to the back of the lobby which led to the arena floor. Ronan had been this way last year when his grandfather took him to see a Boston Celtics game. They'd been able to pose for pictures under the basketball hoop. He sure hoped the famous parquet floor wasn't going to be pooped on by the elephants.

Stepping into the arena, Ronan saw that the floor was concrete. All three rings were



visible. Brightly festooned horses were running around the furthest ones, while two women in pink costumes shouted out words in a foreign language Ronan didn't understand. In the middle ring was a group of men staring up at two trapeze artists who swung through the air, hanging upside down by their knees, which were hooked over the bar. One of them let go of the bar she was swinging from. The acrobat flipped through the air and was caught by the second person. "Holy shit!"

Ronan half-shouted. He'd never seen anything like that in his entire life.

"Would you like a trapeze lesson?"

Celestina asked with a grin.

Ronan shook his head. The last thing he wanted was for the girl to think he was a coward, but he wouldn't swing from the trapeze for love, money, or a brand-new Sega game system. "No thanks."

He offered a bright smile, hoping it would cover up his fear. He was about to ask to see the horses, when a roar caught him off guard. Near the third ring was a giant cage with a black and white tiger inside. A young man was using a pitchfork to give the big cat a piece of meat, which it tore into instantly. "Wow! Who's that?"

"Her name is Sheba and she's my favorite tiger. Let's go see her. I've got a surprise for you."

Celestina motioned for Ronan to follow her.

The man who'd been feeding the tiger turned when he heard Celestina approaching. He wore a warm look that quickly soured when he saw her holding Ronan's hand.

"Hey, Hank,"

Celestina waved at the man, who didn't bother to respond.

When they reached the tiger cage, Ronan couldn't help but notice how small it was for such a large animal. The cat could turn around and lay flat, but there wasn't much room left for her to maneuver. "She is the most beautiful animal I've ever seen in my life."

With her bright icy blue eyes, which Ronan noticed matched the shade of Celestina's, the tiger was magnificent.

Celestina waved to a woman who was dressed in the same red glittery outfit his new friend wore. "That's my mother, Nava."

The woman approached carrying something in her arms. Ronan wondered if it was a baby. He couldn't care less about meeting a child. All he wanted to do was spend time with Sheba. Maybe he'd be able to reach in through the bars and feel her fur.

"Ronan, this is Suri, which means princess."

Celestina stepped aside as the woman knelt in front of Ronan. In her arms was not a human baby. It was a tiger cub. White and black like her mother, with bright, inquisitive eyes.

Ronan was stunned speechless. A moment later, the woman offered the cat to Ronan, who opened his arms to take the baby. He couldn't believe he was holding a tiger. The cat swatted at Ronan with its tiny paw. Reaching out with his right hand, Ronan ran his fingers through the kitten's fur. He couldn't believe how soft it was.

Erin gasped and pulled out her camera. She began snapping pictures of Ronan cooing to the cat. Kneeling beside Ronan, she reached out to scratch the baby behind its ears. "Wow, Ro!"

“I want to run away and join the circus so I can work with the tigers.”

Ronan had always wanted to be a police officer, but now, he wanted to stay here with Celestina and the big cats.

“How about you graduate from high school first?”

Erin laughed as Nava reached for her camera and took a few pictures of mother, son, Celestina, and the tiger.

Ronan rolled his eyes. If Celestina could join the circus, why couldn't he?

“I need to bring Suri back to her mother.”

Nava reached for the tiger.

The last thing Ronan wanted to do was give the baby back. “Grow up big and strong, okay?”

He gave the tiger one last snuggle and handed her back to Nava. “Thank you so much for letting me meet Suri.”

He followed the progress of Nava as she spoke to the man who'd been feeding Sheba. He shot Ronan an angry look, which almost made Ronan laugh. He didn't want Celestina to be his girlfriend. He wanted to try on her outfit. Not that he was going to announce that to guy holding the pitchfork.

“You're welcome.”

Celestina offered Ronan a shy smile. “Are you coming to our performance tonight?”

Ronan nodded. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"I'll look for you in the crowd. Bye!"

With a little wave, Celestina ran off after her mother.

"This is the best day of my entire life!"

Ronan hugged Erin. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome. How about we get something to eat? I could go for some blue cotton candy."

Erin's eyes sparkled at her son.

"Me too."

Ronan pulled away from his mother and spun around, intent on heading toward the lobby. What he saw nearly stopped his heart. Towering over him was the black and white clown. Gone was his friendly nature. In its place was something between a grimace and a snarl. Ying Yang looked like he wanted to rip Ronan apart.

The clown bent toward Ronan's ear. "Stay away from my daughter. Touch her again and I'll cut off your arm and beat you with it before I feed it to the tiger."

As the clown spoke, Ronan could feel Ying Yang's sour, fish-smelling breath ghost over his face. It took all his self-control not to throw up all over the clown. He remembered his science teacher, Mr. Fredrickson's lesson about the fight or flight instinct, but hadn't believed it was real until this moment. Part of Ronan wanted to punch the clown in the mouth, while the other wanted to run the entire fifteen miles back the safety of his house in Quincy.

“Got it, boy?”

Ying Yang asked.

Ronan nodded. He absolutely got it. “Yup.”

Ying Yang gave him a shove, sending him stumbling into Erin, who looked as scared as Ronan felt. A tiny bit of pee soaked into his briefs. His vision started to grey out. Much more of this and he was going to faint, as if he were some kind of damsel in distress.

The clown bared his teeth again and shuffled off toward the tiger cage.

“Let’s go.”

Erin ushered Ronan toward the lobby.

“Stupid motherfucker,”

Ronan muttered under his breath, sounding just like his grandfather. He knew that was the worst thing he could ever call someone, but in this situation, no other word would do.

“You’re telling me, Ro. I wanted to kick that asshole right in his safe deposit box.”

Erin giggled.

His mother always knew how to make him feel better. Ronan burst out laughing and turned his mind away from the asshole clown and toward all of the junk food he was going to eat. Hot dogs. Popcorn. Cotton candy. Fried dough.

Walking into the lobby, Ronan saw the clowns laughing and making balloon animals for the kids. A shiver slid down his spine. He didn't see them as light hearted jesters anymore. They were more like nightmares come to life.

One thing was for certain, Ronan did not want to join the circus and he sure as hell never wanted to be up close and personal with another clown as long as he lived.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

February, present day...

“Pizza’s here!”

Ronan called out, when the doorbell rang. He hurried toward the front door, where Everly stood gawking up at the pizza delivery driver and the six boxes he held in his arms.

Taking the boxes from the driver, Ronan handed the man cash. “Thanks for coming out, Kyle!”

“You got it, Mr. O’Mara! See you next week!”

Kyle headed down the stairs toward his running car with a Greek Life sign on the roof.

“Who wants what?”

Ronan asked, weaving his way through the kids and into the kitchen.

“Pepperoni!”

Little voices shouted at him.

Ronan set the pizza’s on the island and started opening the boxes. Pepperoni was on the top. He grabbed plates and started dishing out hot slices.

Ten and Cope set the food at the kids' spots at the table, while everyone got settled in. Jace grabbed juice pouches from the fridge and helped Aurora stick the straw into hers.

Ten chaotic minutes later, everyone was munching happily on their slices. "What's this big announcement you want to tell us about?"

Ten asked, his eyes on Jace.

"Well,"

Jace began, reaching for a napkin and dabbing at the pepperoni grease on his lips, "my team has finalized our plans for the winter charity gala."

"Ohh,"

Everly cooed. "Last year we got to wear beautiful dresses for the Snow Ball! Remember?"

Aurora nodded. "My dress was so sparkly."

Ronan remembered the day well. The light shining off Aurora's beaded dress had nearly blinded him. He'd shot video of Aurora standing on Fitzgibbon and Jace's feet while she danced with them. Everly's gown had been equally impressive. Bubble gum pink, it would have given Glinda a run for her money.

"Are we gonna have another ball, Daddy?"

Aurora asked.

"Yeah,"



Ronan muttered, “we’ll call it Blue Balls.”

Fitzgibbon sputtered, nearly choking on his pizza.

“Having trouble with your sausage, Fitzzy?”

Ronan waggled his eyebrows.

“Leave my sausage out of this,”

Fitz shot back, taking another bite of pizza.

“We could always call it Sweaty Balls,”

Jude suggested, barking a laugh, along with Ronan, who could barely catch his breath.

“Ew, Uncle Jude.”

Everly wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want sweaty balls.”

“Me either!”

Ronan chirped, gasping for breath.

“Okay, children.”

Jace said, his voice rising about Ronan’s hyena laugh. “There are no balls, sweaty, blue, or wrinkled. We chose a different theme this year.”

“What is it?”

Wolf asked. "I hope I don't have to wear fancy pants and another tie."

He rolled his eyes in a perfect imitation of his father.

"You'll all be happy to know we're going to the circus!"

Jace announced.

The table erupted with everyone speaking at once. "I love the circus,"

Everly gushed. "The clowns are my absolute favorite when they all get out of the tiny car."

"Mine too!"

Aurora agreed.

Ronan cringed. He hated clowns with a burning passion he usually reserved for tax season and cauliflower. There wasn't a big enough word to describe his years-long hate for pancake make-up, red noses and giant shoes. Knowing Everly loved them was a dagger to his heart. How the hell was he going to manage to suck up his ill-will long enough to snap creepy pictures of Everly with the painted nightmares?

"We had a bunch of ideas on how to do this without causing harm or offense to anyone,"

Jace began, "I didn't want there to be any PETA demonstrations, so we're going to limit the circus to human acts and possibly show horses in costumes. As much as I would have loved to see the elephants and big cats, I sure as hell wouldn't have wanted to see them in cages or shackles like Dumbo's Mom."

“I hate that scene,”

Ten said sniffing. “I cry every time I see Mrs. Jumbo rocking Dumbo in her trunk.”

“Me too!”

Cope joined in, sounding equally as sniffly.

“Moving along,”

Jace said, swiping at his moist eyes. “In the days leading up to the performance, we all thought it would be fun if the circus acts were interactive. Letting people learn how to swing on the trapeze or how to ride that tiny clown bike.”

“Like Homer Simpson when he went to Clown College.”

Fitz laughed.

“Something like that,”

Jace agreed.

“Goodie!”

Wolf rubbed his hands together. “I want to get shot out of a cannon! Remember we saw that, Dad?”

he asked Jude. “The daredevil flew through the air and landed in a giant net. I could do that. I’d need a cool name like Wonder Wolf! We could call my friend Cannonball Jackson! I bet he’d love to be a real human cannonball.”

Wolf's dark eyes danced with delight.

Jude shot Jace a questioning look. "Are we really going to launch volunteers out of a cannon?"

He looked intrigued by the idea.

"If you're looking for volunteers, I'll do it!"

Ronan laughed. "I'd call myself Raunchy Ronan and wear sparkly pasties on my man nips and one of those speedos made from dental floss and a pirate eye patch."

Jude gagged. "Can we not talk about man nips at the dinner table?"

"I'm more worried about the itty bitty, teeny weenie in the eye patch."

Fitz snorted.

"I'll have you know it's not a teeny weenie! In fact I'll need a heavy-duty tarp and rope to rein it in! Wouldn't want to scare the women and kids."

Ronan held his hands a foot apart.

"I'll never unsee that."

Jude grimaced. "I'm scarred for life."

"Children!"

Jace said loudly. "No, there won't be a cannon, although to be honest, I'm regretting that decision. I'd be more than willing to let Ronan's happy ass ride the rocket!"

“I’d be a space cowboy!”

Ronan crowed.

“Yeah, for ten whole seconds before you smack into the safety net.”

Fitzgibbon rolled his eyes.

“Ronan, I say go for it!”

Jude said, with a chuckle. “Don’t let anyone stop you from living your space cowboy dream!”

“At least Jude loves me.”

Ronan reached for another slice of pizza. If he wasn’t going to be the human cannonball, he’d drown his grief and disappointment in pepperoni and bacon.

“No, Jude wants to move up the ranks in Cold Case. With you out of the way, he’d make sergeant in no time!”

Fitzgibbon laughed. “As a matter of fact. I’m with Jude. Live your dream, Ronan!”

“You all suck!”

Ronan said, his mouth stuffed full of pizza.

“Can we get back on track here?”

Ten asked. “The kids need their baths and I need my bed.”

He yawned. "I haven't gotten a good night's sleep in almost a week. I keep having this..."

Ten stopped, looking as if he hadn't meant to say as much as he did.

Ronan wondered why Ten stopped short. It wasn't like him to keep things from his friends, especially Cope, who was able to read Tennyson in a way that Ten couldn't do for himself.

"What's Uncle Ten having?"

Wolf asked, with his mouthful of pizza.

"A nightmare,"

Everly said. "It's jumbled and messy like pieces of different puzzles dumped together."

Ronan had hoped Everly would be able to get to the bottom of what was going on. It was freaking him out that his talented daughter didn't know what was going on. "Do you think it's stress from River's upcoming visit next week?"

"It's not stress that I'm aware of, but not knowing what's happening in the dream is freaking me out. It could be a message about River, or you, or the Patriots winning the World Series, but I have no idea what's going on and based on what little Everly said, she can't see the answer either."

"We'll work on it together,"

Ronan said, feeling a shiver of worry slide down his spine. "River's family is flying in next Friday."

“Where are they staying?”

Jude asked.

“With Kaye,”

Ronan said, “although I have a feeling there are going to be a lot of sleepovers in our future.”

“I can’t wait to see Brookie and Baby Delta!”

Everly said.

“We get a whole week together!”

Aurora agreed.

Jace smiled fondly at his daughter. “Getting back to the circus. It’s being held two weeks from tonight. One performance only, but, like I said, there will be other activities during the week, being able to try the trapeze and getting your face painted like a clown. “The dress rehearsal for the show will be on Thursday, the afternoon before the circus performance. If you all are willing to pitch in, there’s some great jobs available.

“I could be the ring master.”

Jude’s eyes glowed. “I’d wear a read sparkly jacket and super tight black pants.”

Grabbing the salt shaker and holding it in front of his mouth like a microphone, Jude stood up. “Ladies annnnnnnnd gentlemen. Children of alllllllll ages.”

“I love it!”

Jace grinned at Jude. “I think we’ve found our ring master.”

“Master bater, more like,”

Ronan grumped.

Jude blew Ronan a kiss. “I think Ronan would be great with the clowns.”

Cope and Tennyson began to sing, “Send in the Clowns.”

“Over my dead body!”

Ronan folded his arms over his chest. His heart was pounding. Memories of the black and white clown from the circus when he was a kid played through his memory. Feeling his stomach lurch, Ronan took a deep breath, hoping to keep his five slices of pepperoni pizza right where they were.

“Don’t tell me you , Ronan O’Mara, the greatest detective since Sherlock Holmes is afraid of clowns?”

Jude wore a stunned look, as if he couldn’t believe his friend could be brought down by something so simple.

“The only good clown is a dead clown,”

Ronan proclaimed. He stood up from his seat. “Okay, kids, who wants to watch Nemo?”

“Me!”



Ezra and Lizbet shouted.

Setting the little kids free from their highchairs Ronan led them into the living room. He grabbed the remote and plopped down on the sofa with the kids piling in beside him. They loved it when he sang along with Mr. Ray's song about the ocean.

Everly wrapped an arm around Ronan's shoulder, like he did with her when she was scared. "It's okay if you're afraid of clowns, Dad. I'll protect you."

"You'll keep me safe?"

Ronan asked.

"With my karate kicks!"

Everly hopped off the couch to demonstrate. "See! You'll be totally safe."

"You know what? I think you're right."

Ronan held his arms open for his daughter, who settled in next to him.

Ronan couldn't help but think he should have signed up to take karate with the kids, instead of sitting in the parents room drinking coffee and trading chicken casserole recipes. Then he'd be able to protect himself and wouldn't need his six year old to be his champion.

It had been over twenty years since Ronan last came face to face with clowns. Maybe they were gentler and kinder now that he was an adult with a family and job where he carried a gun for a living. He couldn't possibly still be scared of people dressed in costumes with bright red noses, and tons of grease paint, could he?

Ronan pondered the question for a few seconds and didn't like his answer one bit.  
Could he still be scared of clowns after all these years?

Yes, he fucking could be.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Ten had been relieved when Cope offered to have the kids spend the night with them. Jude promised to take them for donuts in the morning, which meant Ten could sleep in until around 10 A.M. A good night's rest was just what the doctor ordered, if he could manage to keep that strange nightmare at bay.

Standing in front of his sink in the master bathroom, Ten brushed his teeth. He was so excited River and his family were coming up to spend time with them. It had only been a few weeks since the last time they'd seen each other for the holidays. Ten hadn't spent as much time with his brother as he would have liked courtesy of a dead mall Santa who had been Ronan's partner during his days with the Boston Police. Ten hoped this trip wouldn't involve another grisly murder to solve and that he could just sit back and relax.

"Hey, babe."

Ronan pressed a kiss to the back of his head, before grabbing his own toothbrush.

"Hey, yourself."

Ten spat his toothpaste and washed out the sink. "Can you believe we have the whole night to ourselves?"

"I want you to tell me about this nightmare."

Ronan wore a sympathetic look, but Ten could tell he wasn't going to take any lip on the matter. Just the truth.

“Damn it, Ronan.”

Ten sighed. “Can’t we just get naked and screw?”

Ten always slept better after having sex with his husband. He only hoped he could stay awake until the end.

Ronan was all business, his worry for Ten obvious. “Ordinarily, I’d be the first person to jump all over that statement, and you, but I’m worried about you not sleeping. Talk to me.”

“Like I said last night when you woke me up, there isn’t really a lot to tell.”

Ten climbed into bed, settling the covers over his lap. He waited for Ronan to join him before continuing. “The first time I had the dream was last weekend. Saturday night, I think. We’d watched that spooky show with Everly and I just figured I was having a reaction to her being scared. I didn’t like seeing our little girl hiding behind her hands, even if the scene wasn’t really all that scary, you know?”

Ronan nodded. “I hear you, but I think it was good that she was afraid and we were able to show her an outcome that made her feel safe again. Now she’ll be better able to soothe herself the next time we let her watch something scary, you know, after she turns eighteen.”

Ronan snickered at his joke.

“Make that forty and you’ve got a deal.”

Ten reached for Ronan’s hand.

“I remember going to a friend’s house after school and watching a movie my parents

never would have let me watch, when I was about eleven years old. It was one of those Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup> movies, the one with the killer in the hockey mask. I was so scared during the movie that I almost peed my pants. After the movie ended, I had to walk home. I was dead scared. It was only two blocks or so, but it was getting dark and I was certain Jason was going to pop out from behind every bush with his machete ready to slice me up like a Thanksgiving turkey. I wanted to sleep with the lights out, but my father forced the issue and snapped my light off. I woke up screaming and when I told my frightened parents what frightened me, Dad said that I deserved to have nightmares because I'd broken one of the Ten Commandments."

Ten rolled his eyes. "Nothing like Dad using his lord and savior to justify my being scared, instead of soothing my fears."

"Your Dad was a prick. We'd never do anything like that to our kids."

"Agreed, even if it means Everly sleeping in our bed for a week and kicking us nearly to death."

Ten still had bruises on his shins from last week.

"That kid's got sharp, bony toes, which she definitely gets from your side of the family."

Ronan laughed. "Enough stalling, tell me more about the dream."

Ten had hoped his little story about his childhood woes would get Ronan off the topic of his adult fears, but no such luck. "I don't remember anything, not a sound or a smell or picture of anything. I just wake up with my heart thundering in my chest and feeling scared to death."

Ronan shook his head. "It could be anything scaring you in a dream. Something as

simple as a dandelion bloom or as terrifying as a mask wearing, machete wielding killer.”

“Yeah,”

Ten agreed. “That’s why I didn’t say anything to you.”

“Has it been the same each time?”

“Yes. I just wake up scared with no memory of what happened or why.”

To be honest, Ten hadn’t been anxious to delve any deeper. In this case he believed out of sight, out of mind was the way to go. There was no reason to be scared if he didn’t know what he was afraid of. “I didn’t really want to examine it more closely.”

“If you were just a regular guy, I’d agree with you. Let your psyche sort itself out. But since your dreams are often visions, I’d say now’s probably the time to probe a bit deeper. With the kids on school vacation a week from today and River’s family coming up here for the week, we need to figure out what’s going on sooner rather than later. You don’t want to have one of these dreams with all the kids sleeping over. The way you woke up screaming last night would have sent Aurora diving under the bed. Hell, you scared the shit out of me.”

Ten would never forget the frightened look on Ronan’s face when his husband shook him awake the night before. Ronan had said he’d thought someone was murdering him by the way he was shouting. “I definitely don’t want the kids to see me like that.”

As much as Ten hated to admit it, he was going to need to do some mental exercises to help him remember the dream.

“Whatever is causing your psyche distress, we’ll fix it together. I promise. You know

I'd never let anything happen to you."

Ten nodded. "Yes, I know that. Speaking of letting something happen to the other, what's this thing about clowns?"

It might be a cheap shot, but Ten knew the question would take the heat off himself and put the bullseye squarely on Ronan.

Ronan grimaced. He looked as if he'd rather go swimming with man-eating sharks, than have this conversation. "I was thirteen years old and wanted to go to the circus. There was a parade of elephants in Boston and Mom took me to see it. A teenage girl was handing out invitations to the kids along the route to a special day of activities before opening night. Mom said we could do that too. Inside the building were food stands, carnival games and, of course, the clowns. They were all gathered in the same spot and were making balloon animals and laughing with the kids."

"That sounds like fun."

Ten had never been afraid of clowns. He'd been to the circus once when he was about twelve years old. They'd sat way in the back, in the last row of the bleachers. The clowns looked two inches tall from that distance. He'd been more afraid of the lions than the jolly jesters.

"It was, at first,"

Ronan agreed. "A lot of the clowns were dressed in bright colors with red noses and giant shoes, but there was one clown dressed in black and white. There was an edginess to him that the other clowns didn't have, which I guess was why I was drawn to him. I'd say now he had this punk look to him, but wouldn't have known what that was at the time. I got my balloon animal and then the girl who'd handed me the invitation showed up and asked if I wanted to see something special."

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Ronan O’Mara!”

Ten playfully slapped his husband’s arm. “What was the something special? Or am I better off not knowing?”

Ronan offered a cat who ate the canary grin. “It was a baby tiger. I got to cuddle it. There are pictures around here somewhere of me, the tiger, Mom and the girl, Celestina,”

he said on a sigh.

Ten raised an eyebrow at his husband. “Celestina?”

“She was beautiful, Ten. With golden silky hair and blue eyes. She was a little older than me, probably fifteen or sixteen years old, so she had curves in all the right places. I wasn’t interested in any of that. What caught my attention was the sparkly red dress and feather boa she was wearing. I wanted to wear the boa in the worst way. Everly would have lost her mind over the outfit. You would have too, come to think of it.”

Ten snorted. “Be honest, you wanted to try on the dress too.”

“Totally!”

Ronan agreed. “Every time I see a sparkly dress I think of Celestina. I was so in love with the tigers and the costumes that I wanted to join the circus then and there.”

“What happened to derail that dream?”



Ten couldn't imagine his husband flying high on a trapeze or wrangling elephants.

"Ying Yang the clown."

Ronan grimaced, as if the clown's name tasted bad.

"Ying Yang?"

Ten chuckled. "Cool name."

"You wouldn't think that if you'd met him in person. I mean, he was great when I was talking to him while he made my balloon snake, but then when Celestina asked me to come with her, he looked like he wanted to kill me. I didn't pay him any mind until I'd finished holding the baby tiger. Celestina and her Mom brought the baby back to its mother and when I turned to leave, there was Ying Yang. He threatened to cut off my arm and beat me with it before he fed it to the tiger, if I ever touched his daughter again."

"Holy shit! Did you tell Erin?"

"Mom was standing behind me. She was the one who caught me when Ying Yang pushed me. We got the hell away from him."

"Did you ever see Ying Yang again?"

Ronan nodded his head. "We went to the opening night show. Celestina was there, riding the lead elephant like she had during the parade. Her dress that night was a vivid peacock blue. I was nervous when the clowns came out to do their act, but Ying Yang thankfully, didn't see me sitting in the crowd. To be honest, after Mom and I went home that night, I slept with the lights on. I've been terrified of clowns since that night. I really wish Jace's gala was another ball or a day at Fenway Park, or ice

castles or something, anything other than a circus.”

“You heard Jace say he wants us to staff some of the positions. What are you going to do?”

Ten thought it would be fun to work with the trapeze artists and learn how to swing on the bar.

“I’ll just work security.”

Ronan cast his eyes down and wiggled under the blankets.

“You know,”

Ten began, resting his head on Ronan’s shoulder, “it would go a long way for Everly and Ezra to see you overcome one of your greatest fears. I think you might regret taking the easy way out. In all the years I’ve known you, there’s nothing you’ve faced that you’ve walked away from.”

“That’s different, Ten, we’re talking about doing my job and keeping people safe. No one is going to be in any danger at the circus. It’s not like Pennywise is going to show up with a bunch of red balloons and start munching on kids.”

Ronan shivered, pulling his husband closer.

Ten sighed. Ronan was the bravest man he’d ever known. It wasn’t like his tough as nails husband to want to hide under the bed. He’d faced down murderers, kidnappers, serial killers, and summer tourists without flinching. Who knew clowns would be his downfall.

First thing in the morning Ten was going to put his mind to figuring out how Ronan

could be involved in the circus without constantly having to look over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being stalked by Bozo.

Anything to keep his mind off his mysterious nightmare.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

One week later...

Ronan was having the time of his life at the car wash. Half naked hotties in G-strings were spraying each other under the hot summer sunshine. More stunning men washed and buffed the Mustang, while looking at Ronan as if he were on the menu. He was in the process of getting a lesson in how to wrangle a long, thick hose, when pain exploded in his head.

“Wake the hell up!”

Jude chuckled.

Realizing his face was planted on his desk, Ronan groaned. The last thing he remembered was using his hand to keep his head up. Jude must have yanked it out from under his chin, like Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown. Slowly lifting his face, Ronan realized the car wash was just a dream. “What the fuck, man?”

“It’s not even lunchtime and you’re sleeping on the job.”

Jude took a seat across from Ronan and appeared to be studying his friend.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Ronan dragged his tired ass off his chair and went to the coffee machine. He poured himself a lukewarm cup from the pot he’d started hours ago and drank it down without bothering to add sugar.

“Is something wrong with the kids, or did Ten have another nightmare?”

Jude’s annoyed look morphed into one of concern.

“Both,”

Ronan muttered, as Fitzgibbon walked into the conference room.

“What the hell happened to you?”

Fitzgibbon strode to the coffee pot, and frowned when he found it empty.

“Ten had another nightmare around two this morning.”

Ronan shook his head. If he lived to be a hundred, he’d never forget the sound of Tennyson screaming. “It was so bad that he woke the kids. Everly flew into our room and was shaking Ten’s shoulder begging him to wake up. Ezra sat in the doorway and cried. I eventually managed to get everyone calmed down and back to sleep. Everyone but me. I laid awake the rest of the night ready to spring into action every time Ten flinched or muttered in his sleep.”

“Did he remember any of the dream at all this time?”

Jude asked, looking worried.

Ronan shook his head. “Not really. He had one image flash through his mind that he managed to hold onto.”

“What was it?”

Fitz asked, starting a new pot of coffee.

“A pink dress.”

Ronan spent the majority of the early morning hours trying to figure out what the hell that image meant. “I thought maybe it had to do with Everly’s Snow Ball dress from last year, but other than that, I’m at a total loss here.”

What bothered Ronan the most was that there was nothing he could do to help his husband. Over the years he’d become a better, more attentive, husband, but there were still some things that not even Ronan could conquer, this string of nightmares being the latest in that line.

“What if the dress is metaphorical?”

Jude asked, looking thoughtful.

Ronan shot Jude a questioning look. “I’m much too sleep deprived for words with five syllables. You wanna dumb that down for me?”

“Maybe the pink dress symbolizes something else?”

Jude suggested. “Pink usually stands for femininity, compassion and innocence, and of course it’s a girl’s color. Maybe the dream is about Everly and something that’s in her future?”

“That’s not half bad,”

Fitz said. “I was thinking along the same lines.”

Ronan sighed. “The idea has promise, but doesn’t give me a whole lot of hope that we’ll be able to handle what’s to come.”

“I second that,”

a weary-looking Tennyson said from the doorway to the office. “Got a minute?”

“Yeah, do you want the guys to leave or for us to go to your reading room?”

He didn’t think it was possible, but Ten looked worse now than he had when they’d gotten up. His skin was pale, which made the dark circles under his eyes look more pronounced. His usually lively dark eyes were dull.

“I’d like to talk to all of you, if that’s okay?”

“Sure,”

Fitzgibbon said, taking his usual seat at the conference table, while Ronan ushered Tennyson into the seat he’d just vacated. Before sitting down himself, Ronan grabbed a bottle of water for Tennyson, who really looked like something the cat dragged in. The dark circles under his husband’s eyes combined with Ten’s unruly hair reminded Ronan of the days when they voluntarily sacrificed sleep for sex. Now, he’d give anything for Ten to get a decent night’s rest. “What’s up?”

“According to Cope, my dream was a vision,”

Ten began.

Not exactly breaking news, Ronan thought to himself. “Was he able to get a clearer picture on what the vision is trying to tell you?”

“Sort of.”

Ten nibbled at his bottom lip, which Ronan knew meant his husband was scared and

trying to marshal his thoughts into something that wouldn't send Ronan and the other detectives through the roof.

“What did Cope see?”

Jude asked, looking as anxious as he sounded.

Ten cleared his throat and focused his eyes on Ronan. “Death.”

“What?”

Ronan asked. His heart pounded like a jackhammer in his chest. Black spots danced in front of his eyes and he felt faint. “Whose death?”

If someone was going to die, why the hell had Ten kept this thing a secret?

“Sit,”

Jude said, softly. “Let Ten explain and then we'll make a plan. Your husband is going to need you to be at your very best, right?”

Ronan nodded. His hands shook and it was hard to catch his breath. He knew Jude was right, that he needed to calm down, so that he could help, rather than hurt the situation, but all Ronan could see in his mind's eyes, was worst-case scenarios, the last of which was Tennyson in his best black suit, lying motionless in a coffin. After a few deep breaths, he felt a bit more in control of himself. “Tell us the rest.”

Reaching for Ronan's hand, Ten took a deep breath. “Cope couldn't see much. He said there were people around us but didn't know if they were friend or foe.”

“Where were you? Where was I? What about the kids, were they with you? Were you



scared for their safety?”

Ronan’s mind spun with a hundred more questions. Fitzgibbon’s hand squeezing his shoulder, kept Ronan from asking them all.

“Let Ten finish,”

Fitz said gently.

“That’s all Cope saw.”

Ten’s voice was tinged with desolation, as if a horrible outcome was a foregone conclusion.

While Ronan tried to get himself together, Jude was typing a frantic message on his phone. Seconds later, Cope walked into the room.

“What did you see?”

Ronan demanded. “Where was Tennyson? Was anyone else in the vision? Could you see the time of year? Were the kids safe?”

Another shoulder squeeze stopped Ronan’s questions.

“We’ve all known there’s been something bothering Ten for the last week. During that time, I’ve done my best to read him and try to figure out what’s bother Tennyson. I wasn’t getting any answers until this morning.”

Cope paused, his eyes on Ronan, as if he were expecting the detective to start peppering him with questions again.

Ronan gasped for breath, praying Cope would hurry the fuck up and just tell them all what he saw.

When Ronan remained silent, Cope continued, “Like I said, people were all around us in close quarters, like in a crowded store or a subway train. I didn’t feel anything threatening about the people. It could be one of the people had a grudge against Ten or was going to hurt him in some way. I didn’t recognize anyone and the kids weren’t there.”

“That doesn’t give us a lot to go on,”

Fitz said on a sigh.

Cope shook his head sadly, seeming to agree with Fitzgibbon. “The vision seemed to only be a moment in time. What I was seeing was there and gone in a flash, but my gift told me Ten was dead scared. When I tried to push my gift further, everything stopped.”

“What do you mean, everything stopped?”

Ronan asked, feeling more confused than ever.

“The vision faded and my gift went blank. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to gather more information that would help us figure out what the hell is going on here.”

Cope reached a shaking hand out to Jude, who took it in both of his.

“Did you get the feeling something or someone was trying to stop you from seeing more than you did?”

Jude asked, looking scared.

“I don’t know. It all happened too fast. I wish I were a better witness.”

Cope wore a distressed look.

“You’re doing just fine,”

Jude said.

Ronan disagreed. There were two other psychics sitting downstairs and the fact that no one else saw anything or was able to provide more information on his husband’s possible death was absolutely infuriating. His hands bunched into fists and he felt his anger rising.

“Take a breath,”

Ten said softly. “Carson and Cole didn’t see or sense anything. Neither has Everly. It’s no one’s fault, Ronan. We have to move forward and hope more information comes to light.”

“So we just wait for some unknown assailant to shoot or stab one of us? For some rogue wave to sweep you out to sea or an out-of-control car to flatten the kids? For you to fall down the stairs or die in a house fire?”

Ronan was out of control and he knew it. He wanted to punch something. To scream and slam things around and demand that Cope find the answers they needed to stop whatever had its sights set on Tennyson and their family.

“All we can do is wait,”

Ten said. “I’ll talk to Everly when she gets home from school and see if there’s anything she’s been able to see. I’ve also got a call out to Madam Aurora. In the

meantime, River's family gets here in a few days. Let's focus on that and the upcoming circus performance, okay?"

"Okay, Ronan agreed, lying through his teeth. Nothing was okay. Nothing was going to be okay until he was able to save Ten from the unknown horror stalking his husband. Hell, for all Ronan knew who or whatever the danger was could be coming for him and the kids. For their friends and neighbors, as well.

As much as Ronan hated to agree with Tennyson's suggestion, all they could do was wait. But make no mistake, Ronan would be ready and waiting for whatever the hell was coming for his husband.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

The next several days had flown past in a flash. Ten had suffered through two more nightmares, but neither had provided any more information about what was to come. All he saw was a flash of the pink dress. Cope, Cole, and Carson weren't able to glean any new information from Tennyson, and Everly was also at a loss, which was a larger concern.

Ten always assumed the hardest talk he'd ever have with Everly would be about the birds and the bees. He never imagined having to sit down with his six year old daughter and ask if she'd seen something ominous coming for her father. Thankfully, or maybe not, Everly hadn't seen anything to do with Ten's dreams. She did, however, provide one additional piece of information. Everly felt like her gift wasn't working. She'd been able to read Ten from the time she started to talk, so this was definitely a new, and unexpected, development.

Wanting to put the dream out of his mind, Ten had spent the last few days getting ready for River's family to arrive. He'd stocked the fridge and pantry at his and Kaye's house with Brooke's favorite snacks, plenty of diapers for baby Delta, along with thick steaks and chicken for the grill. It might only be February, but in their house, every season was grilling season.

"Did you know dreaming about death don't mean you're going to die?"

Ronan asked, startling Ten out of his head.

"What?"

Ten asked. He'd been standing at the picture window in the living room waiting for

River's car to arrive from the airport. "It's not even for certain that my nightmare is about death, mine or anyone else's."

Ronan, continued, seemingly undeterred, "According to the great and wonderful Google, dreams about death don't mean you're going to die. They can signal change is coming or that you'll have some sort of personal growth."

Ronan looked down at his phone and tapped several times. "You could also have unresolved emotions that are triggering these dreams. What do you think?"

Ten raised an eyebrow at his husband. It wasn't like Ronan to put stock in dream interpretation. Or even to research it. He'd always felt that something was real if he could reach out and touch it. Doing all of this reading told Ten that his husband was more worried about the dreams than he'd let on. "Those kinds of dreams can also signal fear of change."

"You read the same article?"

Ronan asked.

"Seems that way."

Ten stepped away from the window and wrapped his arms around Ronan. "I appreciate you doing everything in your power to help figure out what's going on. The answer to this situation is going to reveal itself in due time."

"Is 'in due time' before or after you're lying dead in a crumpled heap?"

Ronan offered a hard stare, but stayed quiet.

"I don't know."

Ten sighed. He hated not having any answers as much as Ronan did, but at least he had a better way of handling the situation.

“How the hell can you be so calm about this?”

Ronan asked, sounding edgy.

Ten sighed. “Because there’s nothing I can do about it.”

He casually lifted one shoulder, as if he couldn’t care less. It wasn’t the case, but he didn’t have the energy to go through this all over again with River expected to arrive at any second.

“Nothing you can do?”

Ronan roared. “How about taking precautions to protect yourself? Or seeing every damned psychic in town until someone offers an actual answer? You sound like you’re content to sit and wait to fucking die!”

“They’re here!”

Everly shouted from upstairs. Before Ten could respond to Ronan, Everly came charging down the stairs. She threw open the front door and raced outside. Ezra was hot on her heels.

“Everly, grab your brother!”

Feeling more tired than he had minutes ago, Ten turned back to Ronan. “Let’s finish this conversation later,”

Ten said, feeling a headache coming on. “We can’t bundle me in bubble wrap until

the danger passes. The last thing I want is to die, Ronan. I've got babies to raise and future grandbabies to spoil. I'm not taking these dreams or their implications lightly, but I'm also not going to sit and waste precious time by worrying or stewing over how or why this thing could potentially happen."

Ronan opened his mouth looking like he had a lot to say on the matter.

Ten held a hand up to stop him. "Let's finish this discussion later, okay?"

He pressed a kiss to Ronan's face and hurried outside to join Everly just as a dark SUV, pulled up to the curb.

"Everly!"

Brooke shouted from inside the car, banging on the window. Seconds later, she was scrambling outside and hugging her cousin. Both girls laughed and started talking at once.

"Ten!"

River ran around the vehicle to hug his brother. "It's so good to see you."

"I missed you."

Ten held his brother, never wanting to let him go.

River broke the embrace to help Barb and Delta out of the car.

"You look tired. Don't tell me you've been slaving away getting ready for our arrival?"



Barb asked after hugging Tennyson.

“Nothing like that,”

Ten said, not wanting to lie to his sister-in-law, but not wanting to burden her with what was going on either. “Ronan, why don’t you take the kids inside and call Fitz, so he can bring Aurora over. Same with Jude. I’ll head over to Mom’s house and help River get settled in. After that, we can order some pizza and catch up.”

“Sounds good,”

Ronan agreed. The dark look in his eyes was anything but good.

Ten pulled Ronan to the side, while River gathered their baggage from the car.

“I understand how upset and worried you are about what’s going on. Trust me, I am too, but every time we’ve seen my brother, there’s something going on. There was a dead Santa, the amusement park death, not to mention River being in jail for a murder he didn’t commit. I just want to have a peaceful reunion with my brother for once, without all of us running around to trying to catch a killer.”

Ronan sighed. “Okay. I hear you, but I’ll have my eye on things. Jude and Fitz too.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Ten brushed a kiss against Ronan’s cheek. “Not too much sugar for the kids or for you. Got it? The last time you ate some of Everly’s Skittles, you both had the zoomies for two hours.”

“Yes, dear.”

Ronan rolled his eyes and herded the kids toward the house.

“Is all of this luggage yours?”

Ten asked, looking at the bags on the street. There were three full sized suitcases along with two smaller ones and three backpacks.

“I live in a house with three women. Just be thankful there’s not more.”

River grimaced.

“Oh, there will be when it’s time to go home.”

Barb laughed. “Fitz said he’s got a ton of Aurora’s clothes for baby Delta to wear. Plus we’re going to shop until we drop!”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

River laughed at his wife. He dropped a kiss on her temple and grabbed two of the bigger suitcases. Ten grabbed what he could, leaving Barb with the backpacks, and followed River across the street, where Kaye was waiting for them.

“There you are!”

Kaye wrapped her arms around River.

Ten smiled at his mother and half-brother’s embrace. Kaye’s reaction to River had been nothing short of miraculous. Finding out David had cheated on her before they were married had been a hard blow, but she’d never once taken that out on River or his family, treating them as if they were her own.

“Where are my grandbabies?”

Kaye pulled back from River and hugged Barb.

“Ronan’s got them all. He’s gonna call Fitz and Jude and get everyone together. We’re gonna order pizza,”

Ten said, hugging his mother.

“Well, I’ll just head over there for more hugs and to make sure Ronan orders salad to go with the pizza. He keeps trying to argue that he’s getting his veggies from the tomato sauce, but I call bullshit.”

Kaye grinned at Ten. “You should have everything you need upstairs, but if there’s something I missed, we’ll pick it up later.”

Kaye hurried across the street in time to meet Fitz, who was calling after Aurora. The little girl was in a dead run toward Ronan’s house.

“Let’s get these bags upstairs.”

Ten lugged suitcases up the front stairs and then onward to the second floor. He left Brooke’s bag and backpack in her room and did the same for Delta, who had the most luggage of all of them.

Fifteen minutes later, all the bags were where they needed to be and Barb was unpacking stuff for the baby. Ten and River headed down to Kaye’s kitchen. The table had a fruit bowl filled with apples and pears. He grabbed bottles of water for himself and for River.

“Okay, little brother. Spill it,”

River said, when Ten took a seat at the table.

“We’re still nailing down details about the charity circus, but that shouldn’t take up too much of my time. We’ll have plenty of time to hang out together.”

River raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Don’t try to bullshit me. I saw the look on your and Ronan’s faces when we got out of the car. Something’s up. What’s wrong?”

Ten sighed. “You’re right, there is something going on, but it’s not what you think. Ronan and I aren’t fighting and there’s nothing wrong in our marriage.”

Aside from the fact that Ronan’s dirty socks never seemed to make it into the laundry hamper, he added silently.

“Okay, so what had the two of you looking so grim?”

River wore a worried look.

Ten shook his head. “Every time we see you guys, something big happens or someone dies.”

“You do seem to attract more murders than Jessica Fletcher on *Murder, She Wrote*.”

River grinned.

Ten burst out laughing. He loved that show when he was growing up and was a fan of the conspiracy theory that Jessica Fletcher was a serial killer. “Isn’t that the truth. No one’s been killed, but the person on the hitlist this time might just be me.”

“What?”

River asked, his eyes widening. “Someone’s trying to kill you? Why the hell didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Ten knew his brother was worried about his wife and family. Truth be told, he should have told River what was happening long before today. “I’ve been having this recurring dream I can’t figure out. All I can ever remember is a pink dress. Cope saw something ominous coming.”

He paused waiting for the news to sink in.

“Jesus, Ten.”

River’s mouth hung open like a fish out of water. “When is this cloud of doom supposed to arrive?”

“We don’t know. Cope can’t seem more than that. Everly isn’t seeing anything at all. We don’t know how, when, where, why, or how. All I can do in the meantime is live my life. Ronan’s pissed that I’m being so casual about this whole thing, but really, what else can I do?”

Telling River about the issue made Ten feel a bit better. Talking to his brother always made his heart feel lighter.

“Stay away from people moving pianos for a start.”

River snorted.

Ten laughed along with his brother. “We’ve got so much going on with the circus. The kids are going to have fun learning how to swing on the trapeze and dressing up like clowns.”

“Sounds like fun, just so long as Pennywise isn’t one of the damned clowns.”

River shivered in the warm room.

Ten had tried to read the infamous Stephen King book years ago, but hadn’t made it past Pennywise’s first appearance. “You’re not afraid of clowns are you?

“I’m not afraid,”

River said on a nervous giggle, “but that doesn’t mean I won’t be ready to kick the big-footed fuckers in the balls if push comes to shove. I’ll keep you safe from the clowns, little brother.”

River held up his pinkie finger and Ten wrapped his around it.

“Well, now that we’ve got that settled, let’s go grab some lunch. I’m starving.”

Ten wasn’t, not really, but the last thing he wanted to do was sit around and talk about his dream in more detail. River was only going to be in town for nine days and Ten wanted to make the most of them.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

The next morning, Ronan woke up feeling like something the cat dragged and not because Ten had another nightmare. They'd hosted Aurora, Wolf, and Brooke for a sleepover. The kids had eaten too much sugar, and as a result were up half the night laughing and talking.

Not that Ronan minded. Being kept awake by giggles from the next room was much more preferable than waking up to Tennyson's terrified screams. He'd been reluctant to have the kids sleepover in case he had another nightmare, but thankfully the night passed without incident.

Getting out of bed early, so Ten could sleep in, Ronan headed downstairs and started a pot of coffee before gathering the ingredients to make his famous pancakes. He knew everyone would be over around eight for breakfast. On the agenda for the day was to head into Boston and check out a rehearsal for the circus. He wanted to get the lay of the land and knew the kids would get a kick out of the trapeze artists and the clowns.

His personal plan was to find out the names of all the scheduled performers, so that he could run them through the Boston Police database and see if anyone had a criminal record or warrants out for their arrest. Ronan couldn't be too careful, and not just because of Ten's dream, but there would be thousands of people at the charity performance. Boston Police would be on duty both in and outside the arena, but Ronan wanted to do his homework ahead of time. He'd enlisted the help of old friend, and current captain of the Boston Cold Case Unit, Faulkner Hayes.

"Hi, Daddy,"

Everly said on a yawn from the kitchen door. She was dressed in jeans and a bright pink unicorn tee.

“Good morning, little miss.”

Ronan swooped his daughter into his arms and set her on the kitchen island. “I thought you’d still be sleeping. You guys were up pretty late last night.”

“There was just so much to talk about, Daddy.”

Everly giggled, when Ronan shot her a look of disbelief.

“How could there be so much to talk about?”

Ronan asked with a grin. “You and Brooke speak on FaceTime nearly every day.”

He’d bitten the bullet and had gotten Everly a phone of her own so that she and Brooke could talk without having to use his or Ten’s phone. They’d put strict rules on it, like not taking the phone to bed with her or getting on social media. So far, the phone was working out great.

“Daddy, you don’t understand what it’s like to be a girl. There’s so much going on with school and the circus, fashion, and Brooke’s boyfriend.”

Everly slapped her hands over her mouth. The six year old had obviously spilled a secret confidence.

“Wait! What?”

Ronan grabbed the nearest stool and sat down in front of Everly. “Brooke has a boyfriend? Spill the tea, girl.”



Everly giggled at Ronan's response. "Well, I wasn't supposed to tell you. His name is Winston. He likes to play video games and he smells like tuna fish."

Ronan burst out laughing. "Ew!"

"Right! I don't think I could hold hands with a boy who smelled like that."

Everly wrinkled her nose.

"Okay, then, what kind of a boy could you smell yourself holding hands with?"

Ronan was curious to hear her answer, but make no mistake, he was going to make sure this heretofore unknown boy knew to stay away from his daughter until she was over the age of thirty. No, make that thirty-five.

"If he smelled like roses or cinnamon, I guess, but I have more important things to worry about than holding hands with a boy."

Everly rolled her eyes, as if to emphasize her point.

Everly's answer was music to Ronan's ears. "I'm relieved to hear it. Important things like what?"

"Things like Dad's dream."

All the earlier happiness drained from Everly's face. She looked older than her six years and more tired than a child should ever be. "Part of the reason I stayed up last night was in case Dad needed me."

Ronan was at a loss for words. On the one hand, he loved that Everly wanted to do everything she could to keep Ten safe. On the other hand, that wasn't a job for a six-

year-old. There were so many times his daughter had used her gift over the last year to help solve cases and to make sure her family was protected. It killed Ronan to ask her to put those skills to the test again. “Did you see anything new last night?”

Everly shook her head. “Almost, sort of?”

Barking out a quick laugh, Ronan couldn’t help but think that his daughter sounded like a typical first grader, but the subject was nothing that would ever come up in the classroom. “Can you tell me what you mean?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain, but it’s like when I want to reach something in the cabinet and I’m on tiptoes and just brush a finger against a cup before my feet hurt and I have stand flat again. Does that make sense?”

“It sure does,”

Ronan agreed. “But in your example, you know you’re reaching for a cup. Did you know what was just out of reach? Could you see a little hint of it?”

“No, it was pitch black, like the time the lights went out in that snowstorm.”

“Could you hear or smell anything?”

When Ronan interviewed witnesses to a crime, he’d always ask questions about the five senses. Most people put all their stock in what they saw, but he knew that what people felt, heard, smelled, or tasted were equally as valuable.

“Not really,”

Everly said sounding worried.

Ronan studied his daughter. Everly looked tired and worn out and knew it wasn't just from not getting a lot of sleep the night before. "What else is bothering you?"

Everly shook her head. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about without Dad being here."

"Okay, shoot."

Ronan's stomach dipped and pitched, as if he was going down a rollercoaster drop. It wasn't like Everly to be so serious or to want to talk to him without Tennyson.

"I'm worried about my gift."

Ronan blew out the breath he'd been holding. Relief washed through him. He was afraid Everly was going to reveal something about Ten, something he didn't already know about. Everly's gift being a little wonky wasn't a matter of life and death. "Why? What's going on with it?"

"It's hard to explain, but it feels less strong than before. My friend, Seth, at school, has asthma and the doctor said he would probably outgrow it. What if I'm outgrowing my gift?"

Fear and worry warred in her eyes, breaking Ronan's heart.

Ten would have been much better equipped to speak to Everly about her psychic abilities, which worried Ronan to his core. Why was she speaking to him and not Tennyson. "Has anything like this ever happened to you before?"

Ronan figured if there were other times this happened, he could help his daughter find what was triggering it now.

“No, usually my gift stays the same or gets stronger, but it’s never gotten weaker before. I’m scared that I’ll lose it all together. If that happens, I won’t be able to help my family and can’t reunite spirits with their loved ones or help cross over lost souls.”

Everly sniffled.

Ronan stood and wrapped his arms around his daughter, who’d started to cry. He had no idea how to help Everly and unfortunately, had more questions than answers. “Why don’t you want Dad to know what’s going on with your gift?”

“I’m afraid he won’t love me anymore if I don’t have my abilities.”

Everly wept, sounding helpless.

Pulling Everly’s face from his chest, Ronan wiped his daughter’s seemingly endless tears. “I want you to listen to me very carefully, okay?”

When his daughter nodded with a sniffle, Ronan continued. “There is nothing that could make either one of us love you one bit less. I promise you that. Your gift is only a small part of you.”

A sniffle from the kitchen door caught Ronan’s attention. Tennyson was standing there, swiping at the tears rolling down his cheeks. “Oh, honey.”

Everly hopped off the counter and ran to Tennyson who swept her up in his arms. Father and daughter hugged and cried together.

Ronan felt useless. There was almost nothing he could do to soothe his little girl’s worries and fears. There was less he could do for Ten, who looked more tired now, than he had last night. Wrapping his arms around his husband and daughter, he held

on for dear life.

“Daddy’s right,”

Ten said. “Absolutely nothing could make me love you less. Why don’t we sit at the table and talk about what’s been happening? I’ll take notes, while Daddy starts the bacon.”

“What if I lose it forever?”

Everly asked, looking scared.

“If the worst happens, then we’ll deal with it together, but there are a lot of steps to take between now and then, okay?”

“Okay.”

Everly wiped her damp eyes and offered Ten a smile.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I lost my gift?”

Ten asked, with a rueful smile. He set Everly in her usual seat at the table and sat across from her.

“You lost your gift?”

Everly’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

Ronan would never forget those tense weeks at the beginning of their relationship when Tennyson had somehow locked his gift away and couldn’t find the key to set it free.

“I had a hard time teaming up with your father when we first met.”

Ten grinned at Ronan.

“Was it because Daddy was a dumbass?”

Everly asked, sounding innocent.

Ten laughed, as his eyes shifted to Ronan. “Not really. I knew your father was skeptical of what I could do. He was results-oriented and just wanted to solve cases, so that families could get the justice they deserved. That part I understood completely. What I had a hard time with was how awful people were to each other. I wasn’t sure I could keep putting myself in a position to deal with the damage left behind by horrible people.”

“I understand,”

Everly said, breaking Ronan’s heart.

He’d had years to get used to seeing bloody crime scenes and dealing with criminals who’d just as soon stab him in the gut than tell him the truth. When Ronan became a member of the Boston Police Department, he’d been in his early twenties. A grown-ass man with the maturity to deal with the things he saw and was forced to do in the line of duty. His six-year-old daughter had none of those protections and at the time, neither did Tennyson. He had chosen his profession, his husband and daughter had no say in it.

“I’d gone up to Maine for a few days to clear my head,”

Ten began. “There were spirits everywhere who wanted me to help them. I got angry and told them to leave me alone. Then, I wished I’d never had my gift in the first

place. After my tantrum was over, I took a nap. When I woke up, my gift was gone.”

Everly’s eyes were so wide, Ronan was afraid they’d fall out of her head. “How did you get your abilities back?”

“With a little help from Madam Aurora. She was able to show me how unlock my gift and how to turn it on and off at will.

“You taught me how to do that when I was three.”

“That’s right,”

Ten agreed. “I didn’t ever want you to get to the place I was and have your gift overwhelm you. I hate to ask, but did you do this to yourself?”

Everly shook her head, sending her strawberry blonde hair flying. “I would never do that, Dad. I promise.”

She held up her pinkie finger to swear.

Ten wrapped his finger around his daughter’s. He was about to ask another question when he heard footsteps on the stairs. “We’ll have to talk more about this later, okay? I promise we’re going to do everything we can to get to the bottom of this.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Everly hopped off her chair and hurried into the living room. Squeals of excitement followed shortly after.

“Have you ever heard of this happening before?”

Ronan asked. “Kids losing abilities or having them dull down over time?”

Ten shook his head. “I’ll reach out to Aurora and see if she has any experience with this. For now, all we can do is monitor the situation.”

Nodding, Ronan started adding strips of bacon to the frying pan. He’d injured himself the previous Halloween and very briefly had Ten’s gifts. In that time, he’d spent countless hours speaking with his mother and getting to understand how his newfound abilities affected his mood and actions. When he lost those powers, Ronan had been devastated. He’d known what life was like without being able to speak with the dead, but Everly didn’t. She’d been gifted since she was an infant. Ronan had easily assimilated back into his old life, but knew his daughter wouldn’t find the transition as seamless.

Listening to his daughter’s laugh, Ronan vowed to do everything in his power to make sure Everly didn’t lose her gifts.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

The ride into Boston was thankfully uneventful. With it being Saturday, there wasn't the kind of traffic that plagued the city during the work week. Ten sat in his seat and watched the scenery pass him by, while worrying about Everly's problem. He'd reached out via text to Madam Aurora, who'd written back to say she hadn't had any experience with children losing abilities, but said she'd look into it and get back to him. He'd also asked her to look into his recurring nightmare. All he could do now was wait and try to enjoy the day in the city with his family and friends.

Fitzgibbon had booked a large capacity van to take the entire crowd to the Boston Garden to check out preparations for the charity circus, which meant no one had to drive or navigate. The kids sat in the back watching movies and laughing together, while the adults did their own thing. Ronan, Jude and Fitz were whispering about a case they'd been working on. Kaye and Jace were each reading a book on their phones, while Cope and Barb chatted about how picky Delta was now that she was on solid foods.

Movement at the front of the van caught Ten's attention. River had gotten up from the seat next to his wife and was heading toward Ten, which brought his first real smile of the morning. Like Everly and Brooke, Ten and River spoke on FaceTime several times a week and texted each other every day. Even though they spoke all the time, neither brother ever ran out of things to say.

"How are things this morning?"

River asked, with a knowing look on his face.

"I didn't have my nightmare last night, but I didn't get a lot of sleep either. The kids

were up late laughing together.”

Ten didn’t want to use the kids as an excuse for his lack of sleep. Truth be told, Ten was more than okay with being awake during the night. If he wasn’t sleeping he couldn’t dream.

“We’re moving the sleepover to Kaye’s house tonight. That will leave you free to get some sleep.”

“Here’s hoping.”

Cope had already volunteered to take Ezra for the night, so he and Lizbet could have their own little sleepover, which meant Ten could sleep in his own bed and not worry about waking the kids up if he had another nightmare.

“Have you tried taking something to sleep? Like Ambien or one of those over the counter sleep aids?”

Ten shook his head. “I’m always worried that if I take something that will make me tired, even low-dose Benadryl, there will be something wrong with the kids or Ronan and I won’t wake up in time to help.”

His answer was only part true. The other reason Ten didn’t want to take any sleep aids was because he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to break free from the nightmare, if it came back.

“I hear that. I took NyQuil a few months back when I had a cold and slept right through Delta screaming her tiny head off in the middle of the night. Barb was afraid I’d taken too much and put myself into an inadvertent coma.”

River snorted.

“I reached out to a friend this morning to see if there was something she could do to help me with this nightmare, but I haven’t heard back yet.”

Even though he trusted his brother to keep his confidence, Ten kept his mouth shut about Everly’s situation. The last thing Ten wanted was for Everly to pick up on this conversation and think people were talking about her behind her back. Ten didn’t want anyone else to know what was going on. The fewer people who knew, the better. For now.

“We’re here!”

Jace called, sounding like he was one of the kids. He pointed out the window, where the soaring edifice of the Boston Garden was visible. “Wait until you see the surprises I’ve got in store for all of you!”

Ten snickered when Ronan’s happy expression turned a bit green. He didn’t need his gift to know Ronan was thinking about the clowns. There had to be something he could do to allay his husband’s fear. Maybe if they put a clown face on Ronan he’d be able to relax more around the others. Or he’d end up running back to Salem in record time.

Fifteen minutes later, the van was parked and unloaded. Delta, Ezra, and Lizbet were strapped into their strollers and everyone was ready to roll. Jace led the way to a door where a man dressed in black stood guard. “Good morning, Mr. Lincoln.”

“Good morning, Lucas. Are you bringing your family to the dress rehearsal later this week?”

Jace was all smiles.

“I sure am. My wife and kids can’t wait to meet the clowns.”

Lucas didn't look so enthusiastic.

"They all need to have their heads examined,"

Ronan muttered.

"I couldn't agree more, Mr. O'Mara, but you know the saying, 'happy wife, happy life.'"

Lucas looked less than enthusiastic.

"I do indeed,"

Ronan agreed.

"Just an FYI, they're everywhere ."

Lucas's entire body shivered, making him look like he was doing a crazy dance.

"Thanks for the heads up."

Ronan coughed. "I'm not feeling too well. I should stay in the van."

"Not a chance."

Fitzgibbon wrapped an arm around Ronan's shoulder and led him into the building.

"The only way to overcome your fear is to face it head on."

"Why are we friends?"

Ronan gave Fitz a playful shove. "Forcing me to walk into this fun house of horrors

doesn't sound like something a bosom buddy would do."

Jace led them through the back of the building and into the locker room usually used by opposing basketball teams. Set up inside were long tables with lighted mirrors and more cosmetics than an entire drug store, where a dozen clowns were applying their makeup.

"Clowns!"

Everly, Aurora, and Brooke shouted together. All three girls took off running toward the pink clown at the end. Lizbet undid her buckle and climbed out of her stroller, to follow after the other girls.

"Seriously?"

Ronan muttered.

"Come on, how scary is Pinkie?"

Ten pointed to the clown the girls were losing their minds over. She was dressed in different shades of pink from head to toe, including her rubber nose. "Why don't we introduce ourselves?"

As Ten spoke, Pinkie hoisted Lizbet onto her lap and put a pink nose on her. Lizbet squealed, while Jude snapped pictures.

"Okay,"

Ronan agreed, sounding like he'd rather cover himself in honey while standing on a fire ant hill.

As they approached, Pinkie started to draw a pink butterfly on Lizbet's cheek. All of the girls insisted they wanted a butterfly too.

“Ronan, why don't you get your face painted?”

Fitzgibbon suggested. “Might help you overcome your fear of clowns.”

“Who's afraid of clowns?”

The frowny-faced clown in front of Pinkie asked.

“This guy.”

Fitz held Ronan's hand up.

“Asshole,”

Ronan muttered.

“Let's turn that frown upside down! I'm Sad Sam. It's nice to meet you.”

He held out a gloved hand, which Ronan shook.

“This is Ridiculous Ronan!”

Jude said, laughing at his joke.

“Very funny. Ha. Ha.”

A small smile lit up Ronan's face.

“Come on, Daddy, don’t be a grump!”

Everly called over her shoulder. Pinkie was painting a butterfly on her left cheek. Lizbet and Aurora already had theirs.

“What shall we paint on your face, Ronan?”

Sam asked.

“How about a dic-”

Jude began before Cope slapped a hand over his husband’s mouth. Jude pulled his husband’s hand away. “Excuse me, I was going to say dictionary . Or has that word been outlawed by the swear jar police?”

The nearby clowns laughed along with Jude.

Cope fisted his hands on his hips. “If you were going say dictionary , then I’m the Queen of England.”

“Your Majesty!”

Pinkie executed a perfect curtsy.

Even Ronan laughed at the clown’s performance.

“Why are you ascares of clowns?”

Pinkie asked. She ushered him into the nearest chair and started painting a butterfly on Ronan’s cheek.

“Don’t tell me it’s because you read that Stephen King book.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I swear, that book did for clowns what Jaws did for sharks.”

“No, it wasn’t the book. I had a bad experience with a clown threatening me when I was a kid and I’ve been afraid ever since.”

Ronan wrapped his arms around himself.

“What kind of a clown?”

Pinkie asked.

“He was bald and dressed all in black and white.”

Ronan shivered as he spoke.

“We’re you getting jiggy with his woman?”

Sad Sam asked.

Ronan snorted. “Hardly, I was twelve.”

“It’s never too young to-”

Sam stopped in his tracks.

“To what, Sad Sam?”

Everly asked innocently.



“To make new friends, kid.”

Sam’s sad face perked up into a smile, which made him look slightly terrifying.

Ten was starting to understand where Ronan’s fear had come from, when a clown he hadn’t seen before approached him.

“I need your help,”

the man said. He was dressed in a white satin outfit with splotches of red on it. He looked like someone threw a can of paint at him.

“Help with what?”

Ten asked.

“I need you to find my killer,”

the clown said.

“Your killer?”

Ten realized at once that the red on the clown’s outfit wasn’t red paint. It was blood.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Jumping Jack. You have to help me before it’s too late.”

With those words, Jack vanished.

Ten looked around the room. No one else seemed to have noticed the ghost clown. Not even Everly, who was watching Pinkie apply a spider to Wolf’s cheek.

“Who’s Jumping Jack?”

Ten asked.

The room went silent. Each of the clowns shot each other dark looks. One shook his head, as if to caution against saying anything.

“I’m a psychic medium,”

Ten said. “A clown wearing a white outfit covered in blood just appeared to me and asked me to find his killer.”

He looked around the room. None of the clowns were looking at Ten, but he could feel their unease without using his gift.

“He was one of us. The best clown I ever knew,”

a clown with an overexaggerated bright blue mouth said. “He was my mentor. I was the one who found him inside the tiger cage. Jack was covered in blood, but we all knew Sheba wouldn’t have done anything like that.”

“Sheba? The white tiger?”

Ronan asked.

The blue-faced clown nodded. “When the police got here, they wanted to kill Sheba for hurting Jack, but Celestina and Nava were able to move the cat into a different pen so the police could do their work.”

“The Boston Police were assholes,”

another clown with green stars painted around his eyes chimed in. “It turned out Jack had been shot. Sheba was one hell of a show tiger and they wanted to kill her for nothing. Fuckers. Then, they tried to blame me, since Jack and I were, uh...”

“Lovers,” Ten said.

Green eyes nodded. “Brought me downtown and screamed and shouted that I was going to prison for the rest of my life and explained in detail what happened to gay men in jail.”

“Assholes,”

Everly agreed, breaking the tension in the room and making the clowns chuckle.

Sam shook his head. “They didn’t have enough evidence to arrest anyone, but that didn’t stop them from coming down hard on us.”

“So the crime was never solved?”

Ronan asked.

All the clowns shook their heads.

Ten exchanged a look with Ronan. “I’d like to lend a hand if I can.”

“Why, so you can accuse all of us of killing him too?”

Blue-mouth accused, crossing his arms over his chest.

“ Again ,”

Sam said, bitterly.

“You were all accused?”

Jude asked. “Not just Green Stars?”

“Every single one of us with the circus was accused of killing Jack,”

a clown, with a tag identifying him as Goofball, said. “Not just the clowns, but the ring master, the trapeze artists, the animal keepers. Cops shook us down hard and wouldn’t let us leave town for two weeks. You have any idea how much money we lost, pal?”

“I can imagine, Greg,”

Ten said softly.

“How the fuck do you know my name?”

Goofball Greg demanded.

“I told you, I’m a psychic. The real deal. Not like Madam Fortuna.”

Ten grinned.

A few of the older clowns chuckled. “She was the worst psychic in the world. Copied Bela Lugosi’s Dracula accent and pretended she was from Transylvania. She always told married women their husbands were cheating on them.”

“Can’t tell you how many times we had to break up fights. Women hitting their husbands with their handbags and sometimes their fists. It was all bullshit.”

Greg paused. “Sorry, kids.”

“It’s okay, Goofball. My Dad says that word all the time!”

Everly laughed.

“Yeah, well, cops think we’re all on the grift. Back then, we were just working to support our families. I had a wife and three kids back in Kalamazoo. The money I made during the summer was what paid for back to school supplies, Christmas presents and clothes. I didn’t make enough money as a math teacher to support my family.”

“I hate math!”

Aurora wailed. Brooke and Everly joined in.

“Why don’t we head out to the arena floor and check out all the surprises I promised you.”

Jace motioned the kids toward him. He dropped a wink at Fitz before leading the kids away.

Ten waited for the room to empty out. Ronan, Jude, and Fitz had stayed behind, as he knew they would. Three clowns remained. Goofball, Green Stars, and a third clown dressed in a white satin outfit similar to the one Jumping Jack had been wearing, minus the blood stains. “You’re Jack’s son.”

The younger man nodded. “I am. My name is Alex. I used to sit by Dad in the dressing room while he put on his makeup. I was ten when he died. My mother came to pick me up after the murder. She’d been visiting her family in Maine, while the circus was in Massachusetts. After the show was allowed to get back on the road, no

one ever contacted us about Dad's murder. The police didn't even return my mother's calls and you think that after thirty-something years you're going to solve his murder?"

"I work as a psychic, but I also consult with the Salem Police Department's Cold Case Unit."

Ten pointed to Ronan, Fitz, and Jude. "These guys are the best in the business when it comes to solving the unsolvable."

Ten watched as Alex sunk his head into his hands. He knew the young man had wanted nothing more than to have his father's murder solved, once and for all.

"When did your father die?"

Ronan asked.

"In 1995. I was ten years old. I don't have any memories of him at all."

Alex's eyes were downcast, Ten could feel his pain.

"1995?"

Ronan asked, looking alarmed.

"Yeah,"

Alex agreed.

Ten knew Ronan had come to the circus back then. That was the time he'd met Celestina and had been scared to death by Ying Yang. Was it possible there was a

connection to Jumping Jack's death?"

"We'll tell you what we know, on one condition,"

Goofball said.

"Name it,"

Fitzgibbon said eagerly, stepping forward.

"I don't want you to put the others through what happened the last time. If you're going to look into this, do it right and don't just assume one of us is the killer."

"You got it,"

Fitz agreed. Ronan and Jude nodded their assent.

Ten turned his attention to Alex and the others. "Tell us what happened the night Jumping Jack died."

He took a deep breath and prepared himself for the story to come.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Grabbing his notebook from the inside of his jacket, Ronan took the seat Pinkie had used to apply her makeup. Fitz and Jude sat beside him. Leave it to Ten to uncover a thirty year old murder at the circus. What upset him more than Ten seeing a ghost clown was that he'd been to one of the shows in 1995 but remembered nothing about someone being murdered or about the dead man being found in the tiger cage. His thoughts wandered back to Sheba and her cub Siri. He wondered where they were now. Were either of them still alive? "Tell us what happened that night, Green Stars,"

Ronan urged.

"My real name is Kent,"

the clown began. "It was opening night and we were all so excited, especially Jack, because Alex was with him that night. He was really proud to show his son what made the circus so special. The performance went off without a hitch, which doesn't always happen on the first night. The only sign something was wrong was that Jack didn't come out for the final bow. I figured he must have been in the bathroom. Once the applause died down, everyone headed to the dressing rooms set aside for us. That night, we were in one of the locker rooms the hockey players used, but Jack wasn't there."

Kent paused, looking as if he were trying to get his emotions under control.

Ronan exchanged a look with Fitzgibbon and Jude. Both men wore grim looks. Each of them knew what was coming next.

"When I couldn't find Jack in the dressing room, I went and checked out the



restrooms. There was no sign of him there either. I was about to go back into the dressing room to ask the others if they knew where he was, but that was when-

Kent paused again. His eyes swam in unshed tears.

In that moment, Ronan could see the depths of Kent's love for Jack. He knew if the roles were reversed and he was speaking about Tennyson, there would be no holding back his grief. "When what?"

Ronan prodded gently.

Kent cleared his throat. "That was when the screaming started. I'll never forget the sound as long as I live. Celestina's voice was filled with terror. I knew she'd be back in the area reserved for the animals and ran there as fast as I could."

"Celestina was there?"

Ronan asked, his mind flashing to the young girl he'd met all those years ago.

Kent nodded. "She was so young, only fifteen or so. When I got to her and saw what was making her scream, my brain felt like it was on overload. Like I couldn't process what I was seeing."

"What did you see?"

Jude asked, sounding as if he were hanging on Kent's every word.

Jack was lying inside the tiger cage, face up, in a puddle of his own blood. His eyes were wide open and the look on his face was pure terror. The fur around Sheba's face was tangled and matted with Jack's blood. So were her paws. I understood in that moment why Celestina was screaming, it wasn't so much for Jack, but for her

beloved Sheba. She and the tiger grew up together, the same way a toddler would with the family dog.”

“Only Sheba weighed close to seven hundred pounds,”

Ronan muttered. He remembered being in awe of the tiger with her icy blue eyes. He used to watch animal documentaries with his mother and his favorite had been about big cats. Ronan knew what those teeth and claws could do to an unsuspecting prey animal, a human being wouldn’t stand a chance, especially inside an enclosure.

“That’s right,”

Kent agreed. “It didn’t take long for everyone to come running. Soon more people were screaming. In the middle of the chaos, someone, I don’t know who, called the police. When they arrived we were all taken away from Jack’s body, so we all could be questioned. That was when my true nightmare began. It wasn’t bad enough that the love of my life was dead, possibly mauled by a tiger, but I wasn’t given any time to grieve. In the span of an hour, I went from devastated partner to suspect.”

Ronan jotted notes as Kent spoke. His first step was going to be to putting in a call to old friend, and the current captain of Boston’s Cold Case Unit, Faulkner Hayes. Ronan was going to need access to the case file. His second call was going to be to Cisco Jackson, to see if he and the others could have a little time to work on Jumping Jack’s murder. He’d have Fitz make that call. Ronan, more likely than not, would just piss Cisco off with his burning need to solve this case.

“Were the two of you having any trouble?”

Fitzgibbon asked.

“See, this is what I didn’t want!”

Kent shouted. “To relive that awful night and be accused of killing my best friend all over again.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything, Kent,”

Fitzgibbon said gently. “As Jack’s partner, you’re the obvious first suspect, once we eliminate you, we can move on to other suspects. Does that make sense?”

Ronan was in awe of Fitzgibbon’s tenderness with the clown. Over the course of his career, he’d seen his share of domestic violence, which led to the death of an intimate partner. He’d guess that eight out of ten times the killer was the spouse. Fitz had always gone hard at those suspects, knowing they were the most likely culprit. This gentle side of his boss was something Ronan had very rarely seen.

Kent nodded. His hands were still balled into fists and his face red with anger. “There were no issues between Jack and me. In fact, I was going to ask him to move in with me when the circus went on hiatus before the summer season started.”

Fitz nodded. “Did Jack have any enemies in the circus that you were aware of?”

“Jack was great, don’t get me wrong, but he had his vices and the demons that came with them.”

Kent sighed. “He drank to excess and gambled. Jack owed money to a couple of the guys. One was a roadie named, Frank Whalen, or Whaley. He was a good natured sort, but when you owed him money, he wouldn’t hesitate to make you bleed. The other person he owed money to was one of the other clowns. His name was-”

Movement behind Ronan pulled his attention away from Kent. What he saw made him weak in the knees. A familiar clown, dressed in black and white, with overexaggerated eyebrows stood with his arms crossed over his chest with a chilling

look in his eyes. He recognized the man instantly. “Ying Yang.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

The angry-looking clown sneered at Ronan.

Ronan stood tall, there was no way he was going to show any weakness in front of his nemesis. “I’m Ronan O’Mara, former captain of Boston’s Cold Case Unit.”

“What the fuck are you doing here? As if I can’t guess.”

Ying Yang shouldered past Ronan, knocking him back a step. “You’re here to put the screws to us all over again.”

“Actually,”

Fitzgibbon said. “We’re here for the circus. My husband is Jace Lincoln, the man who is putting this gala together.”

Ying Yang’s menacing gaze softened a bit, but Ronan still wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley.

“Mr. Lincoln has done well by us all. He was the one who flew us all out here for this performance and he’s paying for our accommodations and meals,”

Kent said. “They didn’t come here to put the screws to us. One of them saw Jack’s ghost.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Kent?”

Ying Yang shouted. “No one can see ghosts. It’s all a bunch of fucking bullshit.”

Ronan turned to Ten, who wore a bemused smile. Ying Yang wasn't going to know what hit him.

"If you say so, Vincent,"

Ten said, his eyes glittering with glee. "Or do you prefer Anaconda?"

"You're the psychic?"

Vincent scoffed. "All you have to do is read my Facebook page to get that information. Same with my wrestling name. Nice try, asshole."

Ten's grin widened. "I'll give you that, but I can't imagine you publicly posting about the time you tripped carrying your lunch tray in the fifth grade and wound up with a face full of mashed potatoes. I believe the kids all called you Tater after that?"

Vincent growled low in his throat like a rabid dog about to attack.

Ten carried on, seemingly oblivious to the clown's raging temper. "We're here to see the rehearsal for the circus with our families. A spirit dressed as a clown and drenched in blood introduced himself to me, asking for our help in solving his murder. Now, the way I see it, the only person who would be angry at us looking into this cold case would be the killer. Isn't that right, Ronan?"

"No arguments here,"

Ronan agreed, anxiety churning in his gut. His last run in with Ying Yang was decades ago, but he felt the same fear he did that day so many years ago. "We're not interested in railroading anyone. If we can help Jack's family by bringing his killer to justice, then so be it."

“I don’t like this one bit,”

Vincent grumbled.

“You were there that night, what do you remember?”

Ronan asked.

Vincent’s eyes widened. “How the fuck did you know I was there? Are you psycho too?”

Ronan wasn’t about to rise to Vincent’s bait. “Because I was too. I met you the morning of the performance after the parade of elephants. You were making balloon animal snakes.”

Ronan shivered. “You also threatened to break off my arm and beat me with it if I went near your daughter again.”

“Ronan?”

a woman asked, as she walked into the room. “Is that really you?”

Ronan would know those blue eyes anywhere, even after thirty years. “Hi, Celestina.”

She walked toward him, giving Ronan time to size her up. He’d guess she was about five and half feet tall, in heels. She wore a bright red dress, which hugged her every curve. Her long blonde hair was piled on top of her head. Her show makeup was perfectly applied. In a word, she was stunning. “I can’t believe it’s you.”

Celestina hugged Ronan. “Who are your friends?”

“This is my best friend and boss, captain of Salem’s cold case unit, Kevin Fitzgibbon. My best friend and fellow detective, Jude Byrne, and my psychic husband , Tennyson.”

Ronan beamed at Vincent as he let that last little nugget fly. He looked to Vincent, who still wore an angry look. “Your daughter was never in any danger from me.”

Tennyson stepped past Ronan to get to Celestina. “You are absolutely gorgeous, just like Ronan described. I know my daughter and nieces would love to meet you. Ronan was showing us the pictures you took of him and the baby tiger all those years ago.”

“I’d love to meet them too.”

Celestina led Ten out of the room.

Ronan turned back to Vincent, who still looked like he wanted to punch someone. “Did you have any kind of beef with Jack that night?”

“Why would you ask that? Still butthurt over what I said to you back then?”

Vincent’s arms were crossed over his chest. He might be in his early fifties, but the man was in fantastic shape. Ronan could see the bulge of his biceps and had felt Vincent’s strength when he’d knocked into Ronan.

Ronan shook his head. “Once an asshole, always an asshole.”

He had much more to say on that matter, but he’d let the petty bullshit go, at least for now. “Your wife and daughter were in charge of the tigers. Whoever killed Jack and put his body in the tiger cage needed a key to the enclosure. It wouldn’t have been hard for you to get it.”

“The killer wasn’t attacked by the tiger that night,”

Fitzgibbon said. “Therefore, it could be argued that whoever murdered Jack and put his body in the cage would have a passing relationship with the big cat. You fit that bill.”

“Fuck you all! I don’t have to stand here and listen to this shit.”

With one last sneer, Vincent left the room.

“Do you think you can help catch Jack’s killer?”

Kent asked. “All I want is for him to be able to rest in peace.”

“We can’t make any promises,”

Ronan said. Solving cold cases was difficult under the best of circumstances. Witnesses forget, die, or move away. In this case, all of the members of the circus were scattered to the four winds. A handful of them were here now, but many more were not. All Ronan could do was read the police file and then give it his best shot.

That shot would start with the original case file and with Ying Yang at the top of the suspect list.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

As he walked back to the arena floor with Celestina, Ten did his best to read the woman. He didn't get much, only that she was excited to have some of her old circus family back together for the charity performance and that there was darkness inside her. What that darkness was, he didn't know.

"Daddy!"

Everly sang out, running to him. "You met Celestina! What a beautiful dress!"

Everly ran her hand over the sleeve of the dress, with a look of awe on her face.

"How do you know my name?"

Celestina asked.

"My Dad told me all about you and the baby tiger. My gift told me your name. You have gifts too."

Everly reached for Celestina's hand. "Come meet my friends."

Taking her hand Everly led her back to where the other kids were taking turns swinging on a lowered trapeze.

Ten smiled at his daughter. He wondered if she noticed her gift was working again. Celestina was still beautiful, but looked much different today than she had in Ronan's pictures with her. In the photo the girl had worn a happy, carefree look. Now, she appeared worn down by life. Ten couldn't help but wonder what had happened to her

over the years, but Celestina was so locked down, he couldn't even sense if the woman was married or had remained single.

Feeling a bit of relief, Ten pulled out his phone to take pictures of the kids. Wolf was hanging from his knees, while one of the trapeze artists gave him a little push. He laughed as he soared a few feet off the ground.

“Wonder Wolf!”

the little boy shouted.

“Please don't tell me Everly tried that?”

Ronan asked, coming up behind his husband.

“No, Wolf is the only one so far. He's hooked up with a harness and there are five people all around him, but I feel sick to my stomach thinking about Everly giving it a try. Her turn is coming up next.”

“Holy shit!”

Jude yelled, running past Ten and Ronan. “You're doing it Wolfie!”

“He wants to try it, doesn't he?”

Ronan asked.

“Yup, and so do you, Raunchy Ronan.”

Ten gave his hand a squeeze.

“Daddies, watch me!”

Everly shouted. She was wearing a harness and sitting on the trapeze bar holding on to the side cables. Kicking her legs out, she started to swing, just like she did on their backyard playset. What was different was the way Everly let go of the cables and fell backwards, which left her swinging from the bar by her knees.

“I’m flying!”

Everly shouted. She swung through the air with her arms spread wide. Joy filled her eyes. Ten had never seen her quite so excited. On the other hand, he’d never felt quite so scared.

“Sweet baby cheeses,”

Ten muttered. “Now she’s going to want to be a psychic trapeze artist. God help me.”

Ronan wrapped an arm around Ten. “It’s going to be okay. I wanted to join the circus when I was a kid too.”

“What changed your mind?”

Ten asked.

“The smell of the elephant shit for starters, but the deal breaker was Ying Yang. I actually thought he was going to feed me to the tiger that day. I’ve never quite seen rage like that in another person before. Did you manage to read anything from him?”

Ronan asked.

“Not really,”

Ten admitted, “but I was overwhelmed by his presence. He was menacing when he walked in the door, but after he found out who you were, it ratcheted up several notches. Why the hell is someone like that allowed around kids?”

“When I meet him the first time, he seemed edgy and cool. It felt like he was my teenage angst come to life. Emo, but with a smokers’ cough, if that makes sense. He wasn’t the kind of clown a kid Everly’s age would like, but he was perfect for someone my age.”

“I can see that,”

Ten agreed. “I wish I could tell you more, but there’s so much going on in here with the circus and so many spirits are looking for a piece of my time. Whatever Vincent’s hiding is on lockdown.”

“I think you spooked him with what you did know.”

Ronan grinned.

“Good. If he had anything to do with Jack’s death then he deserves to be spooked. If Faulk and Cisco allow you guys to work this case, you’re only gonna have a few days to catch the killer. Once the circus disbands after the charity performance, they’ll scatter again.”

“I hear you. I’m gonna huddle with the guys.”

Ronan snorted. “As soon as Jude gets off the trapeze.”

Ten turned to see Jude hanging from his knees with both arms out in front of him. Wolf sat on the trapeze across from Jude and was listening intently to what the acrobat was telling him. With a little nod, Wolf started pumping his legs. Before Ten

realized what was going on, Wolf launched himself off the bar toward Jude, who caught him by the wrists.

“Wooo hoo! Wonder Wolf!”

The little boy laughed as he and Jude swung through the air. Seconds later, Jude let Wolf go and he bounced harmlessly into the net.

Cope approached Ten looking a little green. “Did you see what Wolf just did? I got it all on video! I’m sure he’ll love to watch himself on television later, but I swear that’s ten years off my life.”

Ten nodded. “I hope Everly doesn’t want to try it next.”

“She got other worries on her mind, namely you.”

Cope sounded as if he was all business.

Ten sighed. “Yeah, I walked in on her and Ronan talking about my nightmares this morning. She said that she stayed up as late as she could to help me if I had that dream again.”

“But you didn’t, right?”

Cope asked.

“Right,”

Ten agreed, but knew it was only a matter of time until it came back for him. “I don’t know what to do about it. Do you have any idea what the dream is trying to tell me?”

Cope sighed. “I don’t, but, looking at Celestina in that glittering gown, I wonder if she’s the one in your dream with the pink dress. If we find out she plans to wear a dress like that this week, then we may have a Bingo.”

Nodding, Tennyson headed toward Celestina, who seemed deep in conversation with a man dressed in brown Carhartt pants and a dirty tee shirt. As he got closer, she turned around and offered Ten a bright smile.

“Tennyson, this is my husband Hank Myers. He grew up in the circus with me and is working maintenance for the show.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Hank.”

Ten offered his hand. When the man shook it, Ten was jolted by a vision. A young woman, dressed in blue, lay in a heap in the grass at Hank’s feet. He could hear Hank shouting at someone, but he sounded as if he were underwater. When Hank dropped his hands, the vision faded.

“I’ve got to get back to work. I’ll catch you later.”

He kissed Celestina’s face and hurried away.

“You saw something, didn’t you?”

Not waiting for an answer, Celestina led Ten to the arena seats and settled him in to one. She sat beside him. “Are you okay?”

Ten managed to nod. “I always feel a bit off balance after I have a vision.”

Off balance was an understatement. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to throw up.

“Can I get you anything? Water or juice?”

Celestina laid a hand on his arm.

“Water would be great, thanks.”

As Celestina headed off toward a large cooler, Ten took a deep breath. He’d been too overwhelmed by the vision to have read anything from her touch.

“Here we go,”

Celestina said, handing him an ice cold bottle of water and a snack package of chocolate chip cookies. “I figured you could use a little energy boost.”

“Thank you.”

Ten tore into the cookies and gobbled them down with several sips of water. As he ate, his heart began to slow down and he was able to think clearly again. He turned to Celestina, who’d been watching him closely. “My daughter said you have gifts like ours.”

He figured this was the best way to get her talking before he revealed what was in his vision and how he thought it might be connected to his nightmare.

Celestina nibbled her bottom lip, as if she were trying to figure out how to respond. “I wouldn’t say I have an actual gift, she began. “I occasionally get glimpses of things that are about to happen, like the way Wonder Wolf is going to flop out of the trapeze net like a floundering fish.”

Sure enough, that exact thing happened. Jude caught his laughing son and swooped him into the air. Tennyson hadn’t seen what was about to happen to Wolf.

“According to your daughter, your gifts are much stronger than my little bit of intuition. Everly is lovely, by the way. She’s going to grow up to be a beautiful woman. Ronan’s going to lose his mind when young men show up wanting to take her out on car dates.”

Ten snorted. “Ronan’s threatened to not let Everly date until she’s in her forties. I’ve gotten him to begrudgingly relent to thirty-five.”

Celestina laughed. The sound was musical, sounding like windchimes in a summer breeze. “What did you see when you shook my husband’s hand?”

Ten was jolted back to reality by her question. “I saw a woman crumpled at Hank’s feet. Your husband was shouting at someone, but I couldn’t hear the words he was saying.”

“Was the woman wearing a blue dress?”

Celestina asked quietly.

Ten nodded. “The woman was you?”

He knew from the tone of her voice that this was a hard moment for Celestina to recall. “It was your father. He hit you.”

“Hank had just kissed me for the first time. I thought we’d managed to get away from my father for a few minutes, but I was wrong. He ripped me away from Hank. He called me a slut and slapped my face. I wore his handprint for two days. My mother had to put extra makeup on me so that no one would see the bruise. She’d spent years doing the same thing for herself after my father hit her, so it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that he’d turn his rage on me one day.”



“What was he so angry about?”

Ten asked gently.

“Everything,”

Celestina offered a mirthless laugh. “He hated being passed over for ring master. Hated when other men so much as looked at my mother. He was angry when dinner was too cold or too hot. You name it.”

She shrugged carelessly.

“Are you still a part of his life?”

Ten asked.

Celestina nodded. “Vincent didn’t give me much of a choice. Someone has to be there to protect my mother from him. She’s frail and old before her time. My father did this to her. All of his years of abuse and mistrust have turned my mother into a shell of herself. I’d kill him myself if I thought I could get away with it.”

Ten could feel waves of hate coming off Celestina, like heat from a hot stove. He absolutely believed she would come for Vincent and honestly, didn’t blame her one bit. “I’m so sorry you and your mother were forced to live this way.”

“We weren’t given much of a choice. All I can do is be strong for her now.”

“Is she here in Boston?”

Celestina pointed across the arena where a woman dressed in a red sweater sat in a wheelchair. Blankets were piled onto her lap. Her eyes were cast downward, away

from all the bustling action of the circus rehearsal. “There’s no way he’d let her out of his sight for the week we’re here in Massachusetts. She should be home resting. After all these years, she deserves a little peace. I wished he’d just drop dead. I swear if I saw that happen with my gift, I’d turn away and let him die.”

Ten had no doubt she was telling the truth. “Did either you or your mother bring a sparkly pink dress on this trip?”

Celestina’s eyes grew wide. “I did, why?”

“I keep having this recurring nightmare. I’m all alone and scared in the dark. Suddenly, I see a flash of a pink dress and I wake up screaming my daughter’s name. She wore a dress like that last year to Jace’s winter fundraiser. We all joked that she looked like Glinda on steroids.”

“That’s exactly how I’d describe this dress. It was my plan to just supervise this event. You know, make sure everything was running smoothly, but Mr. Lincoln asked me if I would give a little speech at the end of the performance to wrap it up and to ask people to make donations to the cause. I went shopping yesterday for something to wear at the end of the show and found a pink ball gown.”

Celestina turned toward Tennyson with fear in her eyes. “Do you think this premonition is about me? Am I going to die?”

Ten took Celestina’s hand. “I don’t know. I’m not seeing anything about you at all. Usually I can get some kind of overall impression of someone, but you’re like a black hole. I can’t see or feel anything at all.”

Celestina stood up, dropping Ten’s hand. She reached into her small handbag and pulled out a business card. “Call me if you see anything else.”

Ten added her number to his phone and sent off a quick text. “You do the same.”

With a small smile, Celestina walked away. Ten saw she was heading toward her mother.

It was obvious to Tennyson that his nightmare featured Celestina. Now that he’d met her in person, Ten hoped that the dream would give him more information about what was to come. Was Celestina who was frightening him? Or was she being harmed by someone who was now turning his sights on him?

All Ten could do now was wait for bed time. The kids would be out of the house at different sleepovers, so he didn’t have to worry about scaring them when he woke up screaming. Ronan would be there to protect him. He knew the dream would be back and that’s exactly what he wanted. It was time to face the fear the dream inspired in him and get to the bottom of what it meant.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

After a quick call to Faulkner Hayes, assuring he was in the office, Ronan, Jude, and Fitzgibbon headed over to Boston Police Headquarters. Everyone else was going to the Boston Children's Museum. They'd all meet up after for lunch at an Italian restaurant in the North End.

As they drove, Ronan called Cisco Jackson.

"Let me guess, there was a murder at the circus you want to solve,"

Cisco said, not bothering to say hello.

"Faulk called, didn't he?"

Ronan said with a sigh. He should have known.

"Yes, he did. Unlike my own detectives, Faulk thought it was a good idea to call me about this potential case."

Cisco shouted.

"We're calling you now, Cisco,"

Fitzgibbon said. "We reached out to Faulk to see if there was even a case file available. There was no sense getting you involved until we knew there was something more than Ten's chat with the dead clown."

"Of course the murdered man would reach out to Ten."

Cisco said, all earlier traces of his anger gone. He might have been upset that he wasn't Ronan's first call, but when it came to solving cold murder cases, Cisco was all in. "What happened?"

"Jumping Jack was murdered on opening night. His body was found inside the tiger cage, drenched in blood, but the tiger didn't kill him. The man was shot,"

Jude said.

"All members of the crew were interviewed, but no one was arrested and the circus was allowed to leave town a week after their school vacation week performances. In a weirdly related note, I was there the night of the murder."

Ronan was sure that little personal tidbit would sink the hook deeper into Cisco.

"Jesus, you were there that night? How the hell old were you?"

"I was thirteen. Mom had taken me to the parade of elephants and then to the event inside the old Boston Garden. I met one of the clowns, who was an absolute dick and this beautiful girl, who is his daughter. Ying Yang is right up there at the top of my list of suspects. He's physically abusive to both his wife and his daughter, according to what the Celestina told Ten."

"Do you believe Celestina?"

Cisco asked. "I'm putting that on our baby name list."

The smile in Cisco's voice was obvious.

"Yes, I believe her,"

Ronan said. “What’s this about a baby?”

“Luca and I are going to adopt another child,”

Cisco said. “Fingers crossed. We should know in about six weeks. Just have to make sure the birth mother is still willing to give her daughter up. We’re trying not to get our hopes up, but it’s hard not to.”

“I hear that,”

Jude said. “I remember how agonizing it was waiting for Lizbet’s birth mother to sign away her legal rights.”

“I remember how hard that was, especially since you were still in the hospital after nearly getting your dumb ass murdered by a serial killer.”

Cisco snorted, sounding as if the memory of the night they’d saved Jude was a good one. “Back to business, find out what you can from Faulk and get a copy of the case file. Pull criminal history on this Ding Dong character and go from there. Keep me updated. Jace dropped off tickets for the circus performance, so I’ll be down there at some point.”

“Gotcha,”

Fitzgibbon said, all smiles. “Thanks for the leeway to work this case.”

“Don’t make me regret giving it to you.”

With those words, Cisco ended the call.

“Well, at least we asked permission this time instead of begging for forgiveness,”

Ronan said, feeling victorious. There had been plenty of times when the opposite had been true.

Fifteen minutes later, the van pulled up in front of Boston Police Headquarters in South Boston. “Home sweet home. This is where it all began for us, Fitzy.”

Ronan slung an arm around his boss.

“I knew you were trouble from the word go.”

Fitzgibbon rolled his eyes. “Captain Davidson came to me and begged to let you join cold case after you got out of rehab. That man loved you like a son and he wanted to make sure you’d have a place to land when you got your shit together.”

“Cap was one of the good ones.”

Ronan never knew Davidson had gone to bat for him until now. All he remembered from that time was being grateful to still have a job. The fact that he was able to keep his detective’s shield was a bonus, Ronan was eternally grateful for.

The detectives hurried across the street and into the precinct. After waving to a few old friends, they piled into the elevator and were on their way. When the elevator dinged, Ronan stepped out into the hallway and turned toward Cold Case.

The office smelled the same, a strange mix of coffee and dirty socks. “There’s my old desk!”

Ronan didn’t know the young detective sitting there, but knew he was good if Faulk had hired him.

Ronan and Faulk had hooked up on a case for the first time when mob boss Vito

Dragonni had his murder conviction overturned on appeal. Faulk had been deep undercover in the Dragonni crime family and was instrumental in bringing Dragonni to justice after he'd started killing those who'd put him behind bars in the first place. Ronan's name had been on Dragonni's hit list. Thankfully, they'd found Dragonni before he found Ronan.

"Hey, man!"

Ronan said, knocking on Faulk's office door, which was standing open. The office had been his after Fitzgibbon retired to stay home with Aurora.

"Hey, Ronan, Jude, Cap."

Faulk got out of his seat to shake hands with each of the detectives.

"Were you able to find a case file on the circus murder back in 1995?"

Faulk nodded. "Yeah, but there's not much. We've got the 911 call from that night, crime scene photographs, along with the interviews conducted with the employees of the circus. Lastly is the autopsy report. Unfortunately, the doctor who performed it has passed on. There was no murder weapon found."

"Slim pickings,"

Fitzgibbon muttered.

"Yup. I had copies of everything made for you."

Faulk handed Jude an accordion folder divided into different sections.

"Thanks, Faulk, we really appreciate you letting us run with this case."



Ronan grinned at the captain.

“There’s no one better at this than the three of you plus Ten. You’ve got seven days until the charity circus performance and then everyone leaves town. I would imagine they’ll go deeper off the grid this time if the murder is still unsolved by the time the big top comes down, so to speak.”

Ronan had been thinking the same thing. Celestina had been able to contact a lot of the old gang to round them up for this performance. He had a feeling none of those phone numbers would work come Sunday morning. “We’ll let you know what we dig up.”

“I’d appreciate that. Oh, and you’ll need these.”

Faulk reached into his desk and pulled out several gold badges.

Ronan took his from Faulk. “Why do you still have these? They should have been reassigned to other people.”

“No way,”

Faulk laughed. “I knew sooner or later you’d be needing them again and there’s too much paperwork required to requisition new ones. Let me know if there’s any evidence you need to run through the lab. Although, after all these years, I can’t imagine there being anything left to test.”

“Unless Jack’s killer held on to the murder weapon,”

Fitz mused. “We all know how killers love their trophies.”

“Indeed we do,”

Faulk agreed. “Good luck, guys. Riordan, the girls, and I will see you at the circus performance. Isla and Macy have been talking non-stop about getting to see the clowns.”

Ronan shivered in the room. “They need to have their heads examined.”

“Amen, brother, but don’t tell my husband. He loves clowns too.”

Faulk grimaced.

“We’ll be in touch.”

Ronan hung his badge on his waistband and headed out the door. “We’ve got half an hour before we have to meet Ten and the others at the restaurant, which means we’re not going to have a lot of time to look over the file.”

He pressed the button for the elevator.

“Jude you’re on crime scene photos,”

Fitz said. “Ronan, you get the witness interviews, and I’ll handle the autopsy. We’ll get together tomorrow and share our findings.”

“You got it.”

Ronan couldn’t wait to share this information with Tennyson. There might be some details his gift would give him that wasn’t in the case file. Ronan hoped this would help take his mind off the recurring nightmare and his vision of Celestina. Ten thought the two were connected, which troubled Ronan more than he was willing to admit.

His eye was firmly set on Ying Yang as the killer, which he knew he needed to set aside until facts led him in that direction. Just because a man threatened kids, beat his wife, and controlled his daughter didn't mean he was a killer.

Or did it?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Tennyson stood in front of the microwave watching his lunch leftovers spin on the plate. He'd never seen so much food in his life as there had been on their table at Strega in Boston. They'd ordered charcuterie boards, arancini, freshly baked bread, every kind of pasta imaginable, along with meatballs, sausage, and lastly, pistachio cheesecake for dessert. Ten felt like he'd wouldn't want to eat for days, but there he was at half past eleven, hungry again.

Everly informed everyone that strega was the Italian word for witch. She'd used her gift to glean that little piece of information, which warmed Ten's heart. Maybe the problem Everly was having with her gift was just a blip and not signs of a larger problem.

"I thought I'd find you in here,"

Ronan said, walking into the kitchen.

"Oh, yeah?"

Ten asked.

"You're procrastinating going to bed. Where else would you be?"

Ronan took a seat at the table, his focus was on Tennyson.

"Well, the Walmart in Beverly is open twenty-four hours, so there's that."

Ten shrugged and pulled his pasta out of the microwave when it beeped.

Ronan lifted a questioning eyebrow. “Just admit you’re procrastinating.”

“Maybe a little,”

Ten agreed, bringing his pasta to the table. “Can you blame me? I’m exhausted from being up most of the night avoiding my nightmare and now, I’ve got the weight of my vision of Celestina on my mind as well.”

“Do you still think the nightmare and the vision are connected?”

Ronan got up from the table and grabbed a fork from the drainboard.

“More now than ever,”

Ten admitted. “Celestina admitted it was her father who’d hit her, which was why she was laying at Hank’s feet in my vision. It seems too much of a coincidence to be anything but related. What I don’t understand is what the dream is trying to tell me. Is Celestina going to be hurt the night of the performance? Is she going to do something to get back at the father who’s abused her for all these years?”

“Would you blame her if she did?”

Ronan asked.

“Not at all.”

Ten shook his head. “Would you?”

“No,”

Ronan said unequivocally. “I got to sit with Nava, Celestine’s mother, for a few

minutes,”

Ronan began, before forking up a piece of ziti. “She confirmed what Celestina said about Vincent abusing both of them. I wished you’d seen her back in the day. Nava was so beautiful, with the way her dark hair was stacked on her head in curls. I’ll never forget the joyful smile on her face when she handed me the baby tiger. Who knew twenty years later we’d cross paths again. She’s only in her mid-fifties, but I swear she looked a decade older.”

“I was thinking more like two decades,”

Ten said. When he’d introduced himself to the frail woman, the only thing he got from her was pain. Physical. Emotional. Mental. Ten didn’t pry any further than that. The woman had obviously been through enough.

“Was there anything else you picked up from the circus crew this morning?”

Ronan asked.

“Nothing to do with Jack’s murder. People were excited to be together again doing what they love. There was a lot of animosity over the circus being shut down back in 2017. Not that they didn’t agree with the idea of sending the animals to a sanctuary to live out their days, but the fact that the circus hadn’t evolved with the times. Look at Cirque du Soleil. There are no animal acts and their shows are sold out every night. The crew thinks they could have done something similar, minus the insane midair acrobatics.”

“Yeah, like the way Blockbuster was swallowed up by streaming services. They could have made a fortune if they’d switched from DVD to digital media,”

Ronan added.

“Exactly,”

Ten agreed. His procrastination plan was working better than he’d hoped for. Ronan was always keen to talk about his current case and Ten was using that to his advantage. “What information did you get from reading the interview transcripts from 1995?”

Ronan had been unusually quiet on the matter.

“Some of the interviews were horrible, Ten.”

Ronan shook his head, as if to knock the transcripts from his memory. “The cops who interviewed the members of the circus were unnecessarily cruel. They were threatened with jail time if they didn’t confess. Worse, the mothers in the group were threatened that they’d lose custody of their kids. Some of the officers said they’d lock up the performers indefinitely, so they’d miss their next scheduled tour stops. I know I wasn’t with the department back then, but I can’t help but feel sick to my stomach over the way these people were treated.”

Ten could feel Ronan’s ick. He understood exactly what his husband was saying, which also explained why he’d been so quiet about the details of the case. “Was there anything in there that will help find the killer?”

“One of the questions everyone was asked was who they thought killed Jack. It’s a typical interrogation technique,”

Ronan said. “I’ve asked this very question in my career more times than I can count. You ask who they think is the killer and how they think it was done. This usually leads the suspect to a confession they don’t realize their making. The detectives now have more information to go on and can find more evidence. The problem with that question being asked in this case is that all of the circus crew knew they had to give

someone up to save themselves. Most of them picked Ying Yang, you know, because of his eternally sunny disposition.”

Ten offered a weak smile. He’d never been particularly bothered by clowns, but after meeting Vincent, Ten understood exactly what Ronan had feared. The clown was larger than life, a Goliath to Ronan’s David. Even though the two men were roughly the same height now, Ronan had seemed somehow dwarfed by Vincent. “On the surface he sure seems like the perfect suspect. Both mother and daughter claim he was physically abusive toward them, but without proof, it’s hard to make that claim publicly.”

“Especially with Nava and Celestina being almost complicit in the abuse. It kills me to say this, but Nava covered up not only her own abuse, but her daughter’s as well. Celestina returned the favor. I’m guessing there are no pictures of bruises and no calls to the police. We’re going to run criminal records checks on everyone tomorrow, but I’ll bet you that no domestic abuse allegations will come up under Vincent’s name.”

“I agree. Both women were so cowed by him.”

Ten sighed. He’d never understand how a man could be that cruel to his family. “On the other hand, it wouldn’t surprise me one bit if he did have a record for assault, resisting arrest, those kinds of violent offenses.”

“I completely agree.”

Ronan nodded along with his husband’s supposition. “None of members of the circus mentioned him being openly violent with his family. A couple mentioned bar brawls and troubles with local yokels, but nothing that would truly land anyone in hot water with Vincent.”

“Okay, so what do we do next?”



Ten asked, feeling as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

“Like I said, we’re going to run a criminal records check in the morning. Fitz wants to interview both Celestina and Nava for a start. If there are any violent criminals in the group, we’ll want to speak to them as well.”

Ronan stood up from the table and dumped the now empty pasta plate into the trash. “As for you, it’s off to bed.”

Ten bowed his head. He knew this was coming. He felt like a child again and found himself wanting to ask Ronan for just five more minutes.

“I know you’re afraid of this dream getting more intense now that more pieces have maybe fallen into place, but tonight is perfect for that. The kids aren’t home, so you can feel the dream completely without worrying about scaring Everly and Ezra.”

“I know.”

Ten got to his feet and followed Ronan upstairs where they both brushed their teeth and got ready for bed.

“Did you ever think we’d become the kind of people who chose sleep over sex?”

Ten asked, as Ronan turned off the lights.

“I knew it had to happen eventually.”

Ronan laughed and pressed a kiss to Tennyson’s temple. “We’ll be all systems go again once we get to the bottom of this nightmare. As much as I hate to say this, Ten, I hope you have unpleasant dreams.”

Ten shivered. He knew exactly what Ronan meant, but the statement was ominous none the less.

Rolling onto his right side, Ten tried to prepare himself for sleep. Usually, he'd drift off with his head on Ronan's shoulder, but tonight, he was on his own. At least that's the way it felt. By the time Ten was settled and comfortable, Ronan had already fallen asleep.

Ronan had always been able to drop off to sleep within five minutes of going to bed. It was the one thing Ten was jealous of. While he was awake, his mind spinning with his clients for the next day, their kids, bills, an upcoming dental appointment, and this nightmare, Ronan was dead asleep, probably dreaming about the naked car wash. Again.

Ten matched his breathing cadence with Ronan's. He tried to clear his mind and let his body take over. After a few seconds, Ten's mind wandered to the creaky cellar door. Maybe if he got up now, he could find a can of WD-40 to fix it. If he couldn't, he supposed he could always use Pam cooking spray. Lube was lube, right? Then there was the ugly backsplash in the kitchen. Ten had hated it since they moved into the house nearly seven years ago. He could grab his phone and check out tile samples on one of the big box store websites.

Realizing his only job at the moment was to dream, Ten let go of home improvements and felt himself starting to slide toward sleep. Just as he was about to drop off, Ten told his unconscious mind to pay attention when he dreamed. A single detail could be the difference between life and death.

Ten found himself back at the Boston Garden. The building was dark, but for the spotlight in the center of the floor. He assumed it was for the ring master. Moving quickly, Ten walked into the beam of light, which blinded him. From a distance he could hear arguing. Shouting. The sound of a gun being cocked. Fired. Someone was

screaming.

Moving away from the light, Ten hurried toward the screams. Two voices were shouting. One simply screaming in pain, the other begging someone to call 911. It took forever for Ten to find the source of the screaming. When he did, Ten saw someone lying flat on their back in a pool of blood.

Every time Ten moved closer to the scene, it got further away. He couldn't tell who the hurt person was. Celestina hovered over the body, screaming. The hem of her pink gown was quickly absorbing the blood spreading from the victim.

As he tried to wrap his head around what he was seeing, Ten realized the second person he heard screaming was his daughter. Panicked, he looked around for Everly. She was nowhere to be found. "EVERLY!"

"Ten, wake up! Wake up!"

Ronan begged.

Ten's eyes blinked open and quickly shut again. The bedroom light was on and Ronan hovered above him wearing a scared look. "Ronan."

"Jesus, are you okay?"

He sat back against his pillows with a hand on his heart. "You scared the life out of me.

"I'm okay, but someone in my dream was not."

Ten tried with all his might to see who was lying in a pool of their own blood.

“Who was hurt?”

Ronan’s eyes were frantic. “Was it Everly? You were screaming her name.”

He looked as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“I don’t know.”

Ten sat up and reached for the bottle of water on his nightstand. With shaking hands, he twisted the top off and took a sip.

“Is there anything else you can remember?”

Ten shook his head. When he tried to reach for fragments of the dream, they got foggy and out of focus. “There’s one detail I can remember,”

Ten said, still panting. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t slow his breathing or his pounding heart.

“Tell me.”

“There was a gunshot. Someone was laying on the floor and there was blood. The bottom of Celestina’s pink gown is soaked in blood.”

The more Ten pushed his memory and his gift to recall the entire dream, the more his head ached.

“Who’s blood was it?”

Ronan asked, breathlessly.

“I think it’s yours.”

Ten could see the blood in his mind clear as day. Spreading. Red. Viscous.

Ronan got out of bed and started pacing around the room. “Why do you think it’s mine? Could it have been someone else?”

“I don’t know.”

Ten felt like a complete failure for not being able to see more of the dream. “Everly was screaming. That’s the last thing I remember, that pain-filled sound, and not being able to find her.”

There was just so much he didn’t know or couldn’t remember.

Why was Everly screaming? Whose bloody body lay on the floor? Was this dream a premonition of things to come? If so, could he stop these events from happening?

Ten had no answers, but there was one thing he did know. He wasn’t going to let his family go down without a fight.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

After the nightmare and Ten's revelation, which brought more questions than answers, Ronan hadn't been able to fall back to sleep for a long time. He was able to catch a few broken hours, but he definitely wasn't at his best.

He knew the day was going to be spent going over Jumping Jack's case file and running criminal background reports on the members of the circus. Thankfully the Boston Police had made a list of all the employees, down to the roadies, whose job it was to break down the apparatus, like the trapeze.

As Ronan was making a pot of dark French roast coffee, Jude and Fitz walked into the office. Both men looked tired as well. "Hey, guys. Everything okay?"

Jude rolled his eyes and sunk into his seat. "The kids didn't want to go to bed last night."

"You only had Lizbet and Ezra. They're usually both in bed by eight."

Ezra wasn't a fan of the early bedtime, but he and Ten were sticklers about it.

"They teamed up."

Jude said, rubbing his eyes.

"What do you mean they teamed up, like in wrestling?"

Fitz asked.

“Sort of. They were talking and laughing until about nine. Cope and I figured they’d eventually fall asleep, but we were wrong. We moved Ezra in Wolf’s room, but then they kept running back and forth between the rooms. It was like someone slipped them sugar.”

Jude shot Ronan a suspicious look.

“Not guilty,”

Ronan said, holding up his hands. Ten brought Ezra over right after we got back from Boston. We didn’t feed him anything.”

“Maybe it was the carbs from all that pasta?”

Fitz asked. “I know Jace and I were extra frisky last night.”

Fitzgibbon bounced his eyebrows suggestively. “What happened with Ten? Did he have the nightmare again?”

“I’ll never unsee that.”

Ronan grimaced, picturing a naked and frisky Fitz. While one set of friends chased unruly toddlers, the others fucked like bunnies. His tale of the night before was a bit different. “So, Ten thinks I’m going to die in a bloody heap on the floor of the Boston Garden. I really love the Celtics, but this is going too far.”

Humor was the only thing standing between Ronan and a nervous breakdown. That and coffee. He poured himself a cup and tried to compose his thoughts.

Jude and Fitz gasped. “Way to bury the lead, asshole,”

Fitz said, taking a seat and grabbing a pen and notepad from the center of the table.

“Start from the beginning and tell us everything,”

Jude said more gently, taking a seat across from Ronan.

Ronan took a deep breath. “Ten said he heard people screaming in the dream. He tried to find the source of the noise, but he said it felt like he was running through quicksand.”

“I hate those kinds of dreams,”

Jude grumped. “The faster you try to run, the further what you’re chasing gets.”

“Right,”

Ronan agreed. “Only in Ten’s case the closer he got the more fuzzy the picture became. He saw someone lying in a pool of blood with Celestina hunched over them. Blood was soaking into the hem of her dress. Ten couldn’t tell who the victim was.”

“You said that Ten thinks you are going to die. How does he figure that, if he couldn’t see the person lying on the floor.”

Fitz paused, his pen hovering over the notepad.

“He heard Everly screaming, but couldn’t find her.”

Those words had chilled Ronan to the bone. “Ten said the way she screamed made him think it was me. I can deal with being wounded and on the verge of death, there are ways we can hopefully stop that from happening, but what if the main focus of this dream is Everly being missing?”



“Shit,”

Jude thumped a hand down on the table. “He’s sure this dream took place at the circus?”

Ronan nodded.

Jude sat up straighter and reached for his briefcase, which sat on the floor beside his chair. He opened it and pulled out a folder full of papers and a legal pad. “Okay, so then we need to get to work on the Jumping Jack case. If we can figure out who murdered him, we can stop the killer from striking again, therefore keeping Ronan and Everly safe.”

“Maybe,”

Ronan tentatively agreed. “Ten’s always telling me how the future is fluid. One change of plans here or there and the outcome changes completely.”

“I’ve heard him say that repeatedly as well,”

Fitz began, “but the dream has stayed the same. Pink dress. Someone screaming. Ten calling for Everly. These things make me think whatever is going to happen is more concrete than not. What do you think?”

Fitz turned to Jude.

“That scenario makes sense to me, but I don’t want to waste another second thinking about what Ten’s nightmare may or may not mean. Let’s get to it.”

Jude opened the folder and pulled out a set of pictures. He passed them to Ronan and Fitz. “I have to tell you that the pictures of the crime scene are pretty sparse. There’s

a couple shots of the body inside the tiger cage and then only a few more once Jack was removed. I'm assuming the cops thought he'd been mauled and that was that."

Fitz frowned as he looked over the pictures. "We're trained to look at every unattended death as if it were a homicide."

"I hate to say this, Fitz, but I don't think the officers put a lot of effort into this until they found out Jack was murdered, and even then, it felt half-hearted to me."

"I agree,"

Ronan chimed in. "When the cops started interviewing witnesses, all they were doing was throwing stuff at the wall and hoping it would stick to someone. The interrogators were threatening the circus crew with indefinite imprisonment and with having their kids taken from them. In my opinion, the goal was to make someone confess, quick and dirty."

It killed Ronan to say this about fellow officers. Yes, they were brothers and sisters in blue, but that didn't mean they all came at their job with the same dedication and need for the truth as Ronan did. "What did the autopsy say?"

"Jack was shot once. There were no other signs of violence on the body."

Fitz pulled out the photographs and handed them to Ronan. "It was the medical examiner's opinion that Jack had been shot from a distance of about twenty feet. There were no defensive wounds on his hands or arms."

"Were there any sign of drugs in his system? GHB or sedatives?"

Jude asked.

Fitz shook his head. “Those tests weren’t run. They checked his blood alcohol level and it was well beneath the legal limit. I’m guessing he had a shot before the show started. Maybe a toast of some sort for luck on opening night.”

“Fuck,”

Ronan muttered under his breath. “So what are we saying here, that the killer shot Jack, and then moved him into the tiger cage?”

“Yeah,”

Jude said. “The only blood outside of the cage is what flowed under the bars.”

He flipped through the pictures and pointed to the one showing trails of blood. “The killer must have cleaned up the blood from where the shooting actually took place.”

“There aren’t a lot of circumstances that would force me into a cage with a seven hundred pound tiger. I’d do it for Ten and the kids, but that’s it.”

Ronan shuddered at the thought of being in an enclosed space with an apex predator.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’d let Fitz or I become Meow Mix?”

Jude asked with a grin. “Jack was shot. The killer figured the tiger would attack the body and tear it apart, making it impossible to tell the man had been murdered.”

“That makes sense,”

Fitz agreed. “But why didn’t Sheba attack Jack?”

“According to what Celestina told me back in 1995, Sheba was raised around people.

The cat knew people weren't a food source. It's possible that even with a fresh kill only feet away, Sheba knew not to eat him."

Ronan realized he had inside information the cops at the time wouldn't have known.

"If that's true, then it opens up a whole new suspect pool,"

Fitz said, as he jotted notes on his pad.

"I don't understand what you're getting at,"

Jude said, looking confused.

"There were only a certain number of people who had the keys to the tiger's cage. Nava, Celestina, Hank, the tiger keeper, and the owner of the circus, who, according to the police notes was out of town. That gives us three people who knew Sheba intimately."

Ronan turned to Fitz. "All three knew the tiger wouldn't eat a person. That would leave us with the rest of the crew as suspects because the killer assumed the tiger would eat or mangle Jack's body."

Fitz nodded in agreement. "I imagine it would have been pretty easy to steal a key during the performance. Everyone is in high gear getting ready for their act. You've got people running around, changing costumes, and only paying attention to themselves."

"I get what you're saying,"

Jude started, "but a murder isn't a quiet thing. Is it possible for the killer to have shot Jack and dragged him into the tiger cage him without anyone hearing?"

Ronan grinned. He knew the solution to that problem. “During the curtain call at the end of the show, everyone comes out to take a bow, even the roadies. I remember the ring master asking the crowd to give them a round of applause.”

“The killer knew that would be the time to strike because no one would be backstage. In a crowd of workers that big, it would be easy not to notice someone was missing,”

Fitz added.

“Kent told us he remembered Jack not being onstage for the curtain call. What we need to find out is if he noticed if any of the other cast or crew were missing too.”

Jude shook his head. “After twenty plus years, I’m not so sure anyone’s going to remember such an insignificant detail.”

“Not so fast.”

Fitzgibbon flipped the page of his legal pad. “Kent knew Jack was missing because they were lovers. Other members of the crew were in relationships with each other as well. Maybe they noticed someone was missing, the same way Kent did.”

“We need to talk to Nava and Celestina. Find out if Vincent was present at the curtain call.”

Ronan bounced out of his seat and reached for his jacket. “What are you all waiting for? Rehearsal starts at one. Let’s go.”

If Ronan was going to be the killer’s next victim, they didn’t have a moment to lose in catching him. His life was in Jude and Fitzgibbon’s hands.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Thanks to Kaye and Barb taking the kids for the afternoon, Ten and River sat at a table in Lobster Charlie's feasting on chowder and hot buttered lobster rolls. River looked like he'd died and gone to heaven.

"Okay, little brother, spill it,"

River said between bites. "I know you had that dream again last night."

"How did you know?"

Ten asked, wondering if River had a touch of his gift.

"You have this haunted look in your eyes and you've been a bit jumpy today. With Everly especially."

River took a sip from his soda and seemed to be studying Tennyson.

"I hate this."

Ten sighed. "Every time I see you, something is going spectacularly wrong. All I wanted was a peaceful and fun week to spend with you, Barb, and the kids."

"You don't have to worry about the kids. They're thick as thieves together. It wouldn't matter where we took them, they'd have a great time. Same goes for Barb and Kaye, who've become best friends. They're comparing recipes and are going to treat us all to homemade dinner tonight. Who saw that coming?"

River laughed. "I suppose you did."

"Actually, I didn't."

Ten remembered back to their first trip to Florida when River had been arrested for murder. "I was so caught up in trying to help you and being volcanically mad at our father for keeping you a secret, that I didn't look too far into the future. Mom and I were both hurting and all I wanted was for her to smile again. Thank goodness for Everly being able to reach Dad and getting him to talk to us. Mom has come so far since our father died. I wasn't totally sure how she'd react to finding out I had an older brother, but I did know that she wouldn't take David's duplicity out on you."

"Kaye's been like a second mother to me for these last few months. I love how she volunteered to stay with us for a few weeks after the Christmas break when my paternity leave was over. She was invaluable to Deb, Brooke, and Delta. To be honest, I didn't want to send her back to you."

Ten laughed. "I got that same impression from Mom as well. She loves the sunshine and warm days in Florida. It might not take much to get her to agree to spend a few months a year down there with your family."

"I could never take her away from you. Your kids depend on her so much."

"Ezra and Lizbet will be in school full time in a few years, which would free Kaye up to fly south for the winter. If she decides she wants to go before then, we'll just have to enroll them in preschool."

Ten loved the idea of Kaye getting to be a snowbird. If he could get away with it, Ten would do it too. He was sick of New England winters that lasted from November until May.

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

River pushed aside his plate and leveled Ten with a serious look. “You never answered my question about your dream. I’ll give you points for the way you were able to artfully turn the conversation away from you, though.”

The one thing he’d learned about River over the last year of their relationship was that he couldn’t get anything past his older brother. “I had the dream again last night, but I didn’t want to worry you with what I saw. You’re on vacation and deserve to relax.”

River raised an eyebrow. “I’m your brother. Do you actually think I can relax when something this big is upsetting you? And before you ask how I know it’s big, I know you. It’s written all over your body language. All that’s left now is for you to tell me what you saw, then we can make a plan of action.”

“It’s dangerous, River. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

Dangerous was an understatement.

“You let Everly work on some of these cases. Why not me? I mean, yeah, my niece is cute, but I can drive.”

Ten snorted and started to laugh. “You got me there.”

He took a deep breath. “Okay, here goes. In the dream I heard shouting and then a gunshot. Two people were screaming. I tried to run toward the sound of the voices, but they kept moving further away. When I was finally able to break free from whatever was holding me back. I saw a body lying on the ground in a pool of blood. Celestina was hovering over it. She was one of the people screaming. I couldn’t get a good look at the body. When I tried to move closer, the picture got blurry. I realized



Everly was nowhere to be found. She was the other person screaming in the dream. That was when Ronan shook me awake. He said I was shouting our daughter's name.

“Wow,”

River said, shaking his head. “I don't even know where to start with that.”

“There's one more thing.”

Ten tried to picture the body in mind. All he needed was one small clue. Ronan's platinum wedding band, the ridiculous strawberry charm Everly put on his left sneaker. Something, anything to help Ten identify that it was Ronan.

“Okay, now you're scaring me.”

River reached out and took Ten's left hand.

Ten was scaring himself as well. “I think the body is Ronan.”

“What?!”

River's mouth hung open, making him look like a fish out of water. “You just said the person lying on the ground was too blurry to see clearly. What makes you think it's Ronan?”

“Intuition and the fact that Everly was screaming. All I could think was that's the way she'd respond if something happened to her father. It was this cry of pain like I've never heard in my life. It must have been for Ronan.”

River frowned and nibbled his bottom lip. He looked as if he were building up to something. “What if Everly's screaming because she's been kidnapped or hurt?”

Ten's eyes widened. With his sights set firmly on Ronan, he hadn't bothered to run that scenario. He had to admit that River could be right.

"Have you spoken with her? If anyone can help with your vision it would be Everly. She's crazy gifted."

Ten smiled. He loved his brother's faith in Everly. "There's one last piece of the puzzle. Everly's gift isn't working."

"I had no idea psychic powers could come and go."

River wore a concerned look.

"I accidentally locked my gift away before Everly was born. Thankfully a friend was able to teach me how to get it back. Now, I can turn it on and off at will. I taught Everly how to do it too."

"Do you think that's what she's done here? Everly somehow managed to lock her gift away?"

"I thought so until just now."

Ten took a deep breath. He could feel the pieces fitting together in his mind. "Everly couldn't read me or tell me anything about my dream. That's why she thought her gift was broken. But, when we were at the circus rehearsal yesterday, she knew who Celestina was without being told her name. There were a few other things she said in the last twenty-four hours that told me her gift was working just fine."

"It's just not working in relation to your dream."

Ten nodded. "I think so."

“What would cause that kind of thing?”

River looked exhilarated, as if he were enjoying helping Ten solve the mystery.

“Well, I can tell you that my gift doesn’t work so well on myself. When I tried to see my own future, things go foggy. Sometimes I can see a detail here or there, but nothing of consequence. Maybe Everly’s going through the same thing, but with me instead of herself.”

River shook his head. Fear flared in his eyes. “When you were telling me about the dream, you described the body lying on the ground as being foggy. The closer you tried to get to it, the less you could see. What if the body isn’t Ronan?”

“It’s me.”

Ten felt his heart pound in his chest. He tried to take a few deep breaths to slow the beat down, but it wasn’t working. “I need to call Ronan.”

“Phone’s ringing now.”

River held up one finger and started whispering into the phone. A few seconds later, he set the phone down on the table. “We’re meeting at Jude’s house in fifteen minutes. The kids are all at your house. I didn’t tell Ronan what we’ve been talking about, just that there might be a development in the situation with your nightmare.”

A development was putting it lightly. This was major breaking news. Ten thought back to the way Everly was screaming in his dream. He’d originally thought his daughter was screaming for Ronan, what if she was screaming for him?

The realization hit Ten like a tidal wave. How many times had Ten nearly lost Ronan? He’d been shot half a dozen times alone. He was always trying to figure out

what he'd do if the worst happened to Ronan. What if the worst was going to happen to him?

Could Ronan stop it from happening? If so, would that mean Ronan would be the victim instead? Or Everly? Ezra?

Ten felt like his entire world was crashing down on him. His brain spun over how he could possibly save his own life.

What if it was already too late?

What if he was a dead man walking?

What would Ronan do without him?

How could their family survive his loss?

Ten had more questions than answers, but one thing was for certain, with the help of friends and family, he knew they'd find a way through what was to come. Together.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Ronan's hands shook as he paced through Jude's living room. River hadn't given him any details about what they'd uncovered in Ten's dreams, which scared him more than anything. While they waited for Ten and River to arrive, Jude was busy making phone calls. He'd spoken with Cole, Carson, and Madam Aurora. They were all coming by. Cope would bring Everly. Ronan had been against the idea at first, but Fitzgibbon pointed out that her gift was stronger than anyone's.

His friends were right. The things Everly could do at her age staggered other psychics. Aurora especially. She'd had her gifts from a young age just like Everly, but she hadn't come into the real power of them until she was much older. As much as Ronan hated to admit it, they needed Everly here.

From the corner of his eye, Ronan saw movement near the stairs. Everyone had met on the street and were on their way into the house.

"Daddy!"

Everly ran to Ronan and wrapped her arms around him. The others filed into the house behind her. "I missed you today when you were working."

Guilt swamped Ronan. He'd promised to take the entire school vacation week off to spend with her and here he was breaking his word. "I missed you too, honey, but we need your help."

"I know."

Everly nodded solemnly. "But I'm not sure how much help I can be. Remember I told

you I was having trouble with my gift?”

“I remember, but you’re the smartest little girl I know, even without your gift working at full power, I’m sure you’re going to be able to help us figure out what’s going on. Okay?”

“Okay,”

Everly agreed. She looked as if she had more to say, but Ten and River walked into the house and Everly ran to them, hugging her father, then her uncle.

“Why don’t we all have a seat,”

Ten said, offering Cope an apologetic look. “We called everyone together because I need help. I’ve been having this recurring nightmare. Last night I was able to see a bit more of what it’s trying to show me. I thought I had it all figured out, but River pointed out that a different solution was possible.”

Ten offered River a grateful look.

“What is this dream about?”

Cole asked.

“Cope knows a little, but before I say anything more, I want you all to try to see it for yourself. When you’re all done, we’ll talk it over.”

Ten shut his eyes. Ronan could see he was working on his breathing exercises.

The house was quiet for several minutes. The only sound Ronan could hear, aside from his own heart pounding in his ears, was the kitchen clock ticking. His gut roiled.

What the hell could River have figured out about the dream that he and Ten hadn't been able to see themselves?

"Who wants to go first?"

Ten asked, looking around the living room at his friends.

"You're scared out of your mind, for starters,"

Carson said. "For yourself, Ronan, and Everly, but I can't see why. The picture is just beyond my reach, like something on a high shelf."

Anyone who knew Ten would be able to see he was scared. Ten's body turned in on itself, like he was trying to make himself smaller. His usually sunny demeanor was gone and the corners of his mouth drooped down.

"I see a woman in a sparkly pink dress. She's screaming, but I can't make out what she's saying,"

Cole frowned.

"Aurora?"

Ten asked.

The older woman dabbed her eyes. "Oh, Ten. I'm so sorry."

Cole wrapped his arm around Aurora and started whispering to her.

"Ten, what the hell is going on?"

Ronan's heart pounded like a jackhammer. Terror like he'd never known in his life swamped through him. What he didn't know was where the danger was coming from.

Ten pointed to their daughter. "I'll explain everything in a moment. I want to hear what Everly has to say."

All eyes turned to Everly, who sat on the living room floor with her back to the darkened television. It was the spot she usually sat in when it was movie night at Jude and Cope's house. She sat with her legs crossed and her head bowed. When she lifted her head, she wore an angry look.

"Are you okay?"

Ten asked.

"No, Daddy, I'm not okay. Why couldn't I see any this before?"

Everly asked.

"Why don't you tell me what you see, then we can talk about it, okay?"

Ten sounded calm, but Ronan could tell he was anything but.

Everly frowned, but nodded in agreement. "I see someone lying on the floor. He was shot. There's blood. A lot of blood. Celestina is screaming and so am I."

"I'm so sorry, honey, but can you see who the person on the floor is? I originally thought it was Ronan, but now..."

Ten trailed off.



Ronan stopped walking mid-pace. His frantic eyes moved from Ten to Everly and back again. “But now, what ? Will one of you please tell me what’s happening?”

Fitzgibbon walked up to Ronan and wrapped an arm around him. Jude did the same.

“Daddy thought the body on the floor was you,”

Everly said pointing to Ronan, “but now he thinks its himself.”

Ronan felt his knees buckle. Thankfully, Fitz and Jude were holding him up. They maneuvered him to a nearby chair and set him down. “I don’t understand any of this. Aurora, are you seeing the same thing?”

Aurora nodded. “I am, but it’s all I can see. I don’t know who’s done this to Ten or if he lives or,”

Aurora paused looking at Everly.

“Or dies,”

Everly finished. “I might only be six years old Aurora, but I can handle what’s happening. If there’s anything I can do to save my Daddy. I’ll do it, but I need all the facts.”

Ronan snorted. He couldn’t help himself. His daughter just proclaimed that Ten was going to die on one breath, and on the next, she was digging deep, readying herself to change the events she’d seen. “Why did you think the body was mine?”

Ronan asked.

“It’s always you,”

Ten said. “You’ve taken six bullets. Broken two bones. Been kidnapped. Blown up. Held at knifepoint. You were on a notorious mobster’s hit list. Do you want me to go on, because I can.”

Ten shook his head. “I assumed it was you because I couldn’t see who it was. Every time I pushed closer, the vision got foggier. I’d mentioned to River that very thing happens when I try to read myself. He put two and two together and thought I was the victim.”

Jude left Ronan’s side and walked to the front door. He grabbed his briefcase, opened it, and pulled out a legal pad and a pen. “Okay, we’ve got another murder to solve.”

He took the chair beside Ronan, but turned his attention to Tennyson. “You’re sure this incident is going to happen at the circus?”

Ten nodded. “This is going to sound crazy, but I could smell popcorn. When we were in the building yesterday, I couldn’t smell anything on the show floor. That’s why I think this will happen during the performance.”

“Why don’t we stay home?”

River asked. “If Ten isn’t there, he can’t die.”

When no one answered, River looked around the room. “Right?”

“Not necessarily,”

Cole said. “The victim might switch to someone else. Or something worse could possibly happen.”

“What the hell could be worse than losing my brother?”

River asked, sounding appalled.

Cole angled his head toward Everly.

“Wait, no. That’s not possible.”

All the blood drained from River’s face.

“All of you keep saying that the future is fluid,”

Ronan began. “Just by knowing what’s going to happen, doesn’t that mean we’ve changed things?”

“There’s no way to know that for certain,”

Carson said. “It’s not a one for one deal. Removing Ten from the situation isn’t a guarantee that this goes away. It could be much worse than we already know it is.”

“Exactly,”

Cole said, picking up his brother’s lead. “Right now, we know how. We know where. We know when. All we’re missing is who and why.”

“So, you’re saying that if everything stays the same, then what, you have a leg up on catching Ten’s killer? You’ll use him as bait and hope that you’re in time to stop the bullet?”

River’s eyes were so wide, Ronan was afraid they were going to fall out of his skull.

“Something like that,”

Carson agreed.

“Our leg up , as you put it,”

Fitz began, “is time. The three of us spent the morning going over the original cold case murder from 1995. It was our plan to go back into Boston tomorrow and speak with all the members of the current circus who were there back then. If we can figure out who killed Jumping Jack, we may be able to stop what comes next.”

“What if catching the killer is what triggers the chain of events Aurora and Everly are seeing? What if the killer gets the kids instead? What if it becomes a mass casualty event?”

River was on the verge of hysteria.

Ten picked up his brother’s hand. “It’s okay, River. We’re going to figure this out, but we need all hands on deck. You were the one who figured out it was me. I hadn’t been able to see that. I need you working at full-strength here. You might not have my gifts, but you have an amazing sense of intuition. I need all the help I can get. There’s no use sitting around and crying over something that hasn’t happened yet and that we might be able to stop.”

River nodded. He rested his head against Ten’s shoulder. Both men were silent for a few seconds. “I just found you, little brother. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You’re not going to lose him,”

Ronan declared. “None of us are.”

“It’s all hands on deck,”

Jude agreed. “We’re going to talk to the circus crew tomorrow. Carson, Cole, Aurora, if one of you can come with us, we’d greatly appreciate it. Cope, Ten, and Everly, have already been there, we’d like more gifts in the room, if that’s possible.”

“I’m in,”

Carson said.

“I’ll stay here and man the store.”

Cole turned to his brother, who nodded. “There are some appointments I’ll need to reschedule, but that won’t be a problem.”

“I’ll do what I can from here. All I need is a snippet of Tennyson’s hair.”

Aurora offered a wicked smile.

Everly’s eyes widened. “Can I work with you, Madam Aurora?”

“If your parents say it’s okay, I’d love to teach you about some of my other gifts.”

Aurora winked at Ronan.

“She’s all yours,”

Ronan said, without bothering to consult Tennyson. They needed all the help they could get. It had been Aurora who’d been able to break the curse that made Cisco Jackson’s husband a vampire, thanks to a spell she’d whipped up. If she could do that, she might well be able to save Tennyson from winding up dead in a puddle of his own blood.

“We’ve got one hell of a team here,”

Ronan said. “I trust all of you with my life, more to the point, I trust all of you with Ten’s.”

“No pressure,”

River muttered, breaking the room up into some much needed laughter.

Ronan meant every word he said. If anyone could save Ten, it was the people in the room. All they needed to do was stay on task, figure out who killed Jumping Jack, and keep the killer from striking again.

Piece of cake, right?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

Oddly enough, while facing his own death, Ten had gotten the best night sleep he'd had in weeks. After the meeting at Jude's house wrapped up, with everyone getting their assignments, they'd all headed back to his house where Deb and Kaye had cooked an incredible dinner. It was the best chicken and dumplings Ten ever had in his entire life. He wasn't sure if the meal was that good or because it could very well be the last chicken and dumplings he ever ate. Either way, the meal had been fantastic. The kids spent the rest of the night watching movies in the living room, while the adults played Cards Against Humanity. It turned out Kaye had the dirtiest mind of the bunch.

The nightmare hadn't returned, which allowed Ten to get seven hours of uninterrupted sleep. Ditto for Everly and Ezra. He supposed now that he understood what the nightmare was warning him of, its work was done. Ten found himself almost wishing it had come back, wanting to see if there was anything else it revealed, like more details or the events leading up to him getting shot.

Ten found himself sitting in the third row of Fitzgibbon's SUV as they drove into Boston the next morning. Ronan rode shotgun, with Jude and Carson in the second row. Each of the detectives had taken turns revealing what they knew about the murder of Jumping Jack. Which wasn't very much.

When they arrived at the Boston Garden, everyone got out of the SUV. Ten bounced around, stretching his legs. The third row was made for kids, not grown men.

"It's been a long time since I've done anything like this,"

Carson said, as everyone headed to the door.

“What, gone to a circus rehearsal?”

Ten asked.

“No, helped to solve a cold case.”

Carson smiled at Ten. “I remember the days when we’d all sit around Mom’s reading table with some of Cassie’s muffins and talk over cases you and Ronan were working on with the Boston Police.”

“I miss those days sometimes. Everything was simpler back then. Ronan and I weren’t married. We weren’t even dating. I could just go home at night and listen to the silence.”

“True, but you didn’t have Ezra and Everly bringing joy into your lives. I don’t think I could ever live without the controlled chaos the Velociraptors create.”

Ten chuckled at the nickname Ronan had given Carson’s triplets when they’d learned to walk. When it was time for a nap, each of the babies would scatter, making it nearly impossible for their parents, or Ronan to round them up. “I feel the same way, but the more you love, the more you have to lose. I’m about to lose everything here.”

Carson stopped in his tracks. “That’s why every single one of our friends has answered this call. We’re all here for you. To do whatever we can to make sure that nightmare doesn’t become a reality. You said last night that we needed everyone on board, well, that includes you. If you’ve already given up, we’ll lose for certain.”

“Come on, Tenny, buck up!”

Bertha Craig said, materializing beside her son. “We’ve been up against tougher odds before.”



Bertha was right. Ten's mind cast back to when Ronan had been shot three times on their front steps. The doctors had to put him in a medically induced coma in hopes that he'd recover. It had been a long road to recovery, but Ronan had been dogged in his determination to come back stronger than ever. Would that be Ten's fate? Or would he end up in the morgue instead of the ICU? "You're both right. Let's get inside and see what's going on."

"I'll be doing my own detective work. See you later. Toodles!"

Bertha vanished. Ten knew she'd do everything she could to keep him safe.

Fitzgibbon flashed his VIP badge to security and everyone was ushered inside. Ten knew the three detectives had their eyes on the prize. Their first and only suspect in Jumping Jack's murder was Ying Yang. He was an intimidating man under the best of circumstances, but Ten knew the clown's absolute worst was going to be on display when Ronan accused him of killing Jack twenty years ago.

"Imagine living your life thinking you got away with murder, only to have everything come crashing down around you twenty years later?"

Ronan asked, taking Ten's hand.

"That's why I could never be a criminal. I'd be looking over my shoulder constantly waiting for the police to nab me. The anxiety of waiting for that moment would kill me."

The anxiety of this situation was already overwhelming.

Ronan gave Ten's hand a squeeze. "Yeah, well, some people aren't wired like you. If you'd killed Jack, would you come back here to the place it happened?"

“No way,”

Ten said. “Boston is the last place I’d want to be.”

“It takes some pretty big balls to come here,”

Jude added with a grin. “But mine are bigger.”

Ronan rolled his eyes. “Now is not the time to have a ball measuring contest.”

The last thing Ten wanted was to get drawn into this debate, but needs must. “Let’s hope we can use those big balls to our advantage. Vincent already knows we’re looking into Jack’s murder. He’s going to be prepared for whatever questions the three of you plan to throw at him.”

“Agreed,”

Fitzgibbon grinned. “Vincent knows we’re coming, but not Carson.”

He slapped a hand on the psychic’s shoulder. “You’re our secret weapon.”

“Fitz sent me the case file last night. It wasn’t my favorite bedtime story in the world, but if me seeing those awful pictures and reading the witness statements helps to save Ten, then it’s all worth it.

Ronan pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to Carson. “You’re one of us today.”

“This is a real police badge.”

Carson turned it over in his hands.

“It sure is,”

Fitzgibbon agreed. “I hereby deputize you as a member of the Salem Police’s Cold Case Squad.”

“Wow,”

Carson beamed, as he attached it to the waistband of his jeans like Ronan had done with his own badge.

“Okay, Deputy Carnac the Magnificent, let’s do this.”

Ronan slung an arm around Carson’s shoulders.

Ten found his first laugh of the day. Carnac the Magnificent was a character the late, great Johnny Carson used to play on the Tonight Show . Ten had to admit, the name was fitting.

“Carson, follow our lead and keep the psychic thing under your hat,”

Jude said. “Like Fitz said, you’re our secret weapon. Jude reached into his messenger bag and pulled out a small notebook and a pen. “Write your impressions in here while we question Vincent. If you have any questions for him, feel free to ask them, but I’ll warn you now, he’s a strong man. You need to stand up to that.”

“I can sense him from here.”

Carson shivered. “It feels like he’s ten feet tall and bulletproof.”

“You’re not far wrong.”

Fitzgibbon paused at the locker room door. “Everyone ready?”

Ten wished he could run as far and as fast as he could from this place, but instead, he steeled his spine. “Ready.”

The smell of greasepaint assaulted Ten’s senses when they walked into the dressing room. Several clowns were in the process of applying their makeup. One of them was Kent. Ten and the others approached Jack’s lover.

“Captain Fitzgibbon, how is the investigation going?”

Kent asked, looking nervous.

“We were able to get access to the original case file, including the interrogations you and the other members of the circus were subject to. We’re here to conduct interviews today. Where’s Vincent?”

Kent let out what looked like a sigh of relief when Fitz named their target. Ten focused in on him and found there was something the clown was hiding. “Remind me again, what was the state of your relationship with Jack the night of his murder?”

Ronan shot Ten a questioning look, but stayed silent.

“Well, uhhh...”

Kent stammered for a few seconds, seeming to have trouble formulating an answer. “We were fighting.”

Ronan’s eyes darkened. “There was no mention of that in the interviews you gave to the Boston Police.”

“Those stupid cops were trying to frame me for Jack’s murder, saying we were having a lover’s quarrel and all that bullshit. All they were doing was trying to make a fast arrest so they could go back to being racist, homophobic, donut-eating assholes.”

Kent’s hands were fisted at his sides. Ten knew the man was itching for a reason to use them against Ronan and the others.

“Take a breath, Kent.”

Ten took the man’s arm and pulled him away from the detectives. “You realize all three of them are gay. None of them are racist. I will admit to Ronan and Jude loving donuts.”

He’d once seen the two of them put away a dozen glazed donuts in ten minutes.

Kent offered a half-hearted laugh.

“What happened between you and Jack that night?”

Ten asked gently. His gift was still telling him Kent was hiding something. He’d somehow locked the information away in a place Ten couldn’t access. He hoped Carson was having better luck reading the man.

“They’re just going to try to frame me. I’m not under arrest. I know my rights. I don’t have to talk to you.”

Kent relaxed his hands and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked like a petulant child.

Ten sighed, he didn’t have the time or the energy for this conversation, but have it, he

would. “If you didn’t kill Jack, they’ll be able to eliminate you as the killer, freeing them up to find the person who actually committed the crime. If you keep acting like a toddler who was told he couldn’t have a cookie, then all you’re doing is hurting yourself and wasting their time, which is short enough as it is. Some of the members of the circus are scheduled to fly out of Boston on red-eye flights just after midnight on Saturday morning, when the show ends, putting them out of our reach and out of Fitzgibbon’s jurisdiction. Refusing to cooperate only makes you look guilty.

Pulling out a chair, Kent took a seat. “We were arguing about living together. I wanted him to move in with me and Jack thought it would draw too much attention. I wanted to live my life out in the open and all he wanted to do was fly under the radar.”

“Been there. Done that,”

Ten agreed. “I grew up in Kansas, in the middle of the Bible Belt, and there was no way I was ever going to come out while I lived there.”

His decision might have been different if his parents were supportive, but they weren’t. In the end, he ended up on a Greyhound bus bound for Salem.

“Yeah, well...”

Tears fell from Kent’s eyes. He buried his head in his hands and began to cry.

It might not have been ethical, but while Kent’s defenses were down, Ten tried to read the man again. Thankfully, he wasn’t guarding his secret quite so closely now. “Was the argument between you and Jack physical?”

Kent lifted his eye and stared daggers at Tennyson. “Is that how you work? You get people to break down and then you exploit them?”

“How we work is irrelevant in the moment,”

Ronan said. “Answer the question, did you put your hands on Jack that night?”

“Yes!”

Kent shouted. “There! Are you happy now? Jack wasn’t listening to me and was trying to walk away. I grabbed him and pinned him against the wall. I was holding on so tight that I left marks on his upper arms. I’d never put my hands on anyone else in anger in my entire life. When I realized what I was doing, I dropped my hands and stepped away. In that moment, Jack hated me. I’d never been in love that way before and the thought of losing him broke something inside me. When Jack walked away from me, I was afraid I’d lost him for good.”

Tennyson’s heart broke for Kent. He’d been violent with Jack, but did he kill him as well? “Was that the last time you saw him?”

“Privately, yes. I was with him on stage during our performance. I managed to whisper that I was sorry and Jack said we’d talk after the show. He said that he was wrong about hiding in the shadows.”

Kent wiped his damp eyes on the cuff of his costume. “I was so anxious for the show to end so that I could really apologize and hold him again. That was how I noticed he hadn’t come out for the curtain call. You know what happened after that. Celestina found his body. All of my dreams ended that night. I knew I’d be quickly arrested and thrown in jail to rot for the rest of my life if I told anyone about our fight.”

“You’re probably right,”

Ronan agreed. He turned to Ten. “Is he telling the truth?”

“Yeah, the fight is what he’s been hiding from us.”

Ten’s eyes turned to Carson, who offered a barely perceptible nod. He’d been getting the same information as Ten.

“Where’s Vincent?”

Jude asked, cracking his knuckles.

“On stage. He’s choreographing for the first clown number. It wasn’t going well. When he told us to take five, I got away from him as quickly as I could. Vincent was lashing out at us. Shouting at people who were a step off and threatening to kick us out of the show. I can’t stop you from trying to talk to him, but I’d sure as hell watch your backs.”

“He’s the one whose going to need to watch his own.”

Ronan grinned, looking as if he was going to enjoy every moment of the conversation to come.

Ten and the others followed Ronan as he headed for the stage. He was thankful Kent had nothing to do with Jack’s murder. He understood completely why he’d kept the fight hidden from the police back in 1995, but keeping that secret from Ronan and the detectives only served to waste time.

Ten had seen the glint of determination in Ronan’s eyes. He knew that look. It meant his husband wasn’t going to take any shit from anyone. Vincent wasn’t going to know what hit him. Ten couldn’t wait for the fireworks to start.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

With his eyes on the prize, Ronan walked out onto the floor of the Boston Garden. He was standing across from where Vincent was working with the clowns. He'd guess the distance between them was thirty or forty feet, but Ronan could hear the man's voice perfectly well. Vincent sounded angrier than the Incredible Hulk. He wasn't going to like the interruption. Ronan wanted to rub his hands together like a cartoon villain, but there wasn't time for that now. Once Vincent was in cuffs and read his rights it would be time to celebrate. Now, he needed to keep a cool head.

Ronan, Fitz, and Jude stalked across the floor. He nodded at the trapeze artists, acrobats, and roadies working on the equipment. They weren't in his sights at the moment. Even though Ronan was fairly certain Vincent was the killer, he'd keep his opinion to himself and go after hard facts.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Goofball? Are you drunk or just fucking stupid?”

Vincent shouted, as Ronan approached.

“Vincent!”

Ronan said. The tone of his voice was all business.

Turning, Vincent eyed the people standing in front of him. “What the fuck do you want? Can't you see I'm busy? This act is going to flop if these morons can't get their shit together.”

Ronan shot Vincent a dubious look. The act was going to flop if Vincent kept acting like an asshole. “Take five everyone. Vincent, come with us.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Vincent spat at Ronan, as the other clowns watched with obvious glee.

“Members of the Boston Police Department.”

He brushed his coat to the side to reveal his badge. Fitz, Jude, and Carson followed suit.

“We can have this conversation here, or we cuff you in front of everyone, and drag your ass downtown.”

Carson sounded like he was auditioning for a guest spot on Law and Order . “Your choice.”

“Fine.”

Vincent turned back to the clowns. “Fuck off! All of you.”

He shooed them away with a wave of his hand. Some of the clowns scrambled toward the locker room. When they were gone, Vincent took a seat. If this were a Celtics game, he would have been sitting in the most expensive seats in the house.

Ronan took the seat to Vincent’s left. Jude took the one to the right, while Fitz and Carson remained standing. Ten took a seat two rows behind Vincent. Ronan didn’t blame him one bit.

“What do you want?”

Vincent eyed each of the detectives. “As if I can’t guess.”

“Tell us what happened the night Jumping Jack was murdered,”

Carson commanded.

Ronan bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Carson had taken to his role like a duck to water.

Vincent rolled his dark eyes dramatically. “It was opening night and the arena was packed. We all wanted to put on a good show. Me, especially.”

“Why did the performance mean so much to you?”

Ronan asked.

“Because some little shit’s mother complained to management about me. Something about how I threatened to rip off his arm and beat him with it.”

Vincent flashed a malevolent look.

Ronan burst out laughing. “I had no idea my mom reported you.”

“Yeah, well you almost cost me my job, asshole.”

Ronan was about to point out that Vincent almost cost himself his job, but Fitzgibbon shot him a warning look. Ronan was content to keep quiet. For now. He couldn’t wait to talk to Erin about what she’d done all those years ago.

“So you went into the performance on your best behavior,”

Fitz prompted Vincent.

“Yeah. It was a great show. Everyone laughed at the clowns and oohed and ahed over the trick ponies and the elephants. When the clowns came out for our second performance, Kent and Jack seemed to be fighting or making up or something . Either way, neither of them were doing their jobs. I told them to cut the shit and went on with the performance.”

“You were mad at them?”

Fitz asked.

“Fuck, yes! I was about to lose my job, my career, my family and all those two dickheads could do was make moon eyes at each other.”

“It would have sucked being kicked out of the circus,”

Carson said, sounding sympathetic.

“Well fucking duh.”

Vincent rolled his eyes.

“I mean because if you were out of the show then you could no longer beat and control your wife. Ditto for your daughter.”

Carson took a step forward, as if he were challenging Vincent to disagree with him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Vincent thundered, getting to his feet. He towered over Carson by at least a foot, but Carson stood even taller, refusing to wither under Vincent’s threat of violence.

Carson grinned up at the giant clown. “You beat your wife. Controlled her every move. What she wore. What she ate. When she slept. When you had sex. If you were kicked out of the circus, all of that control would have gone bye-bye.”

Carson wasn’t backing down and Ronan was loving every moment of Carson playing bad cop. “Before you ask how I know that, I’ll tell you. Everyone knew! You thought you were keeping this secret from your circus family,”

Carson made air quotes, “but you weren’t fooling anyone. The only thing worse than what you were doing to your wife and daughter was the fact that no one stood up to you to make it stop.”

“Am I under arrest?”

Vincent asked, sounding like he already knew the answer. He shouldered past Carson heading for a group of clowns who all wore stunned looks on their faces.

“That’s right, run away,”

Carson called after him. “You knew Kent and Jack were about to fuck you out of a job, so you did the only thing you could. You killed Jack, and intimidated Kent so that you could go on abusing your wife and daughter. You may have fooled the Boston Police back then, but you can’t fool me. I know exactly who you are.”

Ronan couldn’t decide if he wanted to hug the stuffing out of Carson or give him a standing ovation. He was absolutely killing this interrogation and hadn’t given away the fact that he was using his psychic gifts to read Vincent like a dime store penny dreadful.

“What the hell is going on out here?”

Celestina, dressed in a bright purple kimono, hurried to her father, putting herself between Vincent and Ronan. “I could hear shouting all the way from my dressing room.”

“We’re here to talk to your father about the night Jumping Jack was killed,”

Ronan said, as gently as he could. Watching Celestina defend her father body and soul broke Ronan’s heart. Vincent had done nothing but terrorize his family. All Celestina had known was violence at his hands and here she was, all of a hundred pounds soaking wet, putting herself between her towering, evil father and four members of the Boston Police Department.

“You people have harassed him enough. I don’t care what your relationship is to Mr. Lincoln, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Celestina fisted her hands on her hips.

Fitzgibbon held out his badge. “I’m sorry, but it doesn’t work that way. Why don’t you come talk to us away from the crowd.”

Fitz indicated the rows of seats they’d been sitting in before Vincent pulled a runner.

“Why should I talk to you? So that you can try to turn me against my father?”

Celestina sounded like a petulant child about to throw a tantrum.

When Everly got into the same mood, Ronan did whatever he could to avoid her melting down. Ronan had to admit he wanted to do that very thing now. This beautiful woman had been through enough in her life.

“Please, Celestina, come sit.”

Carson offered his arm, as if she were the Scarlet O'Hara to his Rhett Butler. Surprisingly, she acquiesced. "You know, my eight year old daughter would go nuts for this gown. She loves everything purple."

The hard look on Celestina's face softened. "Obviously your daughter has excellent taste. How many kids do you have?"

Carson led her to a seat in the front row. Ronan and the others took seats behind them. "Three. They're triplets."

"Triplets?"

Celestina's eyes widened.

"Yeah, we had two embryos transferred to our surrogate and ended up with three babies. Two girls and a boy."

Carson pulled out his phone to show her a picture of the kids building a dinosaur in the snow.

"They look like they're a lot of fun."

Celestina handed the phone back with a sad smile.

"They really are."

Carson nodded. He took a look behind him at Ronan, who simply nodded.

Ronan wasn't stupid. He knew Celestina had bonded with Carson. He didn't need the spotlight to be on him constantly. Carson was killing it and he intended to let him keep going with her.

“Look, I don’t mean to be insensitive here,”

Carson began, “but you and I both know the kind of man your father is. If we’re being objective, you have to admit that he’s a viable suspect in this murder.”

“How do you know what kind of man my father is?”

“Because I grew up with one like him. My father was constantly on the grift. He was always pulling one con or another. He cheated on my mother, left, right, and sideways. When she finally kicked him out of the house. He was gone for years and only came home when he needed something, usually money. The last time he came home he needed a kidney.”

“I was going to say I can’t believe that, but I can.”

Celestina took a deep breath. “My father was abusive and cruel, but for whatever reason, my mother stayed with him. Through the beatings, the infidelity, a son born to one of his lovers. I’d be lying if I told you my father wasn’t capable of killing Jack, but I can tell you for a fact that Vincent didn’t kill him.”

Carson’s eyes narrowed. “How can you be so sure?”

“I know my father didn’t kill Jack. That’s all I’m willing to say. Good day, gentlemen.”

Celestina rose from her seat and walked away with her head held high.

“What did the two of you get from her?”

Ronan pointed back and forth between Carson and Ten.



“Not much,”

Ten said. “She’s pretty angry. Whatever she’s hiding, it’s locked down like Fort Knox.”

“I’m getting the same thing,”

Carson agreed. “Celestina has a heart of gold and she’s willing to defend her father no matter what. She’s got a secret, one that’s so well protected, I can’t see anything about it. All I can tell you for certain is that this secret is a big one.”

“I get what you’re both saying,”

Ronan said, “but is there anyway at all to tell what the secret’s about? If it’s not about Jack’s murder then I don’t want to waste time and valuable resources to find out Celestina binge eats PB in Ten’s heart. Ronan sent out a warning to Tennyson, Cope and Carson, who took a giant step to his right.

Nava, seeing Carson move, pivoted and swung the gun toward him.

Carson froze and put his hands in the air.

Jesus, Carson using himself as bait wasn’t what Ronan had in mind when he’d called out a warning about Kent. Carson had already been shot once. He’d taken a bullet meant for Truman when a disgruntled former employee brought a gun to a company Christmas party. Thankfully, Carson had been okay, but it had been a close call.

“Put down the gun, Nava. You don’t want your daughter to see you shoot someone,”

Carson commanded.

“No, but I do!”

Vincent shoved Celestina to the floor. He charged at Nava like a raging bull, slamming into her and knocking her to the ground.

Ronan could see the two of them wrestling for the gun. “Ten! Grab Everly and get the hell out of here!”

That gun could go off at any second and he wanted his husband and daughter as far away from it as possible.

Ten did what Ronan asked. He scooped up Everly and ran for the tunnel leading to the locker rooms. Cope and Carson were right behind him.

Fitzgibbon pulled his own gun. “Vincent stop! Drop the gun.”

A single shot rang out. A pained cry followed. Ronan, Fitz, and Jude hit the floor.

Vincent started to laugh. “I finally got you! You’re dead bitch!”

Still laughing, Vincent shoved Nava aside and started to stand up.

Ronan got quickly to his feet with his gun still trained on Vincent, who thankfully was not holding the his own gun. “I don’t think so.”

He pointed to Vincent’s midsection, which was covered in blood.

“What the-”

Vincent fell to the floor.

Ronan stalked toward Vincent, while Fitz and Jude went for Nava. He saw Jude grab the gun and tuck it into the back of his waistband. He got down on his knees to assess Vincent's gunshot wound.

"Don't just stand there, fucking help me,"

Vincent demanded.

"Fuck you, Pennywise!"

Ronan angry whispered, just as the paramedics and several uniformed members of the Boston Police rushed toward Vincent.

Ronan holstered his own gun and got out of the way. He backed away from Vincent to where Fitz had Nava back on her feet. He passed her off to one of the paramedics. A third medic team was with a woozy looking Celestina. The side of her head was bloody. Ronan assumed she'd hit her head on the floor when Vincent shoved her.

Grabbing his phone. He hit the button to Facetime Tennyson. Relief flooded through him when Ten's face appeared on the screen. "Thank Christ. Are you hurt?"

"Not one scratch on me. Everly's fine too."

Ten panned the camera to show Everly sitting on a gurney talking to a paramedic.

Ronan had no doubt his little miss was reuniting the medic with her long lost grandmother. "We're okay too. Vincent got shot. I don't know how bad it is."

He turned to check out what was going on and saw the medics laying a white sheet being laid over the clown's body. "Correction. The shot was fatal. I'm gonna be here a while. Fitz, Jude, and I will have to give statements and help out the reconstruction

team as well.”

“I’m sorry to hear about Vincent. He was a monster, but he didn’t deserve to die. Do what you have to do, we’ll be waiting for you when you’re finished in there.”

Ten blew Ronan a kiss and disconnected the call.

“Jesus Christ, Ronan!”

a familiar voice called out. “You’ve had your badge back for three days and you managed to bring down the big top?”

“Don’t thank me now.”

Ronan grinned. “I expect to see a bump in pay in my check for a job well done. We closed a thirty year old murder and stopped another from taking place. I call this a job well done.”

“I saw Everly outside. She told me about Ten’s vision. Thank God you got her and Ten out of there when you did.”

Ronan felt his hands start to shake. With the surge of adrenaline wearing off, the enormity of what happened hit him square in the gut. “Off the record, I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

Faulk wrapped an arm around Ronan’s shoulder. “I hear that. At the end of the day, family is the only thing that matters.”

Family was everything . It would take him a long time to forget when Vincent grabbed his daughter, but it would fade in time.

His little girl was a badass. After what Everly did today, he probably owed her that pajama-wearing baby goat.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:54 am*

The next day...

Ten and Ronan stood at the back of their suite at circus watching the chaos. The kids filled in the seats at the front of the box. There were empty popcorn boxes and cotton candy wrappers everywhere. Ronan didn't know where they had the room for the goodies after all the cheeseburger sliders and nachos they'd eaten earlier.

"This is the life,"

Ronan said.

"What being at the circus?"

Ten looked at Ronan as if his husband had a screw loose. He'd had enough of the circus to last forever. The only reason Ten was here at all was because Everly wanted to share this experience with all her friends. There was no way he could deny Everly anything.

"No, I hate the fucking circus!"

Ronan said with a laugh. "Look how happy the kids are. Everly hasn't stopped laughing all day."

It had been a different story when they'd gotten home from Boston the day before. Everly hadn't been able to stop crying. Ten and Ronan had taken turns rocking her until she finally fell into an exhausted sleep. When she'd woken up, it was as if the trauma from the day before hadn't happened at all. He knew a point would come

when he and Everly were going to have sit down and unpack everything that happened. Today wasn't that day. Neither was tomorrow.

After the chaos of the shooting, Nava had been cleared of any wrong doing in Vincent's death and Jack's murder. Faulk decided each of the shootings were in self-defense. He'd known no jury in the world would convict a woman who'd spent the last forty years being beaten and abused.

Everly popped out of her seat and ran toward Ten, who scooped her up. "Baby Bertha's gonna blow chunks any second."

"Truman!"

Ten shouted, pointed to Bertha, who'd started to spew like Old Faithful. Ronan rushed toward the little girl.

"I guess there's nothing wrong with your gift after all, huh?"

Ten had been relieved when his daughter had been able to access her gifts again. He couldn't imagine his daughter without them.

"I told Bertha that four hot dogs was too many. She should have listened!"

Everly giggled and hugged Tennyson tight. "I was scared when I couldn't see your nightmare or read you."

"I know you were, honey, but I wouldn't have loved you one bit less if your gifts went away."

"I know you love me, Dad. When I worked with Madam Aurora the other day, we talked a lot about my gift. Do you want to know what she said about me not being able to see what happened in your vision?"

Ten wasn't quite so sure he wanted to know. "Yeah, sure!"

"She said something bad was supposed to happen to me, that's why I couldn't see what was coming. Aurora wouldn't tell me what that thing was, but I know it was bad. She thinks my gift was protecting me."

It was an interesting supposition. Ten would have to call Aurora to thank her for keeping that little bit of information to herself. "What do you think?"

"I think my gift needs to cut it out. I don't need to be protected. I need to be able to see everything. I'm not a baby. I can handle anything, as long as I have you and Daddy."

"We'll, it's a good thing for you that we're not going anywhere."

Ten pressed a kiss to the top of her head. He set her back on the floor and she ran off to sit with her friends, thankfully away from where Baby Bertha had erupted.

"Everything okay?"

Ronan asked.

"Yup!"

Ten agreed, wrapping an arm around Ronan's back. In this moment, everything was as right as rain.

Ten would let tomorrow take care of itself.

THE END