



# Dead Serious (Cold Case Psychic #28)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** When a grieving father begs the cold case team to investigate the untimely death of his eighteen year old son from a suspected fraternity hazing, Detective Ronan O'Mara is all in. Discovering the previous detectives assigned to the case have done little over the years to solve it, Ronan is determined to uncover exactly what happened to Bash Stark. Along with a little help from his pint-sized psychic, can Ronan bring the truth to light at long last?

Meanwhile, psychic Tennyson Grimm has his hands full when Carson and Cole's father, Corny, on the run from legal troubles, comes to town with a young wife and a huge ask: a new kidney. Neither son wants anything to do with the con man, but can Tennyson convince them that everyone deserves a second chance?

With one father using his every waking moment to find out how his son died, and another, who hasn't seen his sons in nearly twenty years, Ten and Ronan navigate the complicated relationships between fathers and sons.

Was Bash murdered? If so, by whom? More importantly, why has this case remained unsolved?

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Tennyson

Kansas City, KS, 1997...

St. Michael's Hospital smelled like death. At least it did to fourteen-year-old Tennyson Grimm. He knew it was the scent of industrial-strength cleaner being used to mask other odors, human waste, blood, and despair, but from this moment forward, Ten would always associate cleansers with death.

Not only could he smell death, but he could see it too. From the parking lot to his father's room, Ten had encountered no less than half a dozen confused and disoriented spirits. He'd been speaking to the dead for nearly a year but didn't dare do it in front of his mother. Kaye had enough on her plate at the moment.

Ten, his mother, and several members from their Union Chapel Baptist church sat around David Grimm's hospital bed, praying, singing, and speaking in tongues. Ten hated the overenthusiastic praying. It made him feel uncomfortable for the simple fact that if his parents or the church found out about his being gay and psychic, the person being prayed over enthusiastically would be him.

David was scheduled for a minor heart procedure, one which the surgeon described as routine. Dr. Klein said he performed hundreds of these types of surgeries every year and had a very good success rate. As he'd been speaking, Tennyson bore witness to several of his patients dying on the operating table. The ghosts of those who'd been lost crowded around the doctor as if they were hoping for a shot at revenge. Ten would do what he could for those lost souls if he managed to get away from the members of his church for a few minutes.

“Tennyson,” David Grimm called his son’s name. He reached a hand out when Tennyson came to his bedside.

“How are you feeling?” Ten asked, which was a stupid question. He could feel his father’s anxiety and worry courtesy of his gift. David also felt annoyed by the prayer circle. He didn’t need or want them in the room. This time should be for family. Ten wouldn’t say a word about what he knew, not now and definitely not later.

“I’m tired,” David admitted. “I just want this surgery to be over so we can go back to our regular lives.”

Ten understood where his father was coming from. Ever since David had collapsed in the kitchen a week ago, their lives had been filled with never-ending doctor appointments, bloodwork, stress tests, and a healthy dose of fear. Ten didn’t understand the fear. The church pastor preached every Sunday how joyous meeting Jesus Christ would be when our time on this Earth ended. Ten wasn’t an expert, but what was happening in the hospital room at the moment didn’t remotely resemble joy. It was pure desperation-tinged panic.

“You’re going to be just fine, Dad.” Ten wasn’t being optimistic for his father’s sake. He’d seen the results of the surgery. David would pull through with flying colors and would be home in three days. Of course, Ten also saw the frenzy of thankful prayers that would follow and wasn’t looking forward to faking his way through the church services that would be held in David’s honor. It wasn’t that Ten didn’t like church or his Lord and Savior, but from everything he’d been told, Jesus didn’t like him, or rather his sins.

Hate the sin. Love the sinner.

“Thanks, Ten. I appreciate you saying that.” David’s grip on his son’s hand tightened. “You’re the man of the house now. Take care of your mother. She’s going to need

you to be her rock, especially if I don't make it home."

Ten opened his mouth to tell David that he would be coming home. On Friday. At 10:33 a.m. He thought better of speaking and waited instead for his father to continue.

"I love you, son. I don't say it nearly enough, but I love you, and I'm so proud of the young man you've become." David gave Ten's hand another squeeze.

"Thanks, Dad." Ten knew full well that David was only saying those words because he was knocking on heaven's door. Most days, he found his son a disappointment. Ten wasn't the best student and was the worst athlete in the history of Union Chapel High School. He sat for a moment with his father's rare words of praise and had to admit he felt good.

"Make sure your mother eats and takes her vitamins. Don't give her any hassle about bedtime. Got it?" David sounded exhausted.

"Yes, sir. I'll take good care of Mom. I promise." Ten knew the casserole brigade would be dropping by meals every day for the next two weeks. The nosy women would keep Kaye busy and would come with her to visit David in the hospital. Not out of kindness or community spirit, but so they'd be privy to the latest gossip. Sometimes it really sucked to know what people were thinking and the actual reasons behind their smiles and seemingly kind gestures.

"Ah, here we are, Mr. Grimm," Dr. Klein said, breezing into the hospital room. "How are you feeling this morning?"

The prayer circle didn't break their stride when the doctor approached David's bed. In fact, their prayers became even more frenzied.

“Ready to get this over with, Doc.” David offered a weak smile.

The doctor grabbed David’s chart from the end of the bed and flipped through the pages. “The nurse will be in to prep you for surgery in a few minutes. I’ll need everyone but the immediate family to leave the room.”

Kaye ushered the members of her church out into the corridor. “Is everything okay, Dr. Klein?” Kaye looked as worried as she sounded.

“While prayer is helpful in situations like this, what Mr. Grimm needs now are the miracles of modern medicine.” Dr. Klein set David’s chart on the foot of the bed. “I’ll see you soon.” He nodded at Tennyson and was gone.

Ten expected both of his parents to offer some pushback against the doctor and his seemingly atheist views, but they were both quiet. “I’ll head out to the waiting room so you two can have some time alone.” Ten hugged his father and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Dr. Klein’s words were a miracle in themselves. Ten had never heard anyone say that God wasn’t the answer to every question. It gave him hope that one day he’d be able to live in a world where people delighted in who he truly was rather than reviling him. All he needed to do was bide his time.

With a happy heart, Ten went in search of the lost souls who were wandering around the hospital. While Dr. Klein worked wonders with his gifts in the operating room. Ten would use his own gifts to bring restless spirits the peace they deserved.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Ronan

August, present day...

Ronan O'Mara was in heaven. As the creator, organizer, planner, fundraiser, and king of the neighborhood ice cream social, he was surrounded by happy people and gallons of ice cream. Dressed in cargo shorts paired with an I Scream For Ice Cream tee and a sparkly Uncle Sam hat sitting at a jaunty angle atop his head, Ronan strolled through the party, trying to decide if he wanted a super-duper hot fudge sundae from Carson and Truman's stand or a homemade ice cream cookie sandwich from Jude and Cope.

Both, Ronan decided. There was no reason to deprive himself on the most scoopalicious day of the year. "Carson! Hit me with all the hot fudge."

"That's two tickets, please," Carson said, grabbing a paper bowl and his ice cream scooper.

Ronan pulled out his string of tickets and put two into the fishbowl. It had been his idea to use a cash-for-ticket system after Fitzgibbon used all his spare pocket change to pay for his treats last year. Ronan had been super excited to tally up all the money raised at the end of the day until he got to the mounds of pennies Fitz had contributed. "I'll have the cookies and cream, please."

Carson didn't budge. He stood frozen, with his eyes locked on something in the distance.

“Carson?” Ronan asked, snapping his fingers.

“Oh, sorry.” Carson shook his head, as if he were trying to knock away what he’d just seen. “What kind of ice cream?”

“Oreo.” Ronan studied his friend as he scooped ice cream into his bowl. He knew from experience that Carson had seen something courtesy of his gift when his head had seemingly been somewhere else. “Are you okay?”

Carson gave his head a little shake. “Can you keep a secret?”

Ronan nodded. “You know me.”

“Yeah, you’re the biggest gossip on the block.” Carson laughed and ladled gooey hot fudge over two scoops of the frozen treat.

Ronan resisted rolling his eyes. So he liked to talk about his neighbors with his neighbors, big deal. He was Fort Knox with more personal secrets when it counted the most. “This will stay just between us. I promise.” Ronan held up his pinkie.

“Fine. You’ll do.” Carson waved Ronan closer, wrapping his pinkie around his neighbor’s finger. “I’ve been having this recurring vision, and I can’t figure out what it’s about.”

Ronan knew instantly he was in over his head. He’d had an accident a while back where he’d knocked himself out in his kitchen. When he came to, he could see and speak to ghosts, just like Carson. He would be able to help his friend if he were dealing with an especially stubborn spirit, but visions were definitely out of his wheelhouse. “Maybe you’d be better off talking to Ten or Cope about—”

“No!” Carson interrupted. “I need to talk to someone who can’t read me or see my

vision for himself.”

“Okay.” Ronan noticed Carson’s hands were shaking. He signaled Carson’s husband, Truman, to man the booth and led Carson to his front stoop. “What’s going on in the vision?”

“I’m in pain. More pain than I’ve ever been in before. It hurts so much that I can’t concentrate on anything else around me except for one thing. Each vision lasts a few seconds or so, and when I come back to myself, I’m scared.”

“What’s the one thing?” Ronan asked, worried for Carson.

“Cole’s face.” Carson wore a desperate look.

Ronan studied his friend. In all the years he’d known Carson, he’d never seen the psychic in this state before. He’d grown up an only child and had no experience with a sibling. The closest thing he had to brothers were Jude and Fitz. If he knew something bad was coming for either of them, Ronan wouldn’t sleep until the danger was averted. “You’re afraid that if you talk to Ten or Cope, they’ll know what’s going on with your brother.”

Carson nodded. “I can’t lose him. It was hard enough when Mom died. I won’t survive if something happens to Cole.”

“I get where you’re coming from. When I lost my mother, I couldn’t get out of bed for a week to the point where I almost missed her funeral. I know grief.” Ronan didn’t like to think back to those dark days when he’d lost Erin. He was beyond blessed that he’d been able to connect with his mother through Tennyson and later when he briefly had his own gifts. So many other people never got the chance to right the wrongs they’d made in life, which made Ronan feel doubly blessed. “What if this vision is giving you information on how to save Cole? You know, like the vision you



had of Truman before you'd met each other.”

“My vision of love.” Carson sighed wistfully.

Ten had told Ronan the story of how neither Carson nor Cole had psychic gifts when Bertha Craig passed away. On her deathbed, she made her sons promise to carry on her legacy at West Side Magick. In order to do that, Carson became a con man of sorts, faking psychic readings by drawing on what he'd seen and learned from his father, Cornealius Craig, an infamous grifter who'd abandoned his family years before. One night, Carson touched Bertha's crystal ball and had a vision of a man with green eyes being shot at a Christmas party. Somehow or other, Carson managed to find and save the man, taking the bullet himself that had been meant for Truman.

“If there's a chance to save your brother, we need to do everything in our power to make that happen. Whatever I can do to help, I'm there.”

“I appreciate that, Ronan. I've had this vision three times now, and I've blocked it out from my mind.” Carson sounded more relaxed now. “How do I get it back?”

Thankfully, Ronan's years as a police officer had taught him a thing or two about recalling lost memories. “When I interview witnesses who are having a hard time remembering details of what they saw, I have them close their eyes and run through their senses. What do they smell? Hear? See? Feel? Are they hot or cold? Wet or dry? Usually, having them focus on something other than what they witnessed helps bring back the memory they're trying but failing to access. Maybe you could practice later after the kids are in bed.”

Carson nodded. “I'll give it a try.”

“If the vision comes again, give in to it and follow it through to the end.” Ronan didn't know much about psychic powers, but the one thing he'd learned from

Tennyson was that the vision would keep coming until Carson understood what it was trying to tell him.

“I’m scared, Ronan.”

Ronan could see the fear and grief warring in Carson’s blue eyes. “You know, it’s possible you might have the wrong end of the stick here.”

“What do you mean?” Carson asked, his voice hopeful.

“You said you’re in pain in the vision. What if Cole is the one who saves you from it? I suppose Cole is the one who caused it, but there are a hundred different ways this vision could play out. Some good. Some bad. Let your friends help you. Truman too. He looks worried to death every time he peeks over his shoulder at us.”

Carson nodded. “Okay. I’ll open myself up to this process. Thanks, Ronan. You’re a real friend.” Getting off the stoop, Carson hurried over to Truman, who was scooping ice cream for Everly.

“Hey, you.” Ten took the seat Carson had just vacated. “What was that about?”

“I can’t tell you. I promised Carson I’d keep our conversation to myself.” Ronan was damn proud of refusing to tell Ten about Carson’s confession.

“It has to do with that weird vision he and Cole keep having but no one wants to talk about.” Ten waggled his eyebrows when Ronan shot him a stunned look.

Ronan scooted closer to Tennyson. “They’re both having the same vision?”

“Yeah, and Cole is being just as stubborn over talking about it as Carson is.” Ten shook his head.

“Can you see what’s going on in it?” Ronan was afraid to hear the answer.

“No. I sense the pain both brothers feel in the vision, but I can’t see anything else.” Tennyson sounded frustrated by the state of affairs.

“I don’t understand. Shouldn’t you be able to read them and see it for yourself?”

“It doesn’t work that way. Visions aren’t like a video clip on YouTube. I can’t hit Play and see what they saw. I’m only catching glimpses, but that’s because small flashes are all the brothers can remember.” Ten shook his head. “Secondly, you’re assuming Carson and Cole are seeing all of it.”

“I’m confused.” Ronan’s mind was still stuck on the fact that Tennyson couldn’t see everything Carson had experienced.

Ten patted Ronan’s shoulder and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “They could be seeing the beginning, the middle, or the end. You need all the pieces to put the puzzle together, and so far, we only have one. There are a lot of things that could cause pain in this crazy world we live in. It could be something as serious as a friend losing their life or as simple as stubbing your toe.”

Ronan understood what Ten was trying to explain. His eyes moved to Carson, who was laughing with Fitzgibbon as he ladled hot fudge. “He’s scared. I’m sure asking for my help wasn’t easy for him.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Ten agreed. “I’ll tell you what, if Carson and Cole don’t share what they know with each other, I’ll get everyone together in the morning before the store opens and get them to talk about what’s going on. Maybe what Cole remembers will dovetail with what Carson’s seeing and we’ll get to the bottom of this vision.”

“Count me in too. Carson asked for my help, and I promised he had it.” Ronan

wouldn't be able to help the brothers sort through what they were seeing courtesy of their psychic gifts, but he damn well could use his skills as a detective to unravel the mystery and keep his friends safe.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Tennyson

Still feeling as if he were on an ice cream high, Ten floated into work on Monday morning needing a strong cup of coffee and a breakfast sandwich. The last thing he wanted was something sweet. There were still three gallons of uneaten ice cream stored in their basement freezer, and Ronan mentioned wanting some for dinner. His husband was a giant toddler sometimes.

After the block party ended, Ten hoped Carson or Cole would reach out to him about their visions, but that call had never come. Around nine, he'd sent out invitations to a meeting scheduled for this morning. Everyone on the guest list had accepted, most likely because Ten had listed the subject of the meeting as "Back to School."

While Cassie made his order, a sausage biscuit with a side of fruit, Ten scanned his friend. Cassie didn't seem upset about anything other than Lexi not wanting to wear pants to preschool that morning. She'd left Cole to sort their daughter out. As far as Ten could tell, she had not heard a peep from Cole about his vision.

Grabbing his breakfast, Ten headed for the conference room to wait for the others. The psychics stumbled in one by one while the detectives came in together. With Ronan wanting to be involved in the meeting for Carson's sake, he figured Jude and Fitz would want to come as well.

"Good morning, everyone," Ten said. "I've got good news and bad news for you. Which do you want to hear first?"

Jude scowled. "It's Monday, and I've got a hot fudge hangover. What could possibly

be worse than that?”

“No one told you to eat the leftover fudge with a ladle, dumbass.” Ronan snorted.

Ten hadn't been able to believe his eyes either, but that didn't stop him from shooting pictures of Jude's fudge-stained face.

“Waste not. Want not,” Jude said, reaching for his coffee. “I have absolutely no remorse for my actions and will do it again if given the chance, warden .”

“We'll get you a Hot Fudge Warden badge for next year's event.” Fitzgibbon jotted a note on his pad.

“The bad news,” Ten began, knowing the group was almost out of his control, “is that this meeting isn't about the kids going back to school.”

“Thank Christ,” Fitzgibbon muttered. “Aurora and I spent all day Saturday shopping for new clothes, and if I never see another sparkly rainbow unicorn shirt, it will be too soon.”

Ten had loved all the selfies Aurora took of herself and sent to Everly. His daughter, of course, wanted the same shirts. Thankfully, Fitz had grabbed some for Everly too.

“If the meeting isn't about school, why are we here early on a Monday morning?” Jude asked, sounding grumpy.

“I want to talk about Carson's vision,” Ten said simply.

“Son of a bitch, Ronan!” Carson shouted. “You couldn't do it, could you? You couldn't keep my secret after you promised you would.” Crossing his arms over his chest, the psychic sulked while eyeing the door.

“Ronan didn’t say a word, Carson,” Ten said gently, not wanting his friend to leave before he heard Cole was going through the same thing.

“Who did?” Carson demanded, looking suspiciously at each of his friends.

“Uh, psychic!” Ten pointed to himself. “I could feel the uneasy energy coming off you all day yesterday. So being a good but nosy friend, I did a little digging and managed to catch glimpses of the visions you and Cole are both having.”

“We’re both having the same vision?” Cole asked, sitting up straighter in his seat.

Carson bowed his head. “Damn, Ronan. I’m sorry for accusing you of being a blabbermouth. Fifty lashes with a wet noodle.”

“No worries.” Ronan grinned. “I just hope we can help you figure out what’s going on.”

“What happens in your vision?” Cole asked, sounding impatient.

“I’m in the worst pain of my life, and at the end, I see your face,” Carson admitted. “Last night, I tried a memory retrieval technique Ronan taught me and was able to see a shadowy figure who looks more familiar than I want to admit.”

Cole sighed. “I’m in pain in mine too, only I’m seeing you on a swing with some man pushing you.”

“Am I barefoot wearing a Superman tee?” Carson asked.

“Yeah. How did you know?” Cole asked.

Carson reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He dug through it for a

few seconds before pulling out a dog-eared photograph, which he quietly handed to his brother.

“Holy shit. This is exactly the image I’ve been seeing.” Cole shook his head and passed the picture to Jude, who was sitting beside him.

“Who’s the man in the photo with you?” Jude asked, sounding as if he already knew the answer.

“Our father.”

“That’s Dad?” Cole gasped.

“You didn’t recognize your own father?” Fitz asked, taking the photograph from Jude.

“You have to remember Carson is ten years older than me,” Cole said. “Dad left shortly after I was born. There aren’t a lot of pictures of us together, and for years, Mom had them hidden out of sight. I don’t have any memories of him at all.”

“He tried to come back home when you were about a year old, but Mom saw right through him. She kicked him out after only two days.” Carson blinked his misty eyes. “Those were two of the best days of my life. Dad took us to the park and out for ice cream. He told jokes and stories about his life on the road. Before I knew what was happening, he was gone.”

“Have you heard from him at all over the years?” Cole asked.

“He texts every now and then,” Carson said, sounding ashamed. “Around the time Ten and Ronan’s Dateline episode aired, he called the shop, wanting to talk to me. I gave him my cell number. Dad’s never wanted to meet our kids or our spouses. He



usually asks for money, which I don't give. I didn't want to tell you because I was afraid you'd feel the pain of his loss over and over again. I wanted to spare you that. Are you angry?"

Cole shook his head. "No, I'm not angry. I wrote him off years ago, when he stopped sending Mom support payments."

"I'm glad we're able to settle this little bit of family drama, but what does your father have to do with these visions?" Ronan asked.

"Don't know." Carson shrugged. "I guess we're going to have to wait for the next one and go from there." He turned back to his brother. "Do you feel afraid when you get the vision?" Holding out his hands, Ten saw they were shaking.

"It's not fear, exactly. More trepidation than anything else. Like something's coming. What are you guys getting?" Cole pointed to Ten and Cope, who, to this point, had been silent.

"I can feel your discomfort," Cope said. "I'm also sensing that something is coming, but I'm not seeing the hows and whys of it."

"Same here," Ten agreed. "I'm not getting that either of you are in physical danger from anyone, but more like the pain is almost self-inflicted. Like you're doing this to yourselves. Which makes absolutely no sense."

"That makes no sense," Cole muttered, with Carson nodding in agreement.

"What's our next step?" Fitzgibbon asked.

Carson tapped his phone, and seconds later, everyone's text alert chimed. "I just sent you the most recent pic Corny sent me. So at least you'll all know what he and his

girlfriend look like if they show up here.”

Ten pulled up the photo. In it was a tall man who looked worn and weary. Next to him was a much younger woman with a bright smile and a tight tube top, barely containing her breasts, which he imagined was the point.

“Wow,” Fitzgibbon said. “I’m sure Corny’s with her for her personality.”

Ronan snorted and started to laugh. “Christ, I hope Bertha isn’t here to see this.”

“She’s not,” Ten said but had a feeling it wouldn’t take long for her to catch wind of her sons’ visions. In all the years he’d known Bertha, the only person she’d ever spoken poorly about was her ex-husband. For her sake, Tennyson hoped Cole seeing Corny in his vision was a coincidence. His gift told him that wasn’t the case.

Like it or not, Cornealius Craig was going to crash land at West Side Magick sooner rather than later.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Ronan

When the meeting wrapped up, everyone headed into the store. Carson unlocked the door and flipped the sign in the window from closed to open. He'd barely walked away when the bell jingled and a desperate-looking man walked in, carrying a bulging accordion folder under one arm.

Ronan thought the man looked familiar but couldn't figure out why.

The man, dressed in khaki cargo shorts and a Justice for Bash T-shirt, made a beeline for Tennyson. "Mr. Grimm, my name is Paul Stark. I need your help." He turned to Ronan. "Thiers too." Stark pointed to Ronan, Jude, and Fitzgibbon.

Ronan stared at the man for a moment and realized why he was familiar. "You're Sebastian Stark's father." Sebastian had been all over the news three years ago when his lifeless body was found at the bottom of the cellar steps in his Salem University frat house. The subsequent autopsy had said foul play was possibly involved, but no one had been arrested, and the frat had not been suspended.

"I am," Stark agreed. "You're my last hope to find justice for my son."

"Carson, would you get Mr. Stark settled in our conference room?" Ten asked.

"Sure, please follow me." Carson ushered Stark into the office and toward the room they'd all just vacated.

"I'm free for the next hour. How about you?" Ten asked, his eyes on Ronan.

“We’re free too,” Ronan said uneasily. “The Stark Case is still being actively worked by homicide detectives. I’m not sure we could take this case from them if that’s what his father wants from us.”

“It’s been three years since Sebastian died. The case sounds cold to me.” Ten frowned, looking as if he didn’t like Ronan’s answer.

“The definition of what makes a case cold varies from state to state and even city to city,” Fitzgibbon said. “I believe it’s four years here in Salem.”

“What will it hurt for you three to sit in on this meeting? You all have your PI licenses. Technically, you could look into this case in that respect.” Ten wore a hopeful look.

“Yeah, but not without stepping on some toes, namely Cisco’s.” Fitz sighed. “We’ll sit in with you, but I can’t make any promises that we can get involved in this case.”

“That works for me.” Ten and Ronan headed toward the conference room. Carson met him in the hall. “Is he okay?”

Carson shook his head sadly. “No, I don’t think he is. The man is swamped by grief and anger. His moods swing between the two. Handle him gently. Sebastian was his only child. His wife died from cancer a year after his son passed. Paul Stark has really been put through the wringer.”

“Thanks, Carson.” Ten took a deep breath and walked into the room. “Mr. Stark, this is Kevin Fitzgibbon, Jude Byrne, and Ronan O’Mara from Salem’s cold case unit. They’re sitting in on this meeting as civilians, not in their official capacity.”

“I need your help! All of you!” Stark shouted.

“I understand that, Mr. Stark, but there are rules that govern open cases at the Salem PD. We all want to hear what you have to say. After that, we’ll be able to decide the best way to help you.” Fitzgibbon took a seat across from the angry man.

“As far as I’m concerned, Jimenez and Watts are fucking useless.” Stark looked like he was on the verge of going nuclear.

Ronan recognized the names. He’d had brief interactions with both men and hadn’t been overly impressed with their case closure rates, but other than that, he knew next to nothing about them.

“Those are the homicide detectives assigned to your son’s death?” Kevin asked, sounding every inch the captain he was.

“Yeah. They’ve been on Bash’s case from the beginning. All they’ve wanted to do was close the investigation. My calls go unanswered. When I go to the department, I can’t get past the front door. No one will speak to me or return my calls.”

Ronan could feel the desperation coming off Paul Stark. All he wanted was for someone to care as much about his son as he did. So far, that hadn’t happened. “I promise you have our attention. Tell us what happened to Bash. Start from the beginning.”

The detectives pulled their notebooks and pens out and gave Paul Stark their full attention.

“I met my late wife, Maya, in college at UMass. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life.” Paul paused and took a breath. “We fell in love and got married after graduation. She wanted a baby more than words, so we started trying on our honeymoon. Three years later, we hadn’t gotten pregnant. We went for testing and found that the fertility issues were mine. I’ll spare you the details, but thanks to

the doctor's help, Maya was pregnant three months later. The day our son was born was the happiest day we'd ever shared. Our lives were so full of promise for the future, you know?"

"I do," Ronan agreed.

"Bash was such a happy little boy. We were there with him every step of the way, from sitting in the cold for his ice hockey games to late nights studying for exams. I loved every single moment of fatherhood. It surprised us when Bash decided to go to Salem University instead of UMass like we had, but I had nothing to complain about because he would be right here in town. What could possibly go wrong so close to home?"

Ronan's heart broke for Paul Stark. He loved Everly and Ezra more than his next breath. If anything happened to them, he'd never survive. He was certain Ten felt the same way. "What happened at school?"

"Bash never met a stranger who didn't become his friend. He took that attitude to school with him. A couple guys he knew were pledging Sigma Chi, and he joined them. I was worried about hazing but kept my mouth shut. Our son had more common sense than most young men his age, and I knew he would make good decisions. Pledge week was filled with silly things like the guys having to wash the frat house floors with toothbrushes and being messenger boys at all hours of the night when the members wanted a pizza or soda or whatever. Bash was so excited for the opportunity. Maya and I were happy for him, until that last party." Stark let out a shuddering breath. "Bash was supposed to text us when he got back to his room that night. I knew there would be alcohol and maybe pot or edibles. When Bash didn't text that night, I chalked it up to him having a good time and passing out from the booze, or maybe he'd spent the night with someone, but when we still hadn't heard from him by noon the next day, I started calling and texting him. Bash never answered. He always answered us." Tears fell from Paul Stark's eyes. He didn't

bother to wipe them away.

Ronan wanted to get up and hug the bereaved father but stayed in his seat and waited for Stark to continue.

“Maya and I got in the car and drove to the campus. There were cop cars everywhere on Fraternity Row with their lights on. Traffic wasn’t allowed to pass. We parked and got out of the car. There were five other frat houses on that street with dozens of guys living in them, but my gut told me the flashing lights and crime scene tape were for my son. When we reached the last barricade, we could see the medical examiner’s van. Seconds later, a gurney came out of the house with a black body bag on it. I grabbed the first cop I saw and asked if he knew what happened, showing him a picture of Bash. He’d looked annoyed when I first approached him, but once he saw the photograph, everything about him changed. He asked what my name was, and after I told him, he informed us that Sebastian was...” Paul Stark dissolved into tears.

Ronan didn’t need Stark to speak the last word. He knew what the cop had told him. Making death notifications had always been the worst part of his job. To stand there and watch loved ones fall apart. Some howled or let out inhuman cries. Others punched walls. A few were silent, trying to process the shock. Looking around the table, Ronan could see how the others were affected by Paul Stark’s story. Ten was brushing away his own tears while Jude and Fitz wore heartbroken looks. “I’m so very sorry for your loss, Mr. Stark.” Ronan knew his words offered no comfort, but they were all he had.

“I hate to ask,” Fitz began, “but how did the investigation go?”

Paul took a deep breath and dried his eyes. “At first, we were told that Bash died from alcohol poisoning. The cop on the scene said they could smell the booze on him from the top of the stairs. The autopsy said that he’d died from positional asphyxiation, meaning he’d suffocated to death due to the position his body was in.

He lay crumpled at the bottom of the stairs for nearly twelve hours before someone found him and called the police. The coroner told me that if he'd been found sooner, he could have been saved."

"What did the ME rule as the manner of death?" Ronan asked.

"Undetermined," Stark said. "He said there was no way of knowing how or why Bash fell. He had no injuries to indicate he'd been beaten or forced down the stairs. There were no skin cells under his nails, aside from his own. There was evidence of sexual activity, but Bash was six and a half feet tall and weighed about two hundred pounds—there was no way a girl could have thrown him down the stairs."

Ronan didn't want to correct the man, but a woman could absolutely do that very thing. All it took was for Bash to be off balance for a moment, and when people were drunk, they weren't always steady on their feet. "Did the police interview the frat brothers?"

Stark nodded. "No one remembered seeing him after ten that night. One said he'd gone into his room with a girl, but no one saw him after that. Or, no one remembered seeing him after that. The detectives told me Bash's death was a tragic accident, but I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now. Someone killed my son. I need you to prove it." His eyes were laser focused on Ronan.

"I appreciate your faith in me, Mr. Stark," Ronan began, "but like we said earlier, we need to operate within the constructs of the Salem PD. What I can promise is to speak with the chief of police about this case." He handed Stark his phone opened to a blank contact screen. Stark added his information and gave the phone back to Ronan.

"What about you?" Stark asked Tennyson. "I read that you've assisted both the Boston and Salem Police with cases like this. Can you see my son? Is he here with me now?"



“Bash isn’t here, and I haven’t been able to sense him, Mr. Stark,” Ten said.

“You’re fucking useless too! Just like those fucking detectives.” Stark stood and gathered his folder close to his chest.

“Hold on a minute,” Ten said softly. Ronan was ready to punch the man’s lights out, but leave it to Tennyson to hold on to his humanity and treat Paul Stark with kid gloves. “Spirits don’t always cling to us everywhere we go. It could be that he’s home in his childhood bedroom or at the frat house. I’ve also seen spirits who were shy and not apt to speak to strangers. Being dead is confusing enough without there being four strangers thrown into the mix and the fact that your temper goes from zero to sixty in record time. Bash might very well be scared of this version of yourself.”

“Scared of me?” Stark asked, collapsing back into his seat. The look on his face told Ronan the thought had never crossed his mind that he could be the problem.

Ten nodded. “I know you think we’ve all only added to your grief, but here’s what’s going to happen next. If my husband says he’ll speak to the chief, he will. You can count on that. Ronan has an annoying way of always getting what he wants.” Ten smiled. “Either Ronan or myself will call you after that meeting and let you know how it goes. I can’t promise it will be today, although with Ronan’s stick-to-itiveness, anything is possible. Lastly, I’ll set up a time with you later to try to reach out to Bash at your home. In the meantime, you’ve got some work to do yourself. Do you understand what I mean?”

Stark nodded. “I need to get my head out of my ass and control my temper. Before my son and wife died, I had no idea grief could lead to rage. I know anger is one of the stages of grief, but nowhere along the way did anyone ever mention this bone-deep rage. I’ll find a way to deal with it. You have my word, Mr. Grimm. I’m sorry for losing my temper earlier.”

“We’re all fathers, Mr. Stark.” Ten pointed around the table. “We understand where your emotion is coming from. I promise we’ll be in touch as soon as we have information to pass along.” Ten stood and escorted the man out of the room.

“What do you think?” Ronan asked Fitz. He knew he wanted to barrel into Cisco’s office right this very second and demand that they be assigned this case. Of course, Fitzgibbon would advise caution.

“I’m not sure how much we can do,” Fitz said. “It’s been three years since the crime. Some of the frat members there that night could have graduated or dropped out of school, if they remember what happened that night at all. My years of police experience tell me someone knows what happened to Sebastian. I’ll call Cisco now and see if he’s free for a chat.” Fitzgibbon stood and was halfway to the door before he turned back to Ronan. “In the meantime, you need to get your head out of your ass too.”

“So that my anger doesn’t get the best of me?” Ronan asked sheepishly.

“No, because you could use a breath of fresh air.” Jude snickered.

Tennyson had always been the empath in their family, but today, Ronan could feel Stark’s pain as if it were his own. He admired the man for fighting for his son for as long as he had, with as many doors slammed in his face as he’d encountered. Ronan was going to do everything in his power to find out what happened to Sebastian Stark, with or without Cisco Jackson’s approval.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Tennyson

It didn't surprise Ten one bit that Cisco Jackson agreed to meet for lunch at Greek Life. The chief was under the impression Ronan and the others wanted to speak with him about a sensitive subject but hadn't told him that subject was an open case assigned to other detectives.

When Ten and the others got to the restaurant, Cisco was already there, sitting at a table in the back with a half-empty glass of iced tea in front of him.

"Hey, guys," Cisco greeted when Ten and the others filled up the other seats at the table. Their waitress came by and took everyone's orders. Pizza for Jude and Fitz, while Ten, Ronan, and Cisco ordered sandwiches.

Ronan and Cisco talked about the Red Sox's pitching woes until their waitress returned with their food.

"Okay, Ronan, you've buttered me up. What's this meeting really about?" Cisco asked before taking a huge bite from his meatball sub.

"We had a visit from Paul Stark this morning," Tennyson said, figuring Cisco would take the news better from him as opposed to Ronan.

"Paul Stark," Cisco said softly. "He's been through more pain than any man should ever have to bear, losing his son and wife within a year of each other."

Ten nodded. He'd spent their entire meeting this morning feeling the weight of those

losses. “He came by the shop to see if I could connect with his son and to ask if Ronan and the guys could look into Bash’s case.”

Cisco was silent. He took another bite of his sandwich before looking back up at Tennyson. “It doesn’t surprise me that Stark came to you. What does surprise me is that it took this long. Sebastian died nearly three years ago.”

“Like you said, Paul Stark was dealing with the enormity of his wife’s illness and then her death. To be honest, it doesn’t shock me at all that it took him this long to walk into West Side Magick.” Grief worked differently for everyone it affected. He’d worked with widows who’d been on the phone to him minutes after their husbands died. He’d also spoken to people whose losses were decades old.

“Were you able to connect with Sebastian Stark?” Cisco asked, looking as if he didn’t want to hear the answer.

Ten shook his head. “No, but I let his father know that the conditions might not have been right for him to appear. I gave him some advice to follow and let him know we’d try again later, when Paul wasn’t so angry.”

“Where do you chuckleheads come into the mix? Or are you just here for the free lunch?” Cisco pointed between the three detectives.

Ronan grinned at his boss. “Ordinarily, I’d say I was here for the lunch, but I could feel Paul Stark’s pain. It made me wonder how I’d cope if anything happened to Ten or the kids. It’s unbearable to even think about, never mind to live through. I know the case is assigned to the homicide unit, but there’s been no work done on it in nearly a year. The only new additions to the file are stacks of unreturned messages from Stark to the detectives on the case. I know it’s a breach of protocol to even ask to have the file transferred to cold case, but I’m asking all the same.”

Tennyson had to admit he was impressed with Ronan's speech. It was well thought out and calmly delivered. Who was this imposter-Ronan, and what had he done with Ten's husband?

Cisco sighed. "You know there's nothing to go on, right? Just a bunch of drunk frat brothers who were too wasted to have seen Sebastian fall."

"We know," Ronan agreed.

"If I assign this case to you, and that's a mighty big if, what's your game plan?"

"I want to start with the autopsy. There were no signs of a struggle on his body at the time of the autopsy, but there might be now."

"Jesus Christ," Cisco muttered under his breath. "You want to exhume him?"

Ronan nodded. "Maybe. Especially if Ten can't connect with Sebastian's spirit. The ME at the time was Vince Walker, you know, the doc who was caught drinking and performing autopsies?"

"Don't fucking remind me." Cisco shook his head. "Do you know how many convictions were overturned on appeal because of that asshat?"

"I can only imagine. Paul Stark trusts us to work this case. I'm sure he won't object to Sebastian being exhumed if I explain how I think it can help the investigation." Ronan took another bite from his sandwich.

"What else have you got?" Cisco asked.

"I want to reach out to the frat brothers and the girls who were at that party. Time is the enemy of truth. Those kids' memories of that night weren't so good the day after

Bash died, but with three years passing and those kids growing up a bit, there might be a person or two who needs to get something off their conscience.”

“Where are you on this, Fitzy?” Cisco asked.

“I’m one hundred percent in on investigating this case. I know I speak for all three of us when I say we’ll do everything in our power to find out what happened that night, and with Tennyson as our ace in the hole, I think we’ve got a good chance of solving the mystery behind Bash’s death.”

“Does Stark know this might not go the way he wants? It’s entirely possible that his son drank too much and fell down the stairs. Stark is looking to assign blame for his son’s death, and the person at fault here might very well be the person he’s mourning.”

“We’ll make sure he understands that before we make any moves. I want to get my hands on the case file and the evidence reports before we get back in touch with Paul Stark. Ten told him he needed to take some time to get his temper under control before he attempted to contact Bash’s spirit again, so I figure we’ve got a few days to do the legwork and get caught up on the case to date.”

“And if Jimenez and Watts object to the case being assigned to you guys?” A smile played on Cisco’s lips, indicating he knew the overworked detectives wouldn’t mind one bit.

“They’ve got seven open homicide cases sitting on their desks. Cases that are actual murders with suspects to interrogate and witnesses to interview. There’s been no activity on this case for nearly a year because, according to them, there’s nothing left to investigate.” Fitzgibbon offered Cisco a grin.

“You’re always prepared, Fitzy.” Cisco laughed.

“Former Boy Scout.” Fitzgibbon waggled his eyebrows and reached for another slice of pizza.

“Okay, the case is yours.” Cisco looked back and forth between the detectives. “We do this by the book. I get that you all feel a certain kinship toward this man, but that cannot play into the way you investigate this case. If we do have to exhume his son, I want an honor guard there. I want you four dressed in suits, even if it’s hot as balls outside. We do this with all the kindness and respect this boy is due. Got it?”

“Got it,” all four men agreed.

“I’ll speak with Jimenez and Watts myself. There’s bound to be a bit of butt hurt, even if this case is DOA in their eyes. I might have to offer them a few extra days of PTO.”

Ronan opened his mouth, looking as if he were about to ask where his extra paid time off was, but apparently thought better of the idea and went back to eating his lunch.

Tennyson couldn’t believe his husband’s behavior. He was somehow more mature, and his arguments for working the case were well thought out and not abrasive in the slightest. Maybe it was all the ice cream and hot fudge Ronan inhaled yesterday?

Stranger things had happened.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Ronan

Two hours later, Ronan was still stunned that Cisco had assigned them the Stark case and that Cisco had paid for lunch. If he'd known that going in, he would have ordered two steak-and-cheese subs instead of one.

Alone in the office, with Fitz and Jude running an errand, Ronan looked forward to spending time alone with the file. He'd have a chance to read the reports and look over the photographs before his partners were back in the office. Ten had an afternoon reading and would be up to help out when he was finished working.

His stomach roiling, Ronan studied the boxes sitting on the table in the cold case office. In all the years he'd been investigating homicides, he'd never once felt nervous starting a new case until today. Usually, the team chose a case to work and dug into it before they met the victim's family, but the Stark case started with meeting the boy's still-grieving father. Ronan could honestly say that he wouldn't have fought as hard to work this case if he hadn't cried with Paul Stark today.

Starting with the crime scene photos, Ronan laid them out on the large conference table. The first few images were of the frat house. There were several metal beer kegs, along with dozens of discarded red Solo cups. The trash can overflowed with more cups and stacked pizza boxes. The next few photos were of the doorway leading to the basement stairs. It was located down a narrow hallway going from the living room into the kitchen. There wasn't a light on in the space, which would have made it harder to have spotted Sebastian and his potential killer. One item on the door caught and held Ronan's attention. An open padlock hung from a slide lock's anchor point on the door. He jotted notes about how often the door was kept locked and who had



keys to lock or unlock it.

The next few photographs were shots of the staircase leading to the basement. The stairs weren't steep and didn't appear to be rickety or warped. The same went for the railing, which was intact. At the bottom of the staircase was the crumpled body of Sebastian Stark. Ronan set out the pictures of the body. Bash lay face down on the concrete floor with his hands out in front of him. His shoulders and chest also rested against the floor, while his hips and torso lay at an angle on the first two steps. His legs were bent at the knees and were splayed out on the higher stairs. Ronan could see how the boy suffocated with the rest of his body weight bearing down on his chest.

The next photos were close-ups of Sebastian's arms. From what Ronan could see with the naked eye, neither wrist appeared to be broken, and he couldn't see any bruises, either from restraints or from breaking his fall. After having spent twelve hours in that position, there should have at least been signs of lividity, with Sebastian's blood pooling and discoloring his skin.

Moving on to the police report, Ronan found himself getting angry. The notes said Bash most likely died as the result of a drunken fall down the stairs. There were a few witness interviews that all stated none of the frat brothers saw Bash fall. The interviews only listed first names, and there were no phone numbers collected. In Ronan's opinion, the police assumed the death wasn't caused by foul play without bothering to prove or disprove that point with actual evidence.

Grabbing the autopsy, Ronan saw that it was performed nearly forty-eight hours after Bash's remains had been brought in. By the time the ME listed the possibility of foul play being a contributing factor in his death, the crime scene had been cleaned up, and all of the frat brothers responded to follow-up questions in the same manner and, in some cases, with the exact language others had used. Obviously, the frat president or someone high up in the university had gotten to the boys and told them what to say

if the police came around again.

Absolutely disgusted by what he saw, Ronan moved on to the autopsy photos. There were only a few in the file. There were shots of Bash's face, his hands, and chest, which was one large blackish bruise from where the blood had settled after he'd stopped breathing. There were no pictures of his back or of his legs.

"Fuck me with a chainsaw," Ronan said, letting his frustration out.

"That's no way to greet your husband," Ten said from the doorway.

Ronan turned around to see Ten walking toward the table. "Hey, sorry about that. This case is one giant question mark. There are barely any autopsy photographs and almost no contact information for the witnesses at the party that night. No wonder Jimenez and Watts got nowhere with this case. They didn't do any investigative work at all. I hope Cisco fires their lazy fucking asses."

"Whose lazy fucking ass are we talking about?" Jude asked with a grin.

"Not yours," Ronan said and quickly explained what he'd learned so far. "We're going to have to start this investigation from scratch without the benefit of the crime scene."

"That's not necessarily true," Ten said.

"Have you spoken with Bash Stark?" Jude asked.

Ten shook his head. "I was thinking about the large file folder Paul Stark brought with him this morning. It looked stuffed to the brim with documents. I'm betting there's a lot of information in there that would come in handy, especially if he's been running his own investigation for the last few years."

“I agree, Ten.” Fitz took the chair next to Ronan and started leafing through the documents he’d discarded.

“The autopsy was half-assed, just like we thought it would be.” Fitz shook his head. “There’s barely anything here. What an absolute clusterfuck. No wonder the other detectives didn’t put any work in on this case,” Fitz said, echoing Ronan’s earlier comment. “Ronan, call Paul Stark. Let him know we’re on the case and want to meet with him tomorrow morning to take a formal statement from him about the night his son died. Tell him we’d also like to see any evidence he’s collected over the last few years. If he’s got the names and contact information for the frat members that were at the party the night Bash died, it might save us a subpoena or two along the way.” Fitz grabbed the rest of the papers sitting in front of Ronan and flipped through them. “There’s no phone records here either. Let’s hope Paul has them. I want to see Bash’s text history with his frat brothers, as well as what he might have told his parents or his friends. Lastly, I want to know who the girl was that had sexual relations with him that night.”

“You got it.” Ronan grabbed his phone and stepped into Fitzgibbon’s private office to place the call. Paul Stark answered on the first ring.

“Detective O’Mara, I hope you’re calling with good news for me.” Stark sounded hopeful.

“I am. We were able to get Bash’s case assigned to us. If you’re available, we’d like to come see you tomorrow. There’s a lot we have to talk about, including what’s in the folder you brought with you this morning.”

“It’s every bit of evidence I’ve managed to gather from the night Bash died. I looked into his frat brothers, the chapter itself. I’ve got phone records and text messages. You name it, I’ve got it.”

“Do you happen to have Bash’s phone?” Ronan asked, crossing his fingers.

“I do. Maya and I agreed to pay for it if he kept his grades up, but I kept paying the bill even after he died. I call Sebastian’s voicemail just to hear the sound of his voice.”

“That’s going to be very helpful to us, in terms of being able to see your son’s text history. Usually, when we get a dump of phone records, the texts are all jumbled, and we have to try to put them in order, but with his phone, we’ll be able to see the actual conversations he had with people.”

“I’ll have it for you tomorrow, along with copies of everything else. I told you I was willing to do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of my son’s death. Whoever killed my son is also responsible for Maya’s death.”

Stark’s words caught Ronan off guard. “I thought Maya died from cancer.”

“She did. Her lung cancer was diagnosed after Bash died. Maya didn’t put up much of a fight. She saw death as a relief because she would be reunited with our son and wouldn’t have to live with the crushing grief of losing him. She got her wish, and all I was left with was a house full of ghosts and empty memories. The only thing that keeps me going now is the idea of finding some justice for my son and peace for myself.”

Ronan didn’t want to say the words out loud, but it was possible Stark would end up with neither. “We’re doing what we can on our end as well. My colleagues and I have the complete police record, and we’re going through it as we speak.”

“Is there any way I can get a look at it?” Paul asked. “I’d like to see for myself what the cops have or have not been doing over the years.”

“I’ll be more than happy to let you see the file once we’ve exhausted all investigative avenues. There are some questions I have for you related to what’s in there, and I don’t want to prejudice your answers in any way. We’re only going to have one shot to get answers, Paul, and I refuse to fail Bash.”

“I can’t tell you how good it makes me feel to hear you say that, Detective O’Mara. After three years, I finally feel like we’re going to get somewhere with this investigation, and I can’t thank you and your team enough for looking into my son’s death, even if it turns out Bash fell accidentally.”

“How does ten tomorrow morning work for you?” Ronan asked.

“I’ll be here. 22 West Hanover Street. It’s a big green house. You can’t miss it.” Excitement tinged Stark’s voice.

“One last thing, Mr. Stark.” Ronan knew there was one more thing they’d need that Paul Stark would be able to provide.

“Anything, just name it.”

“Grab a few things that belonged to your son. Treasured things, like his hockey stick or a piece of jewelry he always wore. Something he had strong ties to in life.” Ronan knew Ten was often able to connect with objects belonging to the deceased.

“Is that for Tennyson’s work?”

“It is. We’ll explain everything in the morning. In the meantime, talk to your son’s spirit. Tell him what’s going on and who we are. Any information Bash can give us is crucial.”

“The words of a ghost aren’t admissible in court, are they?” Stark asked.

“No, they’re not, but if I know exactly how Bash died and can walk the killer through it step by step, they’re more likely to confess to what they think we already know. Ten and I have tried this tactic in the past, and it usually works.”

“Good to know, Detective O’Mara. I feel like I’ll actually be able to sleep tonight. Thank you, and thank your team for me as well.”

“You got it,” Ronan said and hung up the phone. He hoped Ten could provide some measure of comfort to the grieving father. Ronan opened Fitzgibbon’s door and walked back toward the table, where Fitzgibbon sat with a frown on his face as he paged through documents. “We’re all set for tomorrow morning. I also asked Stark for—”

Shouting from West Side Magick downstairs stopped Ronan in his tracks. Fear set his heart pounding. He moved toward the wall safe and pulled out his gun and holster. Fitz and Jude were right behind him. “Stay here,” Ronan ordered Ten, who looked scared.

Easing his way down the stairs, Ronan could hear several raised voices talking at the same time. He couldn’t make out who they belonged to or the words flying back and forth. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Ronan slowly peeked around the corner. He saw Carson and Cole facing two strangers, an older man and a woman, who was probably in her late thirties but dressed like she was a hippy with a flowing dress and a flower in her hair. Ronan didn’t recognize either of them. From what he could see, neither of them had a weapon. “Is everything all right, Carson?” He exited the stairwell and headed for his friends. His gun was still in his hand but was pointing at the floor.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Carson said, sounding more annoyed than scared. “We’re just taking out the trash.”

“Trash?” Ronan asked, not understanding what was happening.

Carson sighed and ran a hand through his blond hair. “Detective Ronan O’Mara, this is Destiny Beckham and my father, Cornealius Craig.”

“Your father ?” Ronan asked, his fear turning to shock. He took a closer look at the older man and his lived-in face. His hair was mostly silver, but a few golden strands ran through it. Corny had the same blue eyes as his sons and was an inch or two taller than Carson and Cole.

“You called the cops on me?” Corny shouted. He grabbed Destiny and manhandled her toward the door. “You crusty fucking asshole!”

“Corny, stop!” Carson called back, sounding more annoyed than angry. “Ronan is a member of Salem’s cold case team. He investigates unsolved murders. He isn’t here to arrest you.”

“I absolutely will if you don’t take your hands off your friend.” Ronan slid the gun into the holster. He watched as Corny dropped his hands.

“I’m not his friend. I’m his wife , you pig!” Destiny spat back. She plumped her hair and continued to look at Ronan as if he were a cockroach.

Several shoppers who were browsing in the store headed for the front door. “Cole, take them to the conference room.” Turning back to the fleeing customers, Carson offered a warm smile. “Family reunions are so much fun. Is there anything I can help you find at a ten percent discount?”

Ronan stood back while Cole ushered Corny and Destiny away as fast as possible.

“What the hell’s going on?” Ten asked from behind Ronan.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Ronan said, “but one thing’s for certain. Carson and Cole’s visions just came true.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Tennyson

After all the shouting settled down, Ten felt like his gift was fried. Information had been flying at him from all directions, and somewhere along the line, he'd crossed into sensory overload. Looking around at Carson and Cole, he could tell they were feeling the same way.

Cole got his father and stepmother settled in the conference room while Carson tried to save the customers who'd been about to walk out of the store. Needing something to do himself, Ten grabbed bottles of water and granola bars from the breakroom, passing them out to Corny and Destiny, who looked less than impressed.

"We come all the way from California to see you, and all you offer us are snacks and the rudest welcome possible?" Destiny looked as if she were about to fly off the handle again.

"You never told me you were coming," Carson said as he walked into the room with a dark look on his face. He shut the door behind him and seemed leery of taking a seat at the table. "Cole, what about you?"

"Corny hasn't contacted me since he walked out when I was a toddler." Cole shot his father a cold look. "I wouldn't know him from a hole in the wall. How the hell do we even know you are who you say you are?"

Tennyson quickly read each of the people sitting at the table. "They are who they say they are, but Destiny isn't her real name. It's Martha."

Destiny pointed at Ten. “Witch! I decry thee a witch!”

“Jesus Christ,” Cole muttered, rolling his eyes. “This isn’t an audition for *The Crucible* .”

Carson strode to the table to take the empty seat between Ronan and Fitzgibbon. “Enough bullshit. A leopard doesn’t change his spots, Corny. You’re an infamous grifter and a con man. The last I’d heard, you served time for fraud in Arizona, which is how I’m guessing you ended up in California. You’d worn out your welcome . Again .”

“You’ve been keeping tabs on him?” Cole asked. He sounded hurt.

“Yeah, I run a Google search on him every few months. I also set up alerts from when new information is added.” Carson shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. You and I can talk about this later.” Looking back and forth between Corny and Destiny, Carson sighed. “What are you doing here?”

“Is that any way to greet your long-lost father?” Corny asked, a hand fluttering to his heart. “What happened to hugs and invitations to family dinners?”

Tennyson turned his attention back to the old man. Scanning him quickly, Ten was revolted by half of what he was able to see. The other half was going to be the true problem. “He’s sick.”

Corny’s eyes widened. “Who the fuck is this asshole? Are you with the police too, boy?”

“You surprise me, Corny,” Tennyson said with a snarky smile. “There’s no way in hell you came in here blind. You know who I am. Who Ronan, Jude, and Fitz are and what they do for a living. Unless I miss my guess, and I never do, you two have been

researching the shop and all of us since that mishap with the GoFundMe scam in Boulder, yes?”

Corny's eyes widened, but he remained silent.

“I know all about the sick child.” Ten made air quotes over the word sick . “You raised nearly a quarter million dollars for the little mite before you fucked up and were seen around town driving a brand new Caddy.”

“You've got to be fucking kidding me,” Carson muttered under his breath. “You took advantage of a sick kid?”

Corny raised an eyebrow as if to say he was keeping his mouth shut.

“He stole a picture from St. Jude's website. Doctored it up a bit, giving the boy dark hair instead of blond, and made him look much sicker, then slapped it up on GoFundMe. You would have gotten away with it too, if only you'd traded your banger in for the Cadillac on your way out of town instead of two days before.” Ten felt sick to his stomach reading Corny. His thoughts consisted of ways to take advantage of his sons and enlist their help with his medical condition. “You know, it's funny.”

“What's funny, you psycho creep?” Destiny asked.

Ten ignored Destiny, keeping his full attention on Corny. “You scamming the kind people of Colorado for money for a sick kid when you're the one who's actually sick.”

“That's the second time you've said that, Ten,” Carson said. “I've been trying to read my father since he walked in the door, and I'm not getting anything like that.”

“Same here,” Cole said.

“Do you want to tell your sons, or should I?” Ten asked. David Grimm might have had his faults, but he’d never tried to use Ten for anything, even after he’d gained popularity for his work on the Michael Frye case.

“You’re a real douche canoe.” Corny scowled at Tennyson.

“Tell them.” Ten crossed his arms over his chest, unwilling to back down.

“I need a kidney.” He shot Ten an angry glare. “You happy now?”

Shaking his head, Ten wasn’t happy in the slightest. His heart was breaking for Cole and Carson, who were having this man, his offensive attitude, and Destiny forced on them with no notice.

“Why are you sick?” Cole asked.

“It’s my old friends’ fault. Jack Daniels, Captain Morgan, Johnnie Walker, and Jim Beam.” Corny shrugged. “Doc said my best chance for a match was with a blood relative, and since the two of you are all I’ve got, here I am. So, which one of you wants to help your old man?”

Carson turned to Ten, who simply nodded. He knew his friend was asking if Corny was telling the truth.

The room was dead silent.

“Seriously?” Destiny shouted. “Neither one of you fuckers are going to lift a finger to help your dying father? Fuck you all!”

“Where are you staying?” Carson asked, looking as if he’d aged twenty years in the span of this conversation.

“In the Caddy,” Corny said.

Pulling out his phone, Carson left the room. The longer he was gone, the more awkward the silence in the room got.

“Where were you diagnosed, Mr. Craig?” Fitzgibbon asked.

“All over the damn place. When I went to rehab in Texas, the first time. Rehab in Albuquerque. Back to Texas. I collapsed at a bar in Toledo and was rushed to the emergency room. After running me through the mill with every test under the sun, the docs said I needed dialysis and a new kidney.” Corny pulled down the front of his shirt to reveal a dialysis port. “The docs all warned me to stop drinking, and I never listened to a word they said.”

As Corny explained his medical history, Carson came back through the door. “I got you a room at the Hawthorne Hotel. I’ve told them to take all the booze out of the minibar, and they’ve agreed not to serve you in the hotel bar. You can order food from room service. It had better not be all lobster and filet mignon.”

Ten wasn’t often surprised by people, but Carson putting his father up in the lap of luxury and offering to feed him shocked Ten. Not that Carson wouldn’t want to help someone in need, but that someone in question had caused him no end of heartbreak over his lifetime.

“Before you head to the hotel, tell me why you’re listening to the advice of your doctors now?” Carson asked.

“Destiny’s got my bun in her oven.” Corny patted Destiny’s abdomen. For the first

time since Destiny arrived, Tennyson saw her smile. She covered his hand with her own. "I've finally got something to live for."

Carson's mouth dropped open in obvious shock. The angry look on Cole's face darkened. Both brothers remained silent.

"Well, we're off to the hotel! Gotta feed my little woman. After all, she's eating for two. Later, boys!" Corny hopped up from his seat as if it were on fire. He took Destiny's hand and led her out of the room.

"Motherfucker," Carson muttered. "Am I having a stroke, or did that just happen?"

"That just happened," Fitzgibbon agreed.

"Why didn't you tell us about the bun in the oven?" Cole asked, looking shell-shocked.

"I didn't know." Ten shook his head. "I don't know if he was blocking me from seeing it. Same for Destiny, but I'm just as surprised as you are. The two of them have all sorts of tricks up their sleeves, and I feel like we fell for them all."

"What the hell are we going to do?" Cole asked.

"I don't know," Carson said on a sigh. "We need to call a family meeting. If you all can make it tonight at six, we'll talk about everything then. Jude and Fitz, I'd like you to be there. We're going to need to corroborate everything he told us and find out if there are any warrants for his arrest. If you can do that without breaking police procedure."

Fitzgibbon nodded. "I'll speak to Cisco and see what we can find out. Why don't we have the meeting at my house. The kids can hang out in the pool while we talk. I'll

call out for pizza.”

“Thanks, Fitz.” Carson headed out of the room with his head bowed. Cole was right behind him.

Ten stayed in his seat while the others filed out of the room. He was having a hard time coming to terms with the hurt Corny had inflicted on his sons when he said that his new baby gave him something to live for. Even with the help Carson offered, and undoubtedly of the help to come, Corny had still gone for the jugular.

The first thing Ten was going to do when he got home was hug his kids and tell them how much he loved them. Just thinking about being estranged from Everly and Ezra made Ten feel sick to his stomach. Ten’s kids were his life. How the hell had Corny walked away from his two sons and Bertha?

Ten had a feeling he was about to find out.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Ronan

Ronan was on pizza duty. He'd offered to pick up dinner for the family meeting. The pies smelled so good that he'd nearly pulled over twice to cram his face full of pepperoni goodness. Thankfully, he made it to Fitzgibbon's house without digging into whichever pizza was on top of the stack of boxes.

Twenty minutes later, with the kids happily munching away and their feet dangling in the pool, the adults sat around the large patio table with their own slices. All of the usual suspects were there, with one new addition. Cisco Jackson had come by with his husband, Luca, and their adorable son, Frankie. Everly had taken the little boy under her wing and was wiping his sauce-covered face with her napkin.

"Just to catch everyone up," Fitzgibbon began. "After Corny and Destiny left, I had a meeting with Cisco. I filled him in on what Tennyson knew and what Corny admitted to. We ran his criminal record, along with Destiny's. Her real name is Martha Stewart. No," Fitz snickered. "not that one."

"What did you find out, Fitz?" Carson asked, looking as if he didn't want to know.

"Your father has a criminal record as long as my arm," Cisco said. "It's mostly for petty crimes, but there were three charges of fraud. One in California having to do with a yoga studio and the second being the GoFundMe scam out of Colorado and the one you knew about in Arizona. The Colorado case is the only open case against him, which, to be honest, surprised me more than anything."

"What are the ramifications of that charge?" Cole asked.



“It’s a Class 2 felony, punishable by up to twenty-five years in prison and fines, which can total a million dollars, which would be on top of the money fraudulently raised during the scam.”

“He said they’d raised a quarter of a million dollars. Did they take all of the money?” Carson asked.

Cisco nodded. “Yeah, every last penny. We might be able to mitigate his sentence if the money is returned to GoFundMe so the donations can be given back to the people who donated the funds.”

“Where the hell are we going to get two hundred fifty thousand dollars?” Cole’s voice broke. He swiped angrily at tears flowing down his face. “I’ve got a mortgage to pay. Three kids to put through college. I just can’t—”

“Why do we have to pay his dues?” Carson asked angrily. “We’re under no obligation to help him or Martha.”

“That baby is our little brother or sister. No matter the situation, no baby should be born in prison. I guess we could take a second mortgage out on the house.” Cole looked to Cassie, who shook her head.

“Before we even talk about the money, the two of you need to figure out what exactly you want from this man. Do you want him to stick around Salem and be a father? Do you want to help him out and not see him for another thirty years? Do you just want him to take his circus full of monkeys and leave town?”

When Cole shrugged, Cassie continued. “I love you, Cole. You know I do, but I love our family more. I won’t let you bankrupt us for a man you haven’t seen in thirty years.” Cassie took a ragged breath.

“I’ve always dreamed about having a father,” Cole admitted. “When Cass was pregnant with Laurel, I remember feeling so ill-equipped to be a father myself. I mean, Mom was great, but I didn’t know if I would fuck things up like he did with us.”

Carson set a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I was the same way. Truman was too. His father was a hands-off kind of guy, so he didn’t have much of a role model to follow either. When we brought the babies home from the hospital, we were too busy trying to keep them and ourselves alive to worry about what kind of parents we’d be. Remember?”

Truman nodded. “When they got to the point of holding their own bottles and sleeping through the night, I mentioned being worried I wouldn’t be a good father, and I remember Carson telling me to look at our three babies. Our kids were happy and healthy because we made sure their needs came first. All these years later, it’s still the case.”

“I’m not sure what I want from Corny,” Carson admitted. “I was twelve years old when he left for good. I remember how Mom would cry at night when she was alone in her room and thought we were sleeping. That went on for months after he left. Then—” He took a shuddering breath. “—when Mom got sick. I called him so many times, and he never responded. He missed her funeral and showed up a few days later, wanting to know what Mom left him in her will.”

“I didn’t know he was here after Mom died.” Cole looked at his brother as if Carson were a stranger.

“I was trying to protect you.”

“So how come I don’t feel protected?” Cole shouted. “You lied to me and shut me out of making decisions for myself. How can I ever forgive you for that?”

“I don’t know,” Carson admitted, tears glinting in his eyes.

Jace raised his hand in the air as if he were about to order more wine. “I may have a solution to part of your problem if you want to hear it.”

All eyes turned to Jace. Cole nodded while Carson kept his eyes on his uneaten pizza.

“What if I pay back the scam money? Along with the hospital bills associated with Corny’s dialysis and surgery. Hell, I can foot the bill for the baby’s birth and Martha’s care, too, if need be. You all know the kind of money my father left me. What’s it for if not to help my family?”

Carson cleared his throat and wiped his misty eyes. “That’s very sweet, Jace. Ordinarily, I would wave off your help, but Truman and I don’t have the resources to pay this debt or the hospital bills that are going to rack up.”

“Who’s going to donate a kidney?” Cole asked. “You? Me? One of our kids? What if he decides to leave town after the surgery? What if he doesn’t want to be my father? What if he abandons the baby like he abandoned us?” The pain in Cole’s eyes was raw and devastating. Ronan wished he could hug his friend but felt glued to his seat.

“I don’t know, Cole.” Carson grabbed his napkin and dabbed his eyes. “I can’t answer any of those questions. I’m putting my foot down at the kids giving Corny a kidney. None of them are old enough to understand the physical ramifications of what they’re doing.”

“I agree,” Cole said.

“I suppose the next thing is to get tested to see if one of us is a match. I’m not sure I’d do it. Does that make me an awful man?” Carson blinked back unshed tears.

“Would you give me a kidney?” Ronan asked.

“In a heartbeat,” Carson said.

“Me too,” Cole agreed. “You’ve always been here for us and our kids. Mom loves the hell out of you, and I’ve seen the way you hug her in those rare moments when you’re able, and I know you love her as much as your own mother. All Corny ever gave our mother was pain, but does he deserve to suffer or die for that?”

No one had an answer to that question.

“Is he really sick, Ten?” Carson asked. “You seemed to be the only one of us who could pick anything up from him.”

“I have a hard time reading my mother, and it was the same with David when he was alive. I’m sure that the shock of seeing him after all these years, combined with how close you are to the situation, is the reason you’re not getting a clear read on him. I can see how sick he is. For a man in his early sixties, he reads much older, thanks to the way he abused his body over time. It could be that the kidney is the first of many health issues in his future.” Ten shook his head. “I hate to be the one to tell you that.”

“Is he out to con us in any way?” Carson pushed his plate away with a sour look on his face, as if the thought of food was making him nauseous.

“Not where it comes to his health. I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you he and Destiny are dining on lobster tails tonight.”

“I figured as much.” Cole sighed. He looked toward the pool, where the kids were finishing their pizza and laughing at something Wolf said.

“As far as I see things, we don’t need to make any firm decisions tonight,” Ronan

said. “You both need to get blood tests to see if you’re even a match. You might not be.” He paused for a moment to let his words sink in. “Cisco, are you going to arrest Corny?”

“Not right now. If Jace is serious about paying back the money Corny stole, I’ll get in touch with the DA handling that case and see what can be worked out. Just a warning that you might have to hire a lawyer to act on Corny’s behalf. I doubt he has one on retainer.”

Jace turned to Fitzgibbon, who nodded. “I am serious. I can wire the funds tomorrow if need be. Same goes for getting Corny a lawyer. He’s going to need an apartment too. The Hawthorne Hotel is expensive.”

“Yeah, it is.” Carson sighed. “Jace, we’ll set up a payment plan to get you back all the money you’re spending on our father.”

“That’s not necessary.” Jace smiled. “I always feel like you all do so much for Aurora and Fitz, and all I’ve done is book my private jet for us when we travel. I want to do this for you because I can.”

“Okay,” Carson agreed. Cole nodded.

“If that’s the case,” Ronan said with a big smile, “what would you think of sponsoring Jell-O wrestling for our next block party?”

“What the hell is Jell-O wrestling?” Cassie asked.

“Just what it sounds like.” Ronan laughed. “There’s a large inflatable pool thing set up inside a boxing ring. The pool is filled with Jell-O—usually, it’s lime green. The women wear skimpy bikinis, and the men wear Speedos. You know, like professional wrestlers.”

“I’m going to regret asking, but how do you know about this?” Ten asked.

“YouTube.” Ronan grinned. “You’d be amazed at the videos Everly and I watch at night.”

“Like the time you got her interested in Roller Derby? So much so that she cried when I wouldn’t get her roller skates?” Ten didn’t wait for Ronan to answer. “Or the time you showed her videos of baby goats in pajamas, and she cried for two weeks because we wouldn’t buy her a goat? What the hell would we do with a goat?”

“Milk it?” Ronan suggested. “We could make goat cheese and sell it at the next school fundraiser.”

Carson snorted and started to laugh. Cole joined him. Within seconds, the entire table was cracking up over how exactly one would milk a pajama-wearing baby goat.

Ronan appreciated this moment of levity, even though it came at his expense. He knew that in the morning, some heavy bills were going to come due. Carson and Cole were going to need to have a heart-to-heart with their father, at the very least. There were going to be some hard questions coming his way. Ronan could only hope Corny had the right answers.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Tennyson

After the family meeting wrapped up, Ten and Ronan headed home with the kids. Ezra had gone down for the night with ease, but Everly was wide-awake and full of questions. She hadn't been able to hear what the adults were talking about, but her gift had told her what was going on. Ten's daughter might only be six years old, but some days, it felt like she was going on forty.

“Why did Corny leave Uncle Carson and Cole?” Everly asked. “Are you and Dad going to leave me and Ezzie one day?”

“Never!” Tennyson swore. His heart felt like it was being squeezed by an icy fist. “Nothing on earth could keep me away from you and your brother.”

Everly looked placated by Ten's emphatic answer. “So how come Corny left?”

Tennyson's mind spun with all the possible answers to Everly's question. None of them were suitable for a first grader. All the parenting books Ten read talked about the terrible twos and breaking habits like thumb-sucking and teaching your child how to soothe themselves. None of those books ever mentioned what to tell kids when one or both of their parents abandoned them.

“Corny is one of those people who only think about themselves rather than their families,” Ronan said as he walked into the kitchen. He grabbed a ginger ale from the fridge and two cups, one for Everly and one for himself. “He had his own dreams to chase that didn't include being a father.”

Everly was quiet for a few seconds. “Now he’s sick and wants his family to help him. Uncle Carson wants to help him. I don’t understand. They should tell him to get lost like he told them, right?”

“It’s not that easy, honey.” Ten hated this conversation. What he hated more was his child knowing that sometimes daddies left their families. “Carson and Cole might be the only people who can save Corny’s life with a donated kidney. They need to get tested to see if they’re a match.”

“They both are,” Everly said. “Uncle Carson isn’t sure he wants to do it. He worries that he might not be able to be there for his kids when he gets older. Uncle Cole wants to do it, but Cassie is angry that he would put himself at risk for that no-good, lousy bum.”

A tinkling laugh sounded from across the table. Bertha Craig materialized. “No-good, lousy bum is the perfect way to describe my ex-husband.”

“Bertha!” Ronan got out of his seat and walked around the table to hug the spirit. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too, handsome.” Bertha turned to Everly, who flew into her arms.

“Mimi!” Everly held on tight, pressing a kiss to Bertha’s cheek.

“Why don’t you head up to bed,” Ronan suggested to his daughter when the hug ended.

“She already knows the worst, Ronan, and time is wasting. I’m not sure how long I can stay.” Bertha slid into her chair and folded her hands in front of her.

Ten switched gears instantly. “Where do you want to start?”



“Corny’s really sick?” Bertha asked. “This isn’t some ruse to trick you all out of money?”

“He is sick,” Ten affirmed. “His skin was pale, and he had dark circles under his eyes. When I tried to read him, there were a lot of other things on the verge of causing problems.”

“That man never took care of himself. He drank. He smoked. Ate anything he wanted. Now it’s time to pay the piper, and he’s flat broke.” Bertha shook her head.

“That’s about the size of it. Jace offered to step in and cover the cost of Corny’s health and legal troubles.” Ten still couldn’t believe Jace’s willingness to help. Not that their friend would lend a hand, but that he would fork over a quarter of a million dollars to pay back money a man he’d never met had stolen. Then, there was the problem of how much money a good lawyer would cost. The transplant surgery itself would be hugely expensive. It wouldn’t surprise Ten if the total price tag exceeded a million dollars.

“I know. I overheard Cassie and Cole discussing the situation, but they didn’t know I was there.” Bertha sighed.

“Have you spoken to either of your sons?” Ten asked. He could sense Bertha’s pain. All she was concerned with was the safety of her sons where her ex-husband was concerned. She worried after their physical health if they agreed to help Corny, but also their mental health when their father flew the coop once again.

“No. I’m not sure how I want to handle this situation. I needed some advice first. Is Corny really remarried with a baby on the way?”

“We’re not sure if he’s married,” Ronan said. “Cisco went looking for a marriage license but hasn’t found one yet. Corny has a ton of aliases, so it might take a while.”

“Calvin Coolidge,” Everly said.

Ronan wore a stunned look. “What does the former president have to do with Corny?”

“That’s the name he used to marry Martha. They got hitched in Walla Walla. What a funny name for a town!” Everly giggled.

“Who needs Google when we’ve got Everly?” Ten laughed. “Is there anything else you know about this situation?”

“The baby is a girl. Corny’s always wanted a daughter. He dipped his wick from here to Walla Walla but never had any other babies until now.” Everly wore a confused look, as if she didn’t quite understand the message she had delivered.

“Dipped his wick?” Bertha asked on a laugh.

Everly nodded. “He’s proud of his wick. I don’t know what candles have to do with having babies.”

“Anyway,” Ten said, eager to change the subject. Everly had lost enough of her innocence speaking with spirits who’d been horribly abused in life; now wasn’t the time for a birds-and-bees talk. “Let’s get back to Corny’s health. Does he get a kidney?”

“Yes and no.” Everly paused. “No. Yes. Urg ! This is so frustrating.”

“What do you mean?” Ten had never seen Everly struggle with her gift in this way. Her answers were always solid and dependable.

“Sometimes he does. Sometimes he doesn’t. I’ve never seen anything like that before.

Maybe I didn't have enough milk today and my gift is wonky."

Bertha reached out for her granddaughter's hand. "I don't think there's anything wrong with your gift. I think Carson and Cole keep changing their minds."

"That makes sense," Everly said with a nod. "There are so many different outcomes and a lot of tears and heartbreak."

"That's what Corny's famous for, leaving a trail of broken hearts in his wake." Bertha was silent for a few seconds, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. "I know I need to talk to my sons about their father and doing the right thing, but there's such a big part of me who wants that stupid son of a goat to suffer."

Ten knew Bertha wanted to add like I did but had thought better of it. According to Carson and Cole, Bertha had tried to hide her breast cancer diagnosis from her sons. Since neither of them had come into their psychic gifts at that time, they'd been none the wiser. By the time Bertha finally told her sons what was happening, she'd exhausted all medical intervention. Carson and Cole could only sit and comfort their mother as she died slowly and painfully.

"No, you don't want him to suffer, Mimi." Everly offered Bertha a bright smile. "You're angry because your babies are hurting and you aren't here to comfort them. You forgave Corny a long time ago. Carson and Cole need you to tell them they should forgive him too. Their hearts hurt so much right now." Everly set a hand over her own heart. "I haven't ever felt pain like this before, not even from restless spirits. They're angry at each other and at Corny."

"Out of the mouths of babes." Ronan waggled his eyebrows at Bertha.

"Just because you forgive someone doesn't mean you have to let them back into your life, Mimi. You told Daddy that once. I shouldn't have been listening, but I was, and

it's a good thing, too, because now I can give your advice back to you."

Bertha nodded along with Everly. "I gave Tenny that advice about his own father, and look where that's gotten us. Ten and David haven't spoken in months."

"I've been thinking a lot about David today. On the one hand, I'm grateful he didn't leave our family like Corny did, but on the other, he's embracing this other child in a way David never did with River. It's all so confusing." The last thing Ten wanted to do now was contemplate his own relationship with his father, not with Bertha's time running short.

"I have faith that David will come to admit his mistakes with River over time, but I don't think that kind of self-reflection is in Corny's nature. I want to tell my boys just who their father is, but part of me thinks I should keep that to myself. You're both right, this is all very confusing."

"The hardest thing to do is admitting when you're wrong," Ronan said. "I don't think Corny was running away from you and the boys for all of these years. I think he was running away from himself. Jude talked a lot about that when we were in Arizona with Running Eagle. The problem with the plan to leave the reservation was that everywhere Jude went, there he was. I'm sure Corny felt the same way."

"Look at you, Ronan, being all philosophical on us." Bertha laughed. The happy sound quickly faded. "Here's the big question. Would Corny have come home if he were healthy?" Bertha asked.

"Ask him," Everly said. "You have a lot of yucky emotions in your heart, and your aura looks like a mud puddle. If you want, I'll be there with you when you talk to him."

Bertha's eyes were misty. "You would do that for me, little miss?"

Everly nodded. “You’ve been with me through a lot of hard times with my gift. I want to be there for you.”

“I’m going to think long and hard about the advice you all gave me. Toodles!” With a wave, Bertha was gone.

“Family is hard, Daddy.” Everly climbed into Ten’s lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. “It’s especially hard when someone is being a complete and total dumbass.”

Ten snorted. He didn’t like his daughter saying that word, but it was the most apt in this situation. “I can’t argue with you there, but when people are being dumbasses, that’s the best time to let them know you still love them and how much you want to help.”

“I love that you’re so patient with Dad, and he’s a dumbass all the time.” With a giggle, Everly kissed Ten’s cheek and hurried to Ronan.

“You call me a dumbass and then want a hug good night?” Ronan grabbed his daughter and twirled her around in the air. “Do you want me to read to you before bed?”

Everly nodded and tucked her head under Ronan’s chin. “Something with a happy ending.”

“You got it.” Ronan waved to Ten and headed out of the room. A few seconds later, Ten heard his footsteps on the stairs.

Ten hadn’t been able to see how the drama with Corny would play out. Based on what Everly said, it could go either way. It made Ten wonder what he would do in a similar situation. Would he give his own father a kidney, even knowing David’s faults? Would those very faults be the determining factor in his father living or

dying?

Scarily enough, Ten didn't know which choice he would make.

Ronan

Despite the family drama swirling around them all, Ronan had gotten a good night's sleep. He'd been up early, wanting to go over what little information the police had on Sebastian Stark's death. He hoped Paul really did have evidence the police hadn't bothered to collect in their rush to judgment over how the teenager died. The last thing he wanted was to be responsible for bringing more pain to the broken man.

"Have you been able to connect with Bash, Ten?" Fitzgibbon asked as he pulled up to the Stark house.

"No. Honestly, I've been so caught up in this thing with Corny. Bertha came to see us last night, asking for advice."

"How's she taking all of this?" Jude asked, turning in his seat to look at Ten.

"Not well. She hasn't spoken to Carson and Cole yet because she's not quite sure where she stands on the idea of one of her sons giving up a vital organ to a man who has been out of their lives for thirty years."

"Maybe someone else will be a match when they run Corny through the organ transplant database," Jude suggested.

"He's a criminal with a history of drug and alcohol abuse. The only thing he's likely to get is a swift kick in the pants." Fitzgibbon shook his head. "Damn, that didn't come out right. Corny doesn't deserve to die because he made mistakes in life, but I'm also not sure if he deserves the kind of help Carson or Cole would have to give

him.”

“We all agree we’d give each other a kidney with no questions asked,” Ronan said. He’d donate his own heart if it would save Ten or the kids. “It’s a different matter when you’re giving the gift of life to a total stranger.”

“Corny is their father,” Ten said, sounding as if he was waffling on the family connection.

“For all intents and purposes, Corny is a stranger ,” Jude said. “Giving money like Jace volunteered to do is the easy part. Going into that operating room with two kidneys and coming out with one is another story. Not to mention all the dangers associated with the surgery—bad reactions to anesthesia, blood clots, strokes, MRSA, falling in love with a hot doc, and boning him from your hospital bed with all the alarms blaring because your pulse is tachycardic. Then there’s all the pounding footsteps racing to your rescue as you wipe your lips with your sleeve. ‘I’m so sorry, Nurse Cumsalot. I was giving the patient mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, through his dick.’” Jude snorted, laughing at himself.

“Slow down there, Grey’s Anatomy .” Fitz rolled his eyes.

Ronan hooted along with Jude.

“Get it together, you two,” Fitzgibbon said, all business now. “We’ve got a grieving father in there who needs answers about the death of his son. We’re the only ones who can give them to him.” Fitz eyed Ten in the rearview mirror. “You good to go?”

“Yeah, I can feel Paul’s pain from here. It’s like the house is saturated in grief like a clothesline full of laundry in a hurricane.” Ten shook his head. “I can’t sense Bash, but we’ll see what happens when we get in there.” Ten opened his door and got out of the SUV.



Ronan came around to Ten's side, holding him back at the top of the driveway while Jude and Fitzgibbon headed for the side door. "I'm sorry for being such an idiot with Jude. My mind should have been on the case." More than anything, Ronan hated disappointing his husband.

"It's not that, Ronan. Paul is just so sad. The only thing he has to live for is solving his son's death. Even if there is a killer and we somehow manage to catch him or her, there is nothing left for him at the end of the line."

"We'll just have to make him see there is something else besides grief. There are so many support groups for parents who've lost children. He could start his own foundation in Bash's name. He's got a lot left to do here before he reunites with his family."

Ten grinned. "It's funny to hear you talk like me. I guess you have been paying attention all along. You're a good man, Ronan. We're lucky to have you."

Ronan felt himself blushing. "Paul Stark is a good man too. Let's go help him."

Ten and Ronan followed behind Jude and Fitz to where Paul Stark was holding the door open for them. Finding themselves in a small kitchen, Ronan noticed it was immaculately clean. There were no dirty dishes in the sink and nothing drying on the rack. He had a feeling Paul lived on fast food and takeout, just like Ronan had done after his divorce.

"This way, gentlemen." Paul led the way into the dining room, which was also clean and orderly. There were stacks of neatly organized files on the table, along with a laptop computer open to a photograph of the Stark family in obviously happier times. The walls were peppered with photographs of Bash in different stages of life, from the time he was a baby through his teenage years. Ronan could feel Paul Stark's grief wrap around him like a shroud.

Stark took the seat at the head of the table and indicated the others should do the same. He reached for an accordion folder, like the one he'd brought into West Side Magick, and passed it to Fitzgibbon. "This is all of the information I have about my son's death, the people at the party that night, and the fraternity."

Fitzgibbon opened the file with Ronan looking over his shoulder. Each section was organized as meticulously as the rest of the house. Ronan had been afraid they were just going to get a jumble of random paperwork, but he should have known Paul Stark would have been organized, treating his son's case like a full-time job.

"Here's Bash's phone." Paul picked up the darkened device and tapped the screen. A picture of their family appeared on the screen. "The passcode is 1-2-3-4. I haven't touched any of the messages, photographs, or anything." He passed the phone to Fitzgibbon.

"Did the police ever look at it or download the data on it?" Ronan asked.

Stark shook his head. "It was on his body when his frat brothers found him. The medical examiner gave it back to me, along with the friendship bracelet Bash wore."

"So, you had the screen replaced?" Jude asked.

"No, the phone was intact, which I always thought was odd, considering he'd fallen down a flight of stairs." Stark's gaze stayed on Jude, who wore a quizzical look.

"How the hell would the phone have survived a trip down the stairs? A few months ago, Wolf dropped my phone from the couch to the carpeted floor, which was maybe a two-foot fall, and the screen cracked."

"I always wondered the same thing myself," Stark said. "I brought that up to the detectives on the case, but they didn't seem interested in investigating further. To be

honest, no one has ever been interested in Bash's death." Paul Stark sighed heavily. "After my son died, I tried to go back to my office while the police worked my son's death investigation. My performance was awful. I was distracted, angry, and heartbroken. Then my wife got sick. Thankfully, my company offered me early retirement, so I kept my pension and stock options. After Maya's funeral, I threw myself into Bash's case with all the energy I had. This is the result of the last three years of my life." Stark pointed to the folder sitting in front of Fitzgibbon. "I promised my wife on her deathbed that I would get to the bottom of our son's death. I've been through every avenue possible. I hired private detectives, called the Salem Police detectives once a week, went to see the frat's chapter president. I got nowhere. A few weeks ago, I was streaming Dateline, and the episode with Tennyson was on. I was surprised to find you lived and worked here in Salem. I mean, I knew that this city was full of psychics"—Stark made air quotes over the word—"but I never actually imagined your gifts were real. I assumed it was all older women dressed in a turban, rubbing a crystal ball with a cat in her lap."

Ten laughed. "A lot of people think those kinds of stereotypes are true. I saw my first spirit when I was thirteen years old. It was a neighbor who'd recently died, and she wanted me to pass along a message to her granddaughter, who was one of my classmates."

"What was the message?" Stark asked.

"It was a code word the two of them had set up before the grandmother died. My classmate didn't believe me at first when I told her I'd spoken to her grandmother, but once I said the word, everything changed. She hugged me and thanked me again and again. Not all readings turn out that way."

"Why are you telling me this?" Stark asked, looking wary of Ten's answer.

"I'm not sensing Bash here in this house. Maya's not here either," Ten said sadly.

“Ronan asked me to get you a few things that belonged to Bash so that you could use them to connect to him.” Stark got up from the table and left the room.

“Damn, Ten, you’re not sensing this kid at all?” Ronan asked.

Ten shook his head. “It could be that he reunited with his mother and they’ve crossed over. Maybe they’re happy where they are.”

“I can’t imagine Maya and Bash would have left Paul all alone here with all this pain and grief.” Jude’s attention was on Ten. “Look at Bertha Craig. She hasn’t left her sons’ sides in the eight years since she died. Christ, she’s been with Cole longer in death than his father ever was in life.”

“Family is as complicated after death as it is before,” Ten said. “Sometimes it gets more complicated when people die unexpectedly like Sebastian. Those spirits can be lost, confused, and angry. Maya knew she was going to pass and be reunited with her son. She would have been a great help to Bash, taking care of his spirit, like she took care of him on this side of the veil.”

“I hope you’re right, Tennyson.” Paul Stark walked back into the room carrying a trophy in one hand and the aforementioned friendship bracelet in the other. He set both items in front of Tennyson. “I don’t want my wife and son to be sitting shiva over me, watching me mourn them while I wait to die. I want them to soak up all heaven has to offer. If that’s a thing?”

“It is a thing,” Ten agreed. “I’ll do my absolute best to reach out to Bash and Maya after the guys finish talking about the evidence you’ve given them. Where was Bash’s favorite place in the house?”

“His gaming chair in the living room.” Stark pointed.

Picking up the trophy and friendship bracelet, Ten left the dining room and settled himself on the large sofa.

“What’s he doing?” Stark asked.

“Ten always takes a few minutes to clear his mind and meditate.” Ronan smiled fondly at his husband, remembering all the times he’d thought Ten was nuts when he’d done this during the Michael Frye case. “While he’s doing that, why don’t you give us a summary of what you’ve learned over the years.”

“You know, Detective O’Mara, I’m not one for conspiracy theories, but within hours of my son’s death, the university and the fraternity were spewing company lines about Bash’s death being a tragic accident and espousing the dangers of underage drinking on campus. Both offered me their deepest condolences but never responded to my calls after the funeral. Hell, the bastards didn’t even come to the funeral. Same went for the police and members of the fraternity.”

Ronan could see the anger welling up in Paul Stark. After his son died, he’d been blocked from information at every turn, with no one working to find out if Bash truly had died in an accident or if foul play had been involved. If he were in Stark’s shoes, Ronan would feel the same way.

“Salem State sent me an honorary degree in Bash’s name, as if that would somehow lessen the blow of never seeing my only child again.” Stark shrugged. “As for the evidence, I’ve got the names and last known addresses for all the guys who were members of Sigma Chi the night my son died. Same for the higher-ups in the frat. I’ve tried reaching out to various people over the years, and after taking my first call, no one ever spoke to me again. I’m hoping that with your badges and search warrants and whatnot, you’ll be able to break through the bullshit and get me some answers. I want people to be held accountable. The cops for not investigating. The frat for pouring booze down my son’s throat. The asshole who pushed my son down the

stairs. Find them. Punish them.” Flexing his fisted hands, Stark got up from the table and left the room.

Ronan had worked several cases over the course of his career involving colleges and frat houses. He’d run up against the same roadblocks with people being unwilling to cooperate for fear of making the school or the fraternity chapter look bad. He’d also dealt with students who had been too drunk to remember anything from the night in question.

With three years having passed from the time Bash Stark died, Ronan knew he was in for an uphill battle. Unless, of course, Ten was able to speak with Bash’s spirit and hear the account of that last night from the man himself.

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Tennyson

It was strange sitting in someone else's living room. Ten was surrounded by the metaphorical ghosts of Maya and Sebastian Stark. Unfortunately, their actual ghosts were nowhere to be found. Bash's trophy and his friendship bracelet sat on the coffee table in front of him.

Ten couldn't help but think about Everly and Ezra. If anything happened to them, what would be the keepsakes Tennyson would cherish the most?

"Ten?"

Ronan's voice startled Ten. He jumped up and spun around to see his husband standing behind him. "You okay?"

Ten shook his head to dislodge his thoughts about their kids. Thinking about contacting Paul Stark's lost wife and son wasn't much better. "I will be when I can reach Bash and Maya. Neither of them are here."

"I don't want to add to your anxiety, but Paul's really hoping you'll be able to speak with one or both of them."

"Him and me both." Ten looked behind Ronan to see Fitz and Jude with Paul Stark. They took seats around the sofa, being careful to avoid the empty gaming chair favored by Sebastian. Taking his own seat, Ten reached out and picked up the bracelet. It had the name Simon on it. "Who's Simon?" Ten asked.

Stark shook his head. "I don't know. Well, not for certain anyway. The president of the local Sigma Chi chapter was Simon Westlake. From what I understand, he's now the regional president and lives here in Salem. Other than that, there were no boys named Simon at his high school. He's not gay, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't thinking that at all," Ten said. He'd worked cold cases long enough with Ronan to know that the bracelet was a definite clue. Parents didn't always know the ins and outs of what their teenagers were up to, especially when they were out of the house and away at college. If they could find this Simon, it might get them a lot closer to finally finding out what happened the night Sebastian died.

Closing his eyes, Ten focused on the bracelet he held in the palms of his hands. He opened his gift and reached out for Paul Stark's lost son. "Sebastian, my name is Tennyson Grimm. Your father asked me to come here today to speak with you about what happened the night you died. If you can hear me, please let me know."

The house remained silent.

Ten took a deep breath. It wasn't uncommon for spirits to be shy, especially ones that had died violently at the hands of someone else. "Sebastian, can you let me know if your mother is with you? Your father would finally be able to find some peace if he knew you two were together."

Beside Ten, Paul Stark set his face in his hands. Ten could feel the man's despair and desperation. He wished there was more he could do for the bereaved father, but without Sebastian stepping forward, there wasn't a lot else he could do.

"I'm scared," a voice said.

"Bash, is that you?" Ten asked. "What are you afraid of?" Ten felt Paul Stark tense beside him. There would be time to explain what was happening to him later. Right



now, Ten needed to focus all of his energy on the spirit.

“I’m afraid my father won’t forgive me for drinking the night I died. I didn’t want to see the look of shame in his eyes, so I stayed away. I stayed away from Mom too.”

Ten gasped. “Bash is here. He’s saying that he’s afraid you’ll be mad at him for drinking. He’s also been avoiding your wife for the same reason.”

“I’m not mad at him. I could never be angry with my son. Never.” Pausing for a moment, Paul took a deep breath. “Can you ask Bash to prove it’s really him? That you’re really speaking to him?” Paul Stark sounded tired. As if he could sleep for a month and still wake up tired.

“Tell my dad I wanted to dress up like Captain America when I played one of the wise men in our church play.”

Ten snorted. “Bash wants me to remind you about the time he wanted Captain America to be one of the wise men.”

Paul gasped. “There are no pictures of that or mentions anywhere on social media or in the interviews I gave the press after Bash’s death. I’m sorry to have doubted you, Tennyson, but I had to know my son was really here.”

“I understand completely.” Movement out of the corner of Ten’s eye caught his attention. Bash had made himself visible and settled himself into his gaming chair. The chair swiveled so the spirit was facing the sofa instead of the television.

“Holy shit, is that you, Bash?” Paul asked, sounding as stunned as he looked.

“I’m not sure if I can make my father see me, but I’ll try.” Seconds later, a barely there Bash appeared.

Paul Stark started to cry.

“I don’t have a lot of time. I can feel myself getting weaker by the second.”

“Can you tell us what happened the night you died?” Ten asked.

“I’d managed to get through pledge week. The party I was at the night I died was the final step before I was initiated into the frat. I was assigned to be Simon’s gopher. I had to get him cups of beer to drink and whichever girl he chose to... Well, you know.”

“I know,” Ten said. “Your autopsy said you had three times the legal limit of alcohol in your system.”

“Yeah, for every drink I brought Simon, he made me drink two. It was his version of Darwinism. Survival of the fittest. Whoever was still standing at midnight would be initiated.”

“Did you make it to midnight?” As Ten spoke, Sebastian began to fade from view.

“Love you, Dad,” Bash called before disappearing completely.

“Wait! Come back!” Paul shouted. “Bring my son back. You have to bring him back.”

Ronan wrapped an arm around Paul Stark and led him out of the living room. A few seconds later, Ten heard the sound of a can cracking open and knew it was beer and not soda. “Fitz, can you go help?”

Without saying a word, Fitz got up from the sofa and moved toward the kitchen.

“Is he gone?” Jude asked.

“Yeah. He is.” With Bash having a hard time materializing, Ten had known they weren’t going to be able to get a lot out of him. “I should have asked him who killed him. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, Ten,” Jude said earnestly. “How were you supposed to know he would leave the house when he couldn’t maintain his visibility? I assumed when he faded out that the two of you would keep talking.”

“I thought so too,” Ten admitted. “Not every spirit has the kind of mastery over themselves like Bertha Craig does. When she showed up in our kitchen last night, she was solid enough to hug Ronan and Everly. Obviously, Bash hasn’t learned those skills yet.”

“We’ve lost Paul Stark for the day,” Ronan said, walking back into the living room. “He’s on his second Bud in the last two minutes, and there’s a lot more in the fridge. I left Fitz with him. To be honest, I think he’s more distraught now after being able to see his son than he was before Bash’s spirit made contact.”

Jude sighed, stretching his arms over his head. “We should get back to the office and go through the documents Paul gave us. That way, in the morning, when he’s sobered up, we can let him know what we’ve gotten done.”

“Good idea, Jude,” Ten said, feeling buried under the weight of guilt. He should have gotten straight to the point with Bash rather than lollygagging around.

“I’ll go grab the file and will meet you back at the car.” Jude left the room, leaving Ten and Ronan alone.

“Do you think you’ll be able to contact Bash again?” Ronan asked.

“I hope so. It might not be for a while, but I have a secret weapon at home that might be able to help us out.” After dinner, he’d see if Everly could reach out to Bash and ask him to tell the rest of the story. With any luck, she might be able to get Bash and his mother back together. It killed Ten to think that Maya had been dead for two years and hadn’t been able to reunite with her son.

“Well, if our little miss is going to put in some work on this case, it’s only fair we have ice cream for dessert.” Ronan waggled his eyebrows.

“No arguments here.” Ten picked up the friendship bracelet with Simon’s name on it. “Do you think Paul will mind if I bring this with us?”

“With the way he’s drinking, I’m sure he won’t even notice it’s gone.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Let’s get out of here.” Ten slipped the bracelet into his pocket. He wanted to dive into the documents Paul Stark had given them. He knew Ronan would be interested in finding Simon and setting up an interview with him. When that happened, Ten would be ready for him.

Ronan

Back at the office, Ronan quickly made copies of the information Paul Stark had given them. After Fitz brought up sandwiches from Cassie's shop, they'd dug into the file. Ronan couldn't decide if he wanted to plow ahead and read everything or to get into Bash's phone and go through his text messages and pictures.

Fitzgibbon made the decision for him. He slid Bash's phone across the table to Ronan. "It's all yours. Figure out who he was messaging with the night he died. Look into his social media apps. See if there are any hidden files or emails he's stowed away. See if there were any messages from the frat. How did Bash know what was expected of him. And then—"

"Hold on, Cap. I've got it. We've done this a hundred times before." Ronan studied his boss, noticing Fitzgibbon seemed to be on edge. "Are you okay?"

Fitz sighed. "I saw that boy this morning. They don't usually show themselves when I'm there. I guess seeing the ghost of an eighteen-year-old kid really shook me. I started thinking about Greeley and Aurora, and my mind just sort of imploded."

"I get like that, too, when kids are involved. Last week, Everly fell off her bike and skinned her knee. I was right there with her when it happened, but I couldn't get to her in time before she hit the ground. Part of me knew it wasn't serious and a Little Mermaid bandage would fix her up, but the other part of me, the tiger father, was out of my mind that my cub was hurt. There isn't anything worse in this world than losing a child. Witnessing Paul Stark come to terms with the fact that his son was really gone took ten years off my life. When Bash appeared, his entire demeanor

changed. He smiled, and I could feel the hope and love flowing through him, but the minute his son vanished, he crashed back to Earth like Icarus after his wings were melted by the sun.”

“Part of me didn’t want to leave him home alone to drink himself into oblivion.” Fitz sighed.

“I hear you.” Ronan had definitely identified with Paul Stark’s pain. Ronan’s ex-husband leaving him for another woman and filing for divorce had been what tipped him into a battle with alcohol. Ronan hadn’t had a drink in eight years, but he’d seen his old self in Paul Stark. When this case was over, he’d have a chat with the grieving father about possibly getting himself into rehab and therapy.

Stark might not want to hear what Ronan had to say until Bash had been reunited with his mother and his killer had been identified. Ronan found himself praying that Sebastian was murdered rather than dying in a freak accident. He wasn’t sure Stark would believe his son had died without foul play being involved, even if he was presented with ironclad proof. Ronan hoped his little ace in the hole would be able to contact Sebastian later tonight so they could hear the rest of what happened that tragic night three years ago.

Grabbing a fresh legal pad, Ronan turned his attention to Sebastian Stark’s phone. He keyed the passcode and was faced with a picture of Bash and his parents. They were standing in front of the library at Salem University. He couldn’t help thinking Bash would have been better off enrolling at UMass, like his parents had done.

Tapping the photo app, Ronan swiped through the last images Bash had ever taken. There were selfies he’d taken with a girl, both of them with their arms around each other. There were also a couple of pics of Bash serving one of his frat brothers at the party that last night. Ronan wondered if that brother was Simon Westlake. The friendship bracelet with the name Simon was visible on his wrist. Ronan assumed it

was part of the pledge week festivities.

His next stop was to scroll through Bash's contacts. He found a cell number for Master Simon and called it from his own phone. He'd thought for a moment of using Sebastian's phone but didn't want to freak the man out. There would be time for that later if he was the reason Bash was three years cold in his untimely grave. The line rang several times before a voicemail picked up, with Simon Westlake identifying himself in the greeting. Ronan left a quick message, letting the man know they needed to speak with him as the Salem Police were about to close the case for good, with him needing to dot his i's and cross his t's.

"Pants on fire!" Jude said when Ronan ended the call.

Ronan grinned at his friend, who'd called him out with Everly's favorite line. "If I called you and said I wanted to interview you in the suspicious death of one of your pledges three years ago, would you call me back?"

"I don't call you back when you leave a message about going for hot wings." Jude waggled his eyebrows.

"Asshole," Ronan muttered.

"Boys," Fitzgibbon cautioned before going back to a packet of papers he'd been looking through. "Paul Stark printed out the roll call for the Salem University chapter of Sigma Chi. It has names, phone numbers, and has home addresses, not their campus mailbox numbers. Why the hell wasn't this done by the Salem Police?"

"You know why," Ronan said, shaking his head. "No one thought there was foul play, so the detectives assigned to the case did no investigating or any follow-up. They just let the case go cold, all the while refusing to return Paul Stark's calls and not seeing him when he came by the station. I hate to say this, but all of this happened

on Cisco's watch.”

“Yeah, I've been thinking the same thing.” Fitzgibbon frowned as he spoke. “We're not bringing that up. All I want to do is find out what really happened that night. We'll deal with the fallout later.”

“Do you want to set up interviews with the frat brothers?” Ronan asked as his phone rang. “Hold that thought. It's Simon Westlake.” He tapped the button to take the call. “Detective O'Mara.”

“Hey, this is Simon Westlake, president of Sigma Chi. You called earlier about interviewing me.” Simon didn't sound cagey or nervous in the slightest. Ronan's ploy to catch the man off guard had worked like a charm. “You mentioned wanting to talk to me about Sebastian Stark. There's not a lot to tell, but I'm happy to help.” He didn't sound happy in the slightest.

“Hi, Mr. Westlake. Thank you so much for getting back to me. I'm hoping you're free to meet sometime tomorrow so we can wrap up this case and get it off my desk once and for all.”

“Sure thing. Does one work for you?” Simon asked, sounding almost bored with the conversation.

“Uhh, let me check my schedule.” Ronan fluttered papers in front of him to make it sound like he was actually checking. “That works for me. I can swing by your office. Give me the address.” There was no way Ronan wanted Simon to pick the meeting place. He planned on walking into his office flanked by Fitz and Jude, all three with their guns and badges visible to everyone they passed in the building.

“I'll text you the address. Please be on time. I've got meetings lined up all afternoon.” Without waiting for a response, Simon ended the call.



“What a dick.” Ronan rolled his eyes. Seconds later, the text with Simon’s office address came through. “Well, what do you know. His office is near Lobster Charlie’s. Let’s interview this fucker and then grab lobster rolls.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ten said, walking into the office. “I’ll bring the friendship bracelet with me.”

“You stole Bash Stark’s friendship bracelet?” Jude asked in mock horror.

“There’s no way Paul will miss it. When we left the house, he was three beers into a case of Bud, with another on standby. I’ll bring it back the next time we see him. I just hope we’ll have better news for him than I was able to give him today.”

“Don’t say that, Ten. Thanks to you, Paul Stark saw his son for the first time in three years. He told Bash that he wasn’t angry at him for drinking. That’s going to be what gets Bash to cross over, find his mother, and to forgive himself. He’s suffered in purgatory for the last three years, and you’re the one who’ll bring him into the light.” Ronan knew Ten’s abilities when it came to helping families heal. He had no doubt whatsoever that Ten would do the same for the Stark family.

“I hope you’re right. I—” Ten paused when his phone began to chime in his pocket. “It’s Corny,” he said without bothering to take the device out of his pocket.

“You should get that,” Ronan said.

With a sigh, Ten grabbed his phone and answered. “Hello?”

“It’s Corny. I need you to meet me.” Carson and Cole’s father sounded slightly panicked.

“What do you mean you need to meet with me?” Ten wore a worried look on his

face.

Ronan leaned over Ten's shoulder and tapped the speaker button.

"...want to talk to you about my surgery and my family. You're the only one who can help me." Corny sounded earnest.

"Why do you think I can help you? Your wife called me out as a witch." Ten made the jack-off gesture with his left hand.

"Destiny is sorry she said that. She has the tendency to be a bit dramatic. She was shocked by how accurate your gift is. Can you meet us at this sushi joint across from our hotel?"

Ronan nodded, pointing to himself.

"Pregnant women shouldn't eat sushi. Ronan and I will meet you at Casa Blanco, the Mexican place just down the street from the Hawthorne. We'll be there at five."

"I don't want no cops there," Corny said with a snarl in his voice.

"You don't have a choice," Ten said matter-of-factly. "If you want to speak with me, Ronan comes too, or you can forget about it."

There was no way in hell Ronan was going to let Tennyson meet the con artist duo alone.

"Fine. We'll be there at five." Corny disconnected the phone.

"Fuck me with a chainsaw." Ten sunk into the seat beside Ronan.

Jude snorted. “Tell us how you really feel.”

“I wanted to go home and have dinner with my kids. Now, I’m stuck with this asshole.” It wasn’t like Ten to swear like a sailor unless he was really riled up about something or someone.

“You shouldn’t talk about Ronan that way.” Jude laughed again.

Ronan snickered along with him. “Why does he want to talk to you?”

“I assume he thinks I can somehow get through to Carson and Cole about donating a kidney.” Ten sighed. “Make no mistake, I’m firmly with our friends. If there’s pertinent information to share with them, I’ll do that, but I’m not going to be taken in by Corny’s agenda, that’s for damn sure.”

“Aside from not wanting to die and living to meet his daughter, what other agenda could he have?” Fitzgibbon asked.

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” Ten shrugged. “He doesn’t know yet about Jace’s offer. Do you want me to mention it?”

Fitzgibbon sighed as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. “I’m coming along with you. I’ll only mention Jace being willing to assist if he seems willing to be reasonable. We’re sure as hell not just handing him a bucket of money. Anything Jace pays out will be through proper channels with receipts for our taxes and responsible shit like that. I refuse to let my husband be taken for a ride by some slick-ass con man.”

“Preach, Fitzy!” Jude held his hands in the air as if he were at a tent revival. “Should I come too? I feel kind of left out here.” Jude pouted.

“Since the three of us will be having Mexican, why don’t you and Cope make tacos for the kids. Everly loves putting her own tacos together. I bet the other kids will too.”

“That sounds like fun. I’ll make sure to load your kids up on refried beans before I send them home.” Jude waggled his eyebrows.

“Karma’s a bitch, you know,” Ronan shot back. If memory served, the last time Jude had Mexican food, he’d stunk up the house so bad that Cope told him to sleep in the yard. It would serve him right if the same thing happened again tonight.

Pulling his mind away from Jude’s relationship with spicy food, Ronan got back to the task at hand. The clue to how and why Sebastian Stark died that night three years ago was contained in his phone, and Ronan was going to find it.

Tennyson

The scent of margaritas hit Ten in the face when he and Ronan walked into Casa Blanco. Ten had never been much of a drinker before he and Ronan met, but with everything going on in the Sebastian Stark case and now with Corny Craig, he could go for a stiff one. He wouldn't, not with Ronan with him. Ten would just have to find another way to relax.

“Over there.” Ronan pointed to a table in the back.

Ten couldn't help looking at the food on the tables they passed. The fajitas had looked good until he saw someone with enchiladas. Then the chimichangas grabbed his attention. Maybe Ronan would get those, and they could share. He supposed the way he was going to relax tonight was with good food, which Ten absolutely deserved if his conversation with Corny didn't make him choke first.

“Tennyson, Ronan, how nice of you to join us.” Corny stood, welcoming them to the table. “What the fuck is he doing here?” Corny barked out when he spotted Fitzgibbon.

“You're going to want to hear what he has to say.” Ten took a seat across the table. Ronan sat beside him. Fitzgibbon dragged another table next to theirs, sitting on the same side as Ten.

Ten grabbed a menu and busied himself with trying to narrow down what he wanted to eat. When the waitress came by, Ten ordered the enchiladas, with Ronan and Fitz getting tacos. Beef for Ronan and chicken for Fitz. Corny and Destiny ordered fajitas,

along with another margarita for himself.

“What did you want to speak with me about?” Ten asked after the waitress delivered his raspberry iced tea.

Corny took a long sip from the fishbowl his drink had come in before making eye contact with Tennyson. “I don’t want to die.” There was emotion in his voice Ten hadn’t expected. “I’m newly married, with a baby girl on the way. I want to be there for my family for the long haul.”

As Ten listened to Corny’s impassioned speech, he knew the man was telling the truth. He also knew this was the most honest he’d ever been in his life, but time would tell if the trend continued. “Both families? Or just the new one?”

“This family, for a start.” Corny set a hand on Destiny’s baby bump. “My sons don’t want anything to do with me.”

There were a lot of ways Ten could respond to that question. At the top of the list was, “Do you blame them?” He swallowed that response, for now. “As things sit at the moment, you’re right when it comes to Carson and Cole.”

“I’ve been a fuckup my entire life. My father taught me how to be a pickpocket when I was seven years old. We’d practice at county fairs all over the South. He taught me how to hot-wire cars and steal prescription pads from doctors. We wrote bad checks, stole money from fundraising buckets. You name it, he taught me not just how to do it but do it well enough not to get caught. At least at first.” Corny shrugged.

Ten couldn’t help thinking about the things he’d taught Everly over the years, like how to ride a bike and how to make chocolate chip cookies. How to be a good friend with manners. Not once had it crossed his mind to teach Everly how to steal, although, with her gifts, all he’d have to do was ask her for lottery numbers, and

they'd be rich. "You were arrested in Salem." It wasn't a question. Ten already knew the answer.

Corny nodded. "Bertha had a booth at the Salem Halloween Bazaar. She was doing readings for ten bucks apiece. Cash only. I stole her earnings, and she stole my heart."

Ten almost burst out laughing at the corny line until he realized Corny was telling the truth. Destiny snarled at the mere mention of Bertha's name. Ten would let that dog lie for the moment. This woman couldn't hold a candle to Bertha, and she knew it. "What happened?"

"Bertha knew exactly what I was up to. I managed to distract her and grabbed the cash. She tackled me to the ground, but I managed to get away. Cops picked me up later, spending her money at Lobster Charlie's. I'd eaten three lobsters and a plate of shrimp before I was arrested."

"Obviously, not much has changed." Before Corny could hit Ten with a comeback, he added, "I've seen your hotel bill. Carson asked that you not rack up a bill for filet mignon and lobster, and you've done just that."

"We had chicken for lunch, psycho asshole," Destiny muttered.

"Your baby can hear everything you say, as well as the tone you say it in. You might want to reconsider the way you speak in front of your daughter." Enchiladas or not, Ten was ready to get the hell out of the restaurant and go home.

"What the hell would you know about kids?" Destiny asked, not sounding quite as angry as she had moments ago.

"I have a son and daughter of my own."

“How is that possible, with the two of you being...” Corny made the universal sign for blowjob with his tongue against his left cheek.

“We used a surrogate,” Ronan said dryly. “We’ve got two happy, healthy kids, which means more to us than anything.”

“How nice for you,” Destiny sneered.

“Hey!” Fitzgibbon said loud enough that the entire restaurant turned toward their table. Fitz was unbothered by the attention. “You’ve got the best people I know trying to help your sorry asses here. Like Ten said, you’re going to want to hear what I have to say, but if this attitude keeps up. I walk, and so does my money.”

Corny’s left eyebrow arched high. Obviously, money was the word he’d keyed on. “Explain,” he ordered, but upon seeing Fitzgibbon move to stand up, Corny added, “Please.”

Settling back in his seat, Fitzgibbon took a sip of his ginger ale, buying himself a little time to get his obvious temper back under control. “I did some research on you through official channels. You’ve got the fraud and grand larceny charges in Colorado. I spoke with the district attorney in charge of the case, and she is willing to drop the charges if you return the money you stole.”

“Money’s gone.” Corny held his hands out in front of him in an “oh, well” gesture. “We used it to buy the Caddy and to make our way across the country to Salem. We stayed in five-star hotels and ate in the best restaurants.”

“It never crossed your mind to save some of the cash for your child or the operation you need?” Ronan asked.

“Not until I collapsed in Ohio. The doc gave me a stern talking-to. Told me I would



have died if Destiny hadn't been there to call an ambulance for me. I had a lot of time alone in that hospital room to think about my life and how I wanted the rest of it to go. I let the doc put in the dialysis port." Corny looked down at the device. "I had a couple of treatments and paid cash for everything when I was released. It's the most responsible thing I've done in my life. The doctor gave me my life back."

Ten knew Corny was telling the truth. He nodded to Fitzgibbon, who looked ready to continue.

"I spoke with the billing department at the hospital, and they were able to email me a copy of that bill, so I know you're telling the truth. I also spoke with Dr. Caruthers, the man who treated you, and speaking in hypotheticals, he let me in on the kind of treatment a man in your position needed. He also calculated how much it would cost for that alone and with the transplant and rehab thrown in. It's sizeable, about the cost of the money you fraudulently obtained from the caring people in Boulder. Coincidence is funny, huh?" Fitzgibbon wasn't laughing. "So, if you're keeping score, we're up to half a million dollars."

Destiny opened her mouth, looking as if she had a lot to say to Fitzgibbon, but she closed her mouth when Corny shook his head. Fitzgibbon raised a quizzical brow at her, as if he were daring her to say what was on her mind. When she didn't take the bait, Fitzgibbon continued.

"Then we get to you, Martha." Fitzgibbon paused, as if he were waiting for her to insist her name was Destiny. She offered him a smirk but wisely kept her mouth shut. "It's going to be another hundred thousand for you to have this child, not to mention the prenatal care you'll need, Lamaze classes, baby clothes, an apartment to live in before your little bundle of joy arrives. She'll need a crib and a car seat, along with a stroller and other necessities, which brings us up to around the million-dollar mark, all told."

The startling figure wiped the smirk off Destiny's face. "We don't have anything close to that and no family to help us out." Tears dripped from her green eyes.

Tennyson knew in that moment, Destiny's attitude was fear-based. The woman sitting in front of him was scared to death of her future, as well as what would happen to her baby if she couldn't afford the basics to bring her home from the hospital."

"I know you don't have that kind of money," Fitzgibbon said gently. "But my husband and I do."

Destiny's eyes widened with something that looked like hope.

"My husband was a trust fund baby, who inherited about a billion dollars when his father died. He uses that money for all sorts of philanthropic endeavors here in Massachusetts. He's willing to help the two of you out, but you need to know we're not just handing you all that cash. We'll make arrangements to pay the money back to GoFundMe. I'll work with the DA to see that the charges are dropped. We'll pay the treatment and hospital bills, along with your rent and money for food and other expenses."

"What do we need to do in exchange for this help?" Corny wore a look as if to say the offer was too good to be true. If Ten had been sitting in his shoes, he would have wondered the same thing.

"You need to be law-abiding citizens. Both of you." Fitzgibbon pointed back and forth between Corny and Destiny. "Follow doctors' orders. Lastly, you need to make peace with your sons. They're going to have a lot of hard questions that you need to answer."

"Is this a guarantee one of them will give me a kidney?" Corny asked.

Fitzgibbon shook his head. "I don't know."

"What if they say no?" Destiny asked. "What will Corny do then?"

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. For the next few days, you're both going to be busy with your new apartment and with doctor appointments. We'll speak with your sons and will set up a time for you to meet." Fitzgibbon grabbed his phone and opened up a blank contact page before handing it to Corny, who entered his information and then passed it to Destiny, who did the same. "If you need anything, contact me. I mean it. If we find out that you're breaking the rules we've set out, you're done. No second chances."

"The other thing you need to figure out is the kind of relationship you want with Carson and Cole," Ten began. "There's a lot of bad feelings with your sons over how absent you were, but more especially how you treated Bertha. I have to tell you, she's one of my favorite people. Ronan's too. She's always been there for us and helps out with our cold cases."

"You're talking about Corny's dead wife, right?" Destiny asked, looking confused.

"Bertha was an incredibly talented psychic," Corny said. "I know I've talked shit about her abilities, but she was the real deal. I loved her but never showed it. I just always assumed she knew and that she'd let me get away with anything. I was wrong. I let her die alone and left my sons virtual orphans."

"They've worked damn hard over the years to save West Side Magick and bring it back to the prominence it had when Bertha was at the helm. Carson and Cole are also married, with three kids apiece. You have six grandchildren that you've never met, Corny."

"Do you have pictures of them?" Corny asked, his voice hoarse with obvious

emotion.

“I do, but I can’t share them without Carson and Cole’s permission. It’s something you can ask them when you meet. All parents love to show off pics of their kids.” Ten paused, impressed by Corny’s attitude. “One more thing. It might be for the best if Destiny isn’t at that first meeting. Get yourself on better footing with your sons, and then bring your new wife around the next time. Do you understand what I’m saying, Destiny?”

Corny’s wife nodded.

“If you’re both serious about getting the help and medical attention you both need, follow the rules,” Ronan said. “I’ve worked with Captain Fitzgibbon for nearly eight years, and he’s not playing. If you screw this up, there will not be a second chance to set things right.”

“Also know that we’re going to speak with Carson and Cole in the morning about this meeting and what we’re prepared to do.” Fitzgibbon took a sip from his drink as the waitress approached with their food.

“I’m really sorry that I called you a psycho, Tennyson,” Destiny said after the waitress left. “And a witch. And an asshole.”

“You’re forgiven. I know you’re scared for your baby’s health and future.”

“Is she healthy? Can you see that?” Destiny asked, nibbling her bottom lip nervously.

It crossed Ten’s mind to lie to the woman just to keep her in line, but that wasn’t fair to the baby. Any stress Destiny felt would be passed on to the child. “Everything is healthy at the moment.”

“What does that mean, at the moment? Are you saying that won’t continue?” Panic filled Destiny’s eyes.

Ten held up his hand. “The future is fluid, Destiny. Based on the path you’re on now, everything is fine, and your daughter is perfectly healthy, but if you go back to your old habits, smoking, drinking, taking edibles, your daughter’s health will change as well. Do you understand?”

Destiny nodded.

“I’ve got some great parenting books I can lend you, if you’re interested. We also have a gadget that lets you listen to her heartbeat.”

“You’d do that for us?” Destiny asked, barely holding back tears.

“I would. I’m not saying this to be mean in any way, but Corny missed out on one hell of a family. Carson and Cole are two of the best friends I’ve ever had in my life. Same goes for Bertha. We’re all very close because we enjoy each other’s company, and we want all of us to succeed. I can’t make any guarantees that the two of them will want you in their family at the moment. It’s up to the two of you to prove you’re worthy of them letting you in. Got it?”

Both Corny and Destiny nodded.

Their response was good enough for Tennyson. Come what may in the future, the couple was off to a better start now than they had been earlier. Ten would do what he could to let Carson and Cole know that Corny was reaching out with an olive branch and a new attitude. But whatever happened next was going to be up to Carson and Cole.

Ronan

Ronan had to admit dinner with Corny and Destiny wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. With Destiny's attitude adjustment, she was actually a charming woman, who was very obviously in love with Corny. Ten had mentioned she'd had a bit of trouble in her past but was really hoping that was all behind her now. She was determined to be a good wife and mother. Ronan had no doubt she would succeed if she didn't let Corny's more base desires derail their future.

Was it possible for a con man to change his stripes? Ronan didn't know. What he did know was that he'd been a functioning alcoholic who'd vowed to never stop drinking. Thanks to Tony Abruzzi, Captain Henderson, and the compassionate people at his Florida rehab, he'd turned that page. If Ronan could do it, anyone could. He made a mental note to see if there was a Fraudster Anonymous group. There were groups for gamblers and sex addicts; maybe there was a group who could help Corny see the benefit of living a clean life and earning an honest living for his family.

After dinner, Ten had wanted to get home to the kids, but Ronan insisted on getting together with Carson and Cole. Cassie had come along and sent her kids out to play with the velociraptors. Unless Ronan missed his guess, that meant they had about fifteen minutes before one of the kids came in the house crying, bleeding, or both.

"I don't like the look on your face," Carson said when he opened the front door. "You've got bad news, don't you?"

"I'm not sure," Ronan said, trying not to be a jerk. "It depends on your point of view."

“I’m really not in the mood for your bullshit, Ronan.” Carson shook his head and ushered him, Ten, and Fitz into the living room.

“Actually, to be honest, it’s Fitzgibbon and Jace’s bullshit.” Ronan offered a cheeky grin, happy to be out of the line of fire.

“You wanna run that by me again?” Carson asked, looking exhausted.

“Babe, let them sit down and explain,” Truman said. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’m good,” Ronan said, with Fitz and Ten agreeing.

“Okay, so what was Ronan saying about you and Jace?” Cole’s full attention was on Fitzgibbon.

“Corny called Ten this afternoon and wanted to meet him for dinner,” Fitz said.

“Fuck me blue. Was he trying to grift you out of money?” Carson wore a disgusted look.

“No, he wasn’t,” Ten said. “He thought I was the only one who’d be able to get through to you and Cole, you know, since I can read him so well and know when he’s lying.”

“If his lips are moving, he’s lying.” Carson’s mood only seemed to worsen as the conversation went on.

“Corny and Destiny are very scared about their child’s future, as well as about his health,” Fitzgibbon said. “After some attitude adjustments, I set an offer on the table, agreeing to pay back the scammed GoFundMe money, along with our willingness to

pay for their medical bills and an apartment.”

“Jesus,” Carson muttered. “You and Jace are far too generous. That asshole doesn’t deserve friends like you.”

Fitzgibbon took a deep breath. “What would you have said if Jace had made this offer to your mother?”

Carson’s face dropped. “Okay, that’s not fair. You know what kind of person our mother is. She isn’t fit to shine his damn shoes.”

Fitzgibbon grinned brightly. “Agreed, but I was hoping to get you to realize that he’s your father, and like it or not, Destiny is his wife and mother-to-be of his unborn daughter.”

“They told you it was a girl?” Cole asked.

“No, Everly did. She was able to read the situation perfectly, with one exception.” Ronan watched Carson’s face go from angry to curious in a matter of seconds.

“What’s the exception?” Carson shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe he was asking the question.

“Everly didn’t know if either of you would agree to donate a kidney,” Ten said. “She told us that the answer to the question keeps changing. I assumed it’s because the two of you make a decision and then unmake it. If that’s a thing.”

“Neither of us can figure out what to do. I suppose it doesn’t matter until we find out if we’re matches for Corny.”

“Everly says you both are.” Ronan wagged his eyebrows. It wasn’t often he knew



something the psychic brothers did not.

“And now’s when you try to talk one or both of us into doing the right thing.” Cole’s eyes were on Fitzgibbon. If looks could kill, Fitz would be six feet under.

“No, not at all,” Fitz said. “We’re talking about a major organ in your bodies. You’re both married fathers with a lot of years left in you and so many momentous moments on the horizon with graduations, college road trips, proms, engagements, weddings, grandbabies of your own to cuddle. To be honest, I don’t know what I’d do if I were in your shoes and I had a great father. My first thought is always about Aurora, then Greeley, then Jace. I need to be here for them and the cold case team.”

“Aw, thanks, Cap. That’s so sweet, but I’d be able to handle the department just fine without you.” Ronan felt all warm and fuzzy.

Fitz raised an eyebrow at Ronan. “Are you kidding me? You running the team is what would wake me up from a frickin’ coma to go back to work.”

The tension in the room was broken when everyone started to laugh.

Not that Ronan begrudged Carson and Cole a good guffaw, but he wasn’t too keen on it being at his expense.

“I’m in Fitzzy’s boat,” Jude said. “I don’t know if I would do it either. For Cope or the kids, absolutely. Same goes for everyone in this room and Running Eagle, but I don’t know what I do for an absentee parent.”

Ronan felt mostly the same way as Jude. “I agree with saving you guys and the kids. My mom too, but I think I’d end up donating my kidney because of my Catholic guilt.”

“What do you mean?” Carson asked. “You’d do it so that some religion didn’t make you feel bad for thinking of yourself first?”

“Hypothetically speaking, what if what Fitzgibbon proposed to Corny turns everything around? What if he becomes an honest man who works an honest day’s living? What if he’s an excellent father to his daughter? If he dies, so does all of his potential and your ability to forgive him and start a new adult relationship with him and that baby.”

“Fuck me,” Carson muttered.

Ronan knew Carson understood the point he was making. “You all know that I’m a pessimistic kind of a guy, mostly thanks to being a cop for the last twenty years. I don’t trust anyone but my family. I’m not sure if Corny can actually turn over a new leaf. I tend to think he can’t, but if he can, that might just earn him a little grace in your eyes.”

“Corny said the other day with this new baby on the way that he has something to live for, which of course means that Cole and I weren’t worthy of him changing or turning over a new leaf or of going straight,” Carson growled, looking angry enough to punch a wall.

Ronan knew those words were going to come back to haunt Corny Craig. He wasn’t quite sure how to defend them.

“He wasn’t dying then,” Truman said softly. “I remember how angry I was at you when I found out that you lied to me about who you were when we met. Remember?”

Carson nodded.

“All you’d been trying to do was save my life, and you knew I wouldn’t believe a

story about your psychic vision. I screamed and yelled and told you I never wanted to see you again, but what did you do?" Truman smiled at his husband.

"I showed up at that Christmas party and took the bullet meant for you." Carson sighed. "I loved you and would have done anything to save you."

"Yeah, you did save me, and then you died in the fucking ambulance," Truman said, his voice cracking. "But you fought your way back to me."

"I did," Carson agreed.

"That's what Corny wants to do too." Truman held up his hands for Carson to let him continue. "Yes, Corny was a shitty husband. A shitty father to you. A shittier father to Cole. Now, the two of you hold his life in your hands. It might be too late for him to be much of a father to you or even a grandfather to our kids, but think about your sister for a minute. Doesn't she deserve every chance to know her father?"

Tears rolled down Carson's cheeks. Ronan noticed Cole was in much the same state. He knew from his own experience that mentioning Corny's daughter-to-be would be the game changer.

"I really hate you sometimes." Carson swiped angrily at his tears.

"No you don't," Truman argued back. "You took a bullet for me. You're just angry because you know I'm right. As usual." Truman laughed at the look on Carson's face.

"You're not always right!" Carson shot back. "I'm right at least once a week." He laughed along with his husband.

"Cole, where are you in all of this?" Fitzgibbon asked.

“I don’t know.” Cole shook his head. “A better question would be to ask Cassie.”

“Cass?” Ronan prodded.

“I don’t know either. I was up half the night reading about kidney transplants. Things that can go wrong during the surgery. Things that can go wrong years down the road. I love you, Cole. Maybe not enough to catch a bullet for you, but I love you all the same. Our kids love you. So do my parents, your brother, our friends. We need you here with us. If you want to call me selfish, then so be it.” Cassie folded her hands in her lap, her eyes on Cole.

“Let me say that the two of you might not be Corny’s only option. Another match could be found through the registry. Maybe someone won’t mind donating a kidney to a former alcoholic with a criminal record.” Fitzgibbon paused. “According to what the doc told me, he could survive for up to a year on dialysis. That’s time enough for another match to be found.”

“Or not,” Carson said. “Meaning that his little girl would lose her father at only a few months old.”

“Tru, where do you stand on Carson donating to his father?” Fitzgibbon asked.

Truman frowned, looking deep in thought. “If he did it, I’d stand behind him. It would mean no more wine and eating better. No more middle-of-the-night nibbles.”

Carson snorted. “It’s the only time of day I can eat my Snickers without the kids begging for some or watching to see where my hiding place is.”

“In a bag of frozen veggies in the freezer,” Ten said with a laugh. “Ronan stole your idea for his precious peanut butter cups.”

“It’s something I need more time to think about.” Carson shot Ronan a look that said he was doing the best he could.

“Me too,” Cole agreed.

“Just remember there are a lot of steps between today and a future date in the operating room. You need to get bloodwork done to make sure you’re each a match. The hospital won’t take the word of a first-grade psychic.” Fitzgibbon raised an eyebrow at Ronan. “Then you’ll need full checkups and all that jazz. You don’t have to decide on the fly like this.”

“I agree to have the tests.” Carson sighed as if he already regretted his decision.

“Me too.” Cole reached for Cassie’s hand. “The least I can do is have all the facts at hand to make a final decision.”

“I have a question,” Cassie said, turning to Fitzgibbon. “What you and Jace are doing for Corny and Destiny is really amazing, but what happens when Corny gets his shiny new kidney and that baby is born? Your cash is keeping them on the straight and narrow for now, but when they’ve gotten everything they need, what then? How the hell do I console my husband for being taken for a fool and over losing a vital organ, but also his father and baby sister?”

“That’s an answer I don’t have, Cass, but what I can tell you is that every second from now on is an opportunity to build a relationship with Corny. Maybe you’ll find common ground. Maybe he’ll surprise you. I can tell you he asked Ten if he could see pics of your kids, as well as Carson’s.”

“I said no, that I’d need your permission to show him any pictures,” Ten said quickly.

“Thanks, Ten,” Carson and Cole said together.

“It could be that your kids are that common ground. If you want to meet with Corny and Destiny, let me know, and I’ll set it up. I know Jace is going to start organizing doctors’ appointments for both of them, as well as getting them into their own place to live. If anyone has a spare crib or an infant car seat lying around, I’m sure they’d appreciate them. Cute girl clothes too.” Ten grinned.

“It’s a lot to think about. We’ll let you know.” Carson raked his hands through his blond hair. “Thanks for all you’re doing. Jace too. Please tell him we said that.”

“You got it.” Fitzgibbon shook Carson and Cole’s hands and was out the door. Ronan and Ten were right behind them.

Ronan had managed to make it through a day where he’d consoled a grieving father and helped to give an ex-con a second chance to be a family man, but his work wasn’t done yet. He still had to talk to his pint-sized psychic about Sebastian Stark.

A father’s work was never done.

## Page 15

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Tennyson

While Ronan helped Everly with her bath, Tennyson got ready to talk to her about Sebastian Stark. Ten hated asking his daughter to use her gifts to help in a case like this one, where a child died, but where Ronan and the others were meeting with Simon Westlake the next afternoon, they needed any leg up they could get. If Everly could speak with Bash, it would be mission accomplished in that category.

Ten turned on the electric kettle and got out mugs and peppermint tea bags. Next, he grabbed some of the chocolate chip cookies Jude had sent home with Everly and set them on a plate. Just as Ten was pouring the hot water into the mugs, Everly and Ronan appeared in the kitchen.

“Hey, Daddy! You read my mind. I was hoping for tea.” Everly took her usual seat at the kitchen table and reached for a cookie. “Mmm, ooey and gooey! Uncle Jude’s recipe is so good.”

Adding an ice cube to Everly’s mug, he brought it to the table along with his own. Ronan joined them after getting himself some ginger ale. “How were the tacos at Uncle Jude’s?”

“Really good! There was chicken and beef to choose from, and we got to help shred the cheese. I also tried sour cream because Uncle Jude said it was delish with tacos, and he was right! How come you never give me sour cream?” Everly folded her arms over her chest like she was angry.

“I don’t know,” Ronan said, making a sad face. “I’ve failed as a father.” He began to

weep loudly on Ten's shoulder. "Is she buying it?" he whispered.

"Not in a million years." Ten shoved Ronan away from him. "The reason we're having this meeting is because we need your help."

"You do? With a case?" Everly sat up on her knees, leaning across the table. "Detective Everly reporting for duty."

"A young man died at college a few years back, and we need to know how it happened. Was it an accident because he was drinking, or did someone hurt him on purpose?" Ten hated Everly knowing that people sometimes hurt each other. She'd helped on cases before, but usually, the victim had been gone much longer than three years and wasn't so damn young.

"I understand." Everly wore a solemn look. All traces of her giggles were gone.

Ten reached into his pocket and pulled out Sebastian's friendship bracelet and pushed it across the table to Everly.

"Oh, a Taylor Swift bracelet." Everly went to reach for the item but pulled her hand back at the last minute as if she'd been burned. "Not a Swiftie bracelet. I wouldn't touch that for a million bucks and two, no, three unicorns."

Ten hadn't felt anything from the bracelet at all. "What did you feel that made you say that?"

"Well," Everly said, drawing the word out. "My stomach was squirmy the way it gets when Aurora gets a new toy I don't have."

"So you felt jealousy, maybe?" Ten prodded.



“Something like that. Simon was jealous of Batch. Bats. Brats.” She shook her head as if that would help her figure out the word she was reaching for.

“Bash?” Ten asked.

“Yes! That’s it. I’ve never heard a name like that before.” Everly nodded to herself.

“It’s a nickname. His real name is Sebastian.” Tennyson knew the connection his Disney princess-loving daughter would have to that name.

Everly kept her composure. She was all business, just like Ronan. “Like Ariel’s friend. Okay, that makes sense now.”

“Do you know what Simon was jealous about?” Ronan asked, taking a sip from his cup.

“Mandy Patterson,” Everly said without hesitation. “Simon wanted her to be his girlfriend, but she liked Bash better. “Did you bring the phone, Dad?”

“Your cell phone is charging on the hall table,” Ten said. “Do you want me to go get it?”

Ronan grinned at his daughter. “That’s not the phone she’s talking about. Is it?”

“Nope!” Everly shook her head and returned Ronan’s knowing look. “There are pictures of Mandy on Bash’s phone. She’s wearing a pink bra or something.” Everly made a face.

Reaching into his back pocket, Ronan pulled out the darkened cell phone. He tapped the screen and quickly entered the code. He held the device in front of him so that Everly couldn’t see the screen. “Is there anything else you can tell me about the

picture?”

“Bash is smiling on the outside, but he’s not really happy. There’s something wrong. He has on a blue shirt with funny letters or something, and Mandy’s wearing a little black skirt with her pink bra.”

Ronan flipped through the pictures on the phone and handed it to Tennyson, who wasn’t surprised by what he was seeing. He set the phone on the table in front of Everly.

“Yup, that’s the picture.” Mandy wore a tight pink tank top, which almost resembled a sports bra. Her breasts stuck over the top of the shirt to the point where her nipples were almost visible. Her barely there skirt was almost invisible. Bash wore a blue shirt, just as Everly said. “What is the weird writing on his shirt?”

“Bash was trying to become a member of a fraternity called Sigma Chi. The two symbols are Greek letters.”

Everly frowned as Ronan spoke. “He didn’t want to be a Cobra Kai. Not anymore. Bash wanted to make his father proud, but...” She trailed off, looking lost in thought.

Ten reached out to his daughter with his gift, hoping he could see or feel what she was experiencing, but all he felt was betrayal.

“But he found out something that made him feel a certain way, not mad, not sad, not happy. I don’t know a word for it.” Everly looked to Tennyson for help.

“Did a friend do something behind his back? Like pretending to like him but really didn’t?” Ten asked. He hated that he was about to teach his young daughter a new word, one she’d never heard of and hadn’t experienced before.

“Something like that. What is it?”

“Betrayal,” Ten said softly. “It’s when breaking someone’s trust in you. Like if Dad went on a date with another man. Or if you pretended to be Wolfie’s friend in order to trick him into something that would hurt him and help you.”

Everly shook her head. “I don’t like that feeling. I feel icky inside my belly. I’d never do that to Woofie or Aurora or anyone.” She turned back to the picture, her lips frowning. “I can see a weird look in Bash’s eyes. His mouth is smiling, but the rest of him is not. He knows someone is trying to hurt him.” Everly took a long sip from her tea cup, as if the peppermint brew could wash away the sick feeling inside her.

“Can you tell who hurt him?” Ten crossed his fingers that Everly would be able to figure it out.

“I’ll try to ask him.” Everly shut her eyes. Her right hand hovered over the friendship bracelet, slightly shaking. “Hi, Bash!”

The teenager appeared, standing beside Everly. “This is my Daddy Ten. You met him today.”

“It’s good to see you, Tennyson.” Bash offered a smile. “Say hello to Ronan. He can’t see me.”

“Bash says hi, Dad.” Everly smiled at Ronan.

“Hey, Bash. I’m glad you’re here. Your father is convinced that your death wasn’t an accident, that someone hurt you on purpose. My partners and I have taken on your case, and we want to do everything we can to get to the bottom of what happened to you that night at the frat party.” Ronan’s eyes were on Everly.

“Simon and the others were supposed to announce which of the pledges would be asked to join the fraternity. Mandy told me that I wouldn’t be one of the ones accepted because I’d broken a rule.”

“What rule?” Ten asked after telling Ronan what Bash had said.

Bash shifted his eyes to Everly and blushed. “I’m not sure I can say it in front of your daughter.”

“It’s okay, Bash,” Everly assured him. “I help my daddies out with their cases all the time. I’m tiny but mighty.” She flexed her muscles to prove her point.

“Well, I slept with Mandy. She was Simon’s girlfriend, and he made her come on to the pledges to see if they would take her up on her offer. Me, being the na?ve kid I was, went for it. I assumed if she was trying to get it on with me that her relationship with Simon must have been over.” Bash shook his head. “She’d told me the news as I was snapping selfies of us together.” Guilt was written all over his face. Ten couldn’t tell if it had to do with having sex with Mandy, telling Everly, or both. “I should have left right then and there. To be honest, all of the guys in the frat were jerks. I wouldn’t have wanted any of them to be my friends, but Dad was a member of Theta Phi. He always talked about how special his relationship was with his brothers. I wanted to have that same kind of friend circle and, more than that, wanted him to be proud of me for making it into a frat. You must think that’s pretty stupid, huh?”

“Not at all,” Ten assured the young spirit. “Friends are what make our world go round. Ronan’s detective partner, Jude, lives across the street. My partner, Carson, lives next door. Fitzgibbon is down the block, and so is my mother. I understand exactly what you were looking for.” Ten bit his lower lip for a second. “I hate to ask, but what made you stay that night?”

“Mandy said I’d have a second chance to get into Sigma Chi. I believed her.”

“Was there a second chance?” Everly asked.

Bash nodded. “At ten that night, Simon announced the pledges who’d made it. He said that there was one final test for me to go through if I wanted to be admitted. I could have walked away, then and there. My heart was broken from Mandy’s betrayal, and the last thing I wanted was to have to watch her with Simon when I wanted her to be with me, but I still had my pride, so I agreed to go along with Simon’s last test.”

“What happened?” Ronan asked after Ten filled him in on what Bash had said.

“Simon said I had to come up to his room for a private challenge. I’d worked too long and hard to get into Sigma Chi to lose out at the last second, so I followed him up to his room, where he told me to lay face down on the bed. I still had my clothes on, so I didn’t worry about him messing with me. He was dating Mandy, so I went along with it. I don’t know what I expected to happen, but Simon sitting on my back, pulling my arms behind me, and pressing my face into the mattress wasn’t it. I bucked against him, trying to get him off of me, and it worked. He got off my back. What I didn’t know at the time was that Mandy had come into the room. Simon told her to repeat what he’d just done. She refused, and he told her that she’d be next if she didn’t do what he said. I should have gotten up and run out of there, but I didn’t. I knew how light she was and that there was no way she could hurt me. So I went along with it. Seconds later, Simon climbed on my back, adding his weight and pushing my face into the bed.”

Ten watched as a lone tear trickled down Bash’s face. Everly reached out for the spirit’s hand.

“I tried to get them off me. It didn’t work. Finally, I stopped struggling. When I did, Mandy got off me and welcomed me into the frat. I didn’t realize I was dead until Simon started shouting my name. I kept telling them I was right there, but then I

turned back to the bed and saw my body still lying face down on the mattress. Simon laughed like a loon and said, ‘Shouldn’t have effed my girlfriend, asshole.’”

“Jesus, he was murdered,” Ten said to Ronan before explaining what had happened.

“How did you get into the basement?” Ronan asked with obvious shock in his voice.

“Simon grabbed some of the guys. They carried me down the stairs and arranged me to look like I’d fallen. They left me there for the rest of the night. I stayed with my body until the police and the ambulance came the next morning. The last thing I remember was seeing my parents with one of the police officers. I could hear my mother screaming. I’d never heard a sound like that before.”

“Your mom is looking for you, Bash.” Everly gave his hand a squeeze. “She loves you very much and just wants to find you.”

“How did she die?” Bash’s voice was barely above a whisper.

Ten could tell the spirit was worried that he’d been the cause of his mother’s death, further decimating his small family. “She had a fast-growing breast cancer.”

Bash’s devastated look turned to relief. “What happens now?”

“Ronan, Jude, Captain Fitzgibbon, and myself have a meeting with Simon tomorrow. We’ll use what you told us to try to get him to confess to your murder. I imagine the next step after that is to find Mandy and arrest her as well and then the guys who carried you to the basement. They were accessories after the fact. When all of that is finished, we’ll go see your father.”

“Will I be able to speak to him?” Bash asked.

“You will. I’ll bring along a friend of mine, who can help you materialize and give you time to say what you like to your father.”

“Is that friend Bertha?” Bash asked with a grin.

“Yup!” Everly agreed. “She’s my mimi, and I know she’s taking good care of you.”

“She is. Bertha is the first real friend I’ve made since I died. She’s been trying to help me realize that no one’s angry at me for what happened that night.”

“I promise I’ll reach out at some point tomorrow to let you know what’s going on, unless you want to come along to Simon’s office and see what happens for yourself.”

“I just might do that.” Kneeling down on the kitchen floor, Bash turned his attention to Everly. “Thank you so much for reaching out to me and helping me to tell the truth. I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me and my family.”

“You’re welcome, Bash. Can I ask you a question?”

The spirit nodded his agreement.

“Did your mommy and daddy name you after the crab in *The Little Mermaid* ?” Everly giggled.

“They did! Whenever I would cry, my parents would sing ‘Under the Sea’ until I started to laugh again.”

“That’s the best story ever!” Everly gushed before turning serious again. “Promise me that after my daddy arrests that Simon asshole, you’ll walk into the light and find your mommy.”

“I promise.” Bash held up his right pinkie finger.

Everly wrapped hers around it. “Bye, Bash!” she called as the spirit vanished.

“Son of a bitch,” Ronan whispered. “Paul Stark was right all along. His son was murdered. Jimenez and Watts let the murderers get away. Cisco didn’t take them to task for not really working the case at all. This is going to be one hell of a mess.”

“It’s okay, Dad.” Everly finished her tea and crawled into Ronan’s lap. “They’re gonna get fired, and Uncle Cisco is gonna start a scholarship fund in Bash’s name.”

“I’ll be the first to contribute,” Ronan said. “As for you, little miss, it’s time you went to bed. I’m so proud of you for helping Bash the way you did.”

“I’m glad I could help you work on your case.” She kissed Ronan’s cheek and leaned over to plant one on Tennyson. “Night, Daddies!” Everly climbed down and walked out of the kitchen.

“I’ll be up in a minute,” Ronan called after her. “Are you okay?”

Ten nodded. “I’m glad Everly was able to reach out to him, but I hate that she learned about betrayal and had to walk Bash through the last moments of his life. I know I say it all the time, but little pieces of her innocence are just melting away.”

“I feel the same way, but learning the lessons she is at such a young age lets her use her empathy to help spirits. What happened today is only going to make her stronger and more determined to help others. As her father, I can’t ask for much more than that.” Ronan wore a proud look. He pressed a kiss to Ten’s lips. “I’ll go tuck her in. After that, you and I are gonna do a little dancing in the dark.” Ronan waggled his eyebrows and left the room.



Ronan was right that everything Everly was learning would help mold her into a young woman whose first goal in life would be to help people. He would make sure that his daughter knew how proud he was of her every day.

As for Ronan's other suggestion, Ten was ready to dance the night away.

Ronan

Ronan had woken up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, thanks, in part, to finding out what really happened to Bash. He couldn't wait to get to the office and tell Jude and Fitzgibbon what he'd learned.

Stopping to grab some of Cassie's passionfruit muffins and everyone's favorite coffee, Ronan was on top of the world when he walked into the office.

"I was hoping for breakfast," Cisco Jackson said.

Ronan was surprised that the chief of police was sitting at the conference table with Jude and Fitz. He couldn't help but wonder why no one had warned him that Cisco was going to be in on this meeting, unless, of course, he was here for a reason not having to do with the Stark case.

"I told them not to tell you I was here, Ronan," Cisco said, reaching for a muffin.

Was Ronan in trouble? His gut twisted as he passed out coffees to Jude and Fitz. Lastly, he settled himself into a chair beside Cisco and grabbed a muffin. Realizing his hands were shaking, Ronan stuffed them under his thighs. Breakfast could wait until he heard what Cisco had come to say. "I'm all ears."

"We had a development in the Stark case." Cisco's dark eyes didn't give away if this was a good development or a bad one.

It was on the tip of Ronan's tongue to ask if Simon Westlake confessed, but if that

were the case, Cisco wouldn't be drawing this out. Figuring the best thing to do was to keep quiet, Ronan bided his time.

"What happened?" Fitzgibbon asked, sounding as if he were on edge as well.

"Paul Stark was in an accident last night. While driving drunk, he smashed his car into the Roger Conant statue near the Witch Museum. Stark wasn't wearing a seat belt. He's in critical condition in the ICU at Salem Mercy Hospital."

"Son of a bitch. We were so close to arresting Bash's killer." Ronan thumped a fist against the table. He shot off a quick text to Ten, asking him to come up to the office.

"Wait! What do you mean we're on the verge of catching the killer?" Jude wore a confused look. "We still don't know if he was murdered or died accidentally."

"Actually, we do," Ten said, coming into the room. He took the seat beside Ronan at the table.

"The news I have to tell you is why I called this meeting, but before we tell you what we learned last night, tell us where things stand with Paul Stark." Ronan turned to Ten. "He was in an accident last night."

Ten dipped his head. "He was going out for more beer."

"More beer?" Cisco asked, his eyes narrowing.

"We met with Paul yesterday morning. He had some objects that belonged to his son that he was hoping I could use to speak with Bash. They worked, and his ghost appeared. He started to tell us what happened the night he died before his energy ran out and he vanished. Bash had made himself visible to his father. After Bash left, I couldn't reestablish a connection with him, and Paul started to drink. From what I

know, he had two unopened cases of Budweiser, and he'd managed to drink three cans before we left."

"I knew I should have stayed with him," Fitzgibbon said softly.

"He's a grown man, Fitz," Cisco said. "There's nothing you could have done."

"Is Stark going to live?" Jude asked. "I got the distinct feeling the man was waiting to die in order to be reunited with his lost son and wife."

"I got that impression too," Ronan said. "I was hoping that with what we learned last night, we'd be able to talk him into rehab after we arrested the killers."

"Killers? As in plural? More than one killer?" Cisco's mouth hung open. "Why the hell didn't you call me last night? Jesus, Ronan! What the fuck were you thinking?"

"Take a breath, Cisco, before you give yourself another heart attack." Ten wore a look that said he meant business.

Taking a deep breath, Cisco sat back in his chair. "Sorry, Ronan. It's been one hell of a night."

"It's okay, Cisco." Ronan offered his boss a placid smile. "After we finished our dinner meeting with Corny and Destiny and spoke with Carson and Cole about next steps, we picked up the kids and went home. Ten wanted to talk to Everly about Bash. I'd taken the friendship bracelet Paul left for us to use to contact his son."

"What the hell are corny and destiny?" Cisco looked around the table.

"They're not a what but a who," Fitzgibbon explained. "Corny is Carson and Cole's father, and Destiny, aka Martha, is his new, pregnant wife."

“What the hell goes on when you guys are off the clock? It’s like you’ve all taken a trip to Crazytown.” Cisco shook his head.

“The story gets even better.” Fitz gave a quick recap on everything that happened with the Craig family.

“I’ll never complain about Luca’s family ever again. That’s just insanity. Poor Carson and Cole, but let’s get back to Paul Stark.” Cisco pointed to Tennyson. “You. Go.”

“Everly said Simon Westlake was jealous of Bash because he’d slept with Mandy Patterson, Simon’s girlfriend. Apparently, Mandy was used as a lure to see which of the pledges would sleep with her and which ones would not. When Bash showed up, he explained that he naively believed that Mandy and Simon had broken up. Because of that, uh, infraction, shall we say, Bash was told that he wouldn’t be admitted to the Sigma Chi fraternity.”

“But,” Ronan said, picking up the story, “if he passed one final test, Bash would become a member.”

“What was the final test?” Fitzgibbon asked.

“Bash had to lie on Simon’s bed while he knelt on Sebastian’s back. While that was going on, Mandy came into the room, and Simon forced her to do the same thing to Bash. She refused, and Simon told her if she didn’t do what he said, he would do the same thing to her. She obeyed, and while she did what Simon asked, he climbed back on Bash, adding his weight, and pushed his face into the mattress until he suffocated.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Cisco muttered.

“How did Bash’s body end up in the basement?” Fitz asked.

“Simon and some of the other members carried him and left him on the stairs, which explains why Bash’s phone was intact and why his hands didn’t have the injuries you would expect to see in a fall of that kind. There was no damage to his fingers, palms, or wrists, as well as there being no bruising.” Ronan shook his head. “I had set up a meeting with Simon for one this afternoon. I planned on bringing Jude and Fitz along in hopes we could get Simon to confess. Knowing what we know now, the next step is to find Mandy Patterson and to get the names of the guys who moved the body. I’m going to round them all up and arrest them.”

Cisco wore a gobsmacked look on his face. “So, just as the two of you were finding out what really happened to Bash, Paul Stark got into his car and drove drunk. If it weren’t for bad luck, that guy would have no luck at all.”

“I didn’t call you last night because this case was three years cold, and I didn’t think twelve more hours would hurt anything. I was wrong.” Ronan felt his emotions start to rise. “Because I was an asshole, this man who’s already lost so much might lose the only thing he has left—his life.”

“Ronan, you’re not an asshole,” Cisco said, setting a hand on his shoulder. “At least not in this instance. There’s no way you could have known Stark would drive drunk and almost kill himself.”

“How is he?” Ten asked. “I missed that part of the conversation.”

“He’s in ICU at Salem Mercy. The docs think he’ll be okay, but he’s in a heap of legal trouble. I told my guys not to arrest him while he was in the ICU, but when he recovers enough to be released to a regular hospital room, I won’t have a choice.”

“My original plan was to tell him my story of how I shot a suspect and ended up in a Florida rehab with my career hanging in the balance. I hoped he would take my story to heart and let me help him get into a program. I’m not sure that would work now.”

Ronan sighed. He should have called Paul Stark after he'd spoken with Bash.

“What if Stark pled no contest and was ordered into rehab?” Jude asked.

“That’s something I’d have to speak with the DA about.” Cisco didn’t look as if he wanted to make that call.

“I’ll do it,” Fitzgibbon said. “I’m already acting as a liaison between the SPD and Boulder, Colorado, district attorney’s office. What’s one more phone call?”

Cisco shot Fitz a stunned look. “You wanna explain that to me? Just for shits and giggles, also throw in why I’m not hearing about your diplomatic skills until now?”

Ronan snorted and tried to cover it up with a cough. Cisco wasn’t buying it.

“You want to end up on my shit list? Keep laughing, asshole.” Cisco turned back to Fitzgibbon. “Explain. Now!”

Fitzgibbon sighed. “While Corny and Destiny were living in Colorado, they started a GoFundMe page for a sick boy with cancer.”

“I’m guessing the boy and his family never got the money?” Cisco pinched the bridge of his nose, a sign that his head was starting to throb.

“It’s worse than that.” Fitzgibbon flinched. “There was no boy. They took the money and blew town.”

“And what is it that you’re liaising about?” Cisco looked as if he didn’t actually want to hear the answer.

“Jace offered to pay back the money Corny and Destiny stole in order to get the

charges dropped. With Corny needing a kidney transplant and Destiny expecting their child, Jace also agreed to pay their medical bills and house them.”

Cisco’s mouth hung open. “It’s a world gone fucking mad. Jesus, I remember the hell that man put Bertha Craig through.”

“Yeah, well, Carson and Cole have to decide if they’ll donate a kidney to save his life. To make matters worse, we don’t know if Corny and Destiny will stick around after the baby is born.” Ronan paused. “Those boys have been through enough. If Corny were to leave again after one of them donates a vital organ, it will wreck them both.”

“Does this deal with the Boulder DA put the Salem Police in the line of fire?” Cisco asked.

“I don’t know,” Fitzgibbon admitted. “I’ll speak with the DA and find out.”

“You’re also going to have to deal with the fact that Jimenez and Watts did diddly squat to investigate this case, never mind to solve it,” Ronan said. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s better you know the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

Cisco set his head in his hands. “Fitz, find out what the deal is with the Boulder DA. If there’s any way at all we can come out of this with good press, do it. Once you have arrested Simon Westlake, Mandy Patterson, and the accessories after the fact, I’ll figure out what the hell to do about Jimenez and Watts.”

“Everly said you’re going to can them and have a press conference that celebrates you closing this case.”

Cisco snorted. “My little niece is something special.”



“She sure the hell is,” Ronan agreed. “We’re also willing to do whatever we can to give you the glory for assigning us this case and helping us to solve it.”

“I’m going to need one hell of a speechwriter to figure this shit out.” Cisco got up from his chair. “I need a handful of aspirin and a fucking shot of bourbon. For now, I’ll settle for getting rid of this headache. Keep me informed about Simon Westlake and Corny Craig.”

Fitzgibbon nodded. “You got it. Please do the same for us with Paul Stark.”

“I will.” Cisco headed for the door. “Is there anything else you need?”

Ronan raised his hand.

“Fuck, I knew I was going to regret asking. What is it?” He shot Ronan a cautioning look.

“Get Ten and I added to the list of people who can visit Paul Stark. I want to be there when he wakes up. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“I’ll call the hospital on my way back to the station.” Without saying goodbye, Cisco turned and left the office.

“That was a fucking close shave,” Jude said.

“Yeah, we’re not out of the woods yet.” Fitzgibbon reached for the folder Paul Stark had given them the day before and slid it to Jude. “Find Mandy Patterson.”

“Ten, if you or Everly can reach Bash Stark, see if he knows the names of the guys who moved his body and left it on the fucking stairs. Jesus, I can’t believe they left him down there alone in the dark while they drank and partied upstairs and didn’t call

the police until the next morning. I want to nail those little fuckers to the wall. Got it?"

Ten nodded. "I'll do what I can."

"I'll be in my office pulling my hair out and trying to reach the DA in charge of prosecuting Paul Stark."

"Be ready to go meet with Simon Westlake at half past twelve."

"I can't wait." Fitzgibbon headed for his office, closing the door behind him.

"Let's go talk to Everly," Ten said.

With a sigh, Ronan got out of his chair and followed Ten out the door. As far as Ronan was concerned, his daughter had already done her bit. It wasn't fair that they were going to question her again about Sebastian, but if he knew his little girl, Everly would be excited to help.

Again.

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Tennyson

When Ten and Ronan got home, Kaye had a list of three names waiting for them. Everly had known what her daddies needed and asked her grandmother to write what she told her.

Ten felt marginally better about getting this kind of passive help from his daughter, but not by much. A quick Google search was able to locate two of the three men listed, Brent Jones and Andy Britton, but the third man, David Kellog, appeared to be in the wind. Ronan promised to run his name through the system when they got back to the office.

Unfortunately, Jude had been unable to locate Mandy Patterson. According to Ronan, all that mattered at the moment was cornering Simon Westlake into confessing.

At five minutes to one, Ronan and Ten joined Fitz and Jude in the lobby of Westlake's office building. The tenth floor housed the regional members of the Massachusetts Sigma Chi chapter. Ronan found Westlake's name in the directory beside the elevator. "You ready for this?" he asked Ten.

"I was born ready." Over the years, Ten had a hand in apprehending a lot of murderers, but he knew this one would be the most satisfying, if Ronan and company could get Simon to confess. His gift wasn't giving him any clues as to what was going to happen when they walked into the Sigma Chi offices.

Reaching into his suit jacket, Ronan pulled out his badge and hung it around his neck. Ten noticed Fitzgibbon and Jude were not wearing theirs. For that reason, Ten left his

in his pocket. Ronan ushered everyone into the elevator and pressed the button for the tenth floor.

When the doors opened, Ten found himself facing the fraternity doors. They were full-length and glass with the Sigma Chi letters etched into each panel. Opening his gift wide, he found there was a little surprise in store for the detectives, Jude especially. “I found Mandy Patterson.”

“The hell you did!” Jude shot back. “All we did was ride the elevator, and I didn’t see her in the car.”

Ten’s grin deepened. He pointed to the reception desk, where a brunette with a very prominent baby bump stood, with both hands braced against her lower back. He didn’t need his gift to tell him the advanced state of pregnancy was wearing on the woman.

As Ronan opened the door, Ten couldn’t help but be struck by the fact that Mandy Patterson was going to jail. He remembered not wanting Destiny Craig to have her and Corny’s baby in jail and had to admit he wished the same for Mandy. Her innocent child didn’t deserve to pay the piper for its mother’s crimes. Unfortunately, the matter was out of Ten’s hands.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked. Her nameplate listed her as Amanda Westlake.

“Detective Ronan O’Mara. I have an appointment to meet with Simon Westlake about the Sebastian Stark case.”

Amanda’s eyes widened and moved to three men standing behind her. “And these people are?”

“Summer interns,” Ronan said quickly. “They’re here to observe, although the tall one seems to think he’s in charge. He’s not, but let’s let him think he is.” Ronan winked at the woman and chuckled.

Laughing along with Ronan, Amanda led them down the hall toward Simon’s office. Ten watched as Jude and Fitzgibbon pulled out their badges and hung the chain around their necks. Ten couldn’t help thinking how clever the move was not to reveal to Amanda they both were cops as well.

Knocking on the door, Amanda opened it, ushering them inside the office. “Simon, this is Detective O’Mara and his interns.” She offered Simon a confused look. “Let me know when you want me to walk them out.” Amanda turned to leave, but Ronan gently caught her by the elbow.

“You’re going to want to stick around for this.” Ronan led her to a plush sofa and held her arm while she sat down. He moved toward Simon with his hand outstretched. “Detective Ronan O’Mara. We spoke yesterday.”

Simon took his hand, pumped it once, and dropped it like it was hot. “Who are these other men? My wife said they’re interns, but since when do interns wear badges and a golden captain’s shield?” He shot his wife an angry look.

Amanda’s hands came up in front of her bump, as if to shield her child. “They weren’t wearing badges when they walked into the office. I swear.”

Simon wore a look that said he didn’t believe his wife and that she’d pay for her mistake later.

“Let me introduce Detective Jude Byrne and Captain Kevin Fitzgibbon. We’re with Salem’s cold case unit. Let’s chat, shall we?” Ronan motioned Simon to sit on the sofa with his wife while Jude took up a position at the door.

“What can I do for you, Detective .” Simon wore a sour look.

“Well, it’s funny you should ask.” Ronan offered the man a cold smile. “You could save us all a lot of trouble and confess to killing Sebastian Stark.”

“You’re out of your mind if you think I hurt that kid. He drank too much and fell down the stairs. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got work to do.” Simon stood but found himself face to chest with Fitzgibbon, who, at six and a half feet tall, was an imposing figure.

“Sit down, Mr. Westlake,” Fitzgibbon ordered.

“See, here’s the problem with your story. The facts don’t back up what you’re saying.” Ronan paused, smirking at Westlake, who, instead of looking annoyed like he had moments ago, looked worried. “I get that a history major might not know a lot about anatomy, so let me give you a little crash course.” Ronan stood up and motioned Ten to join him. “When we fall forward,” Ronan began, shoving Ten forward while holding on to his belt. Ten’s arms flew out, and his hands were up to break his fall, “our hands shoot out to protect us. It’s like our lizard brain knows we’re in danger and acts accordingly. This reflex is still active when we’re drunk off our asses.” Ronan paused, letting his words sink in. He motioned for Ten to sit down. “Here’s the interesting part. Sebastian Stark had no injuries to his arms, his wrists, his palms, or his fingers. If he’d actually fallen down a flight of stairs, he would have had several injuries, scrapes to his skin, broken wrists and fingers, skinned palms, but here’s the surprise: Bash didn’t have so much as a scratch. It’s almost as if four people placed him in that position on the stairs. You know, people like Brent Jones, Andy Britton, David Kellog, and you.”

It warmed Ronan’s heart to see the look of utter shock on Westlake’s face. Turning his attention to Mrs. Westlake, he saw that the woman looked as if she were about to hurl. He hadn’t seen another person turn that shade of green since the time a few

years back when Jude ate gas station sushi. “Of course, that was after you had a secret meeting with Bash in your room, under the guise of giving him one last chance to win your approval to join the frat.”

“You stupid bitch!” Simon shouted at his wife. “You fucking ratted me out. I knew you were nothing but a dumb whore! Did you tell them that I wasn’t the only one who suffocated that annoying motherfucker, huh? Did you tell them that you were in on it too? Come to think of it, killing Bash that way was your idea. This was all your idea. I’ll just plead temporary insanity. I lost my head when I found out my future wife was fucking prospective members of Sigma Chi. You were nothing but the frat bicycle. Everyone got a free ride! You probably fucked the detectives too, you stupid piece of trash.”

Amanda sat on the edge of the sofa with her mouth hanging open. Her arms wrapped protectively around her unborn child as if she could somehow protect him or her from the sins of her past.

“Yoo-hoo, Simon?” Ronan waved his hand at the crazed man, getting his attention off his wife and back to Ronan, who stood up and reached behind his back. He held up his cuffs for Westlake to see. “I hate to break it to you, pal, but your wife didn’t tell us what happened the night Sebastian died.” He offered Simon a cat-who-ate-the-canary smile. “And for the record, none of us slept with your wife. She’s not our type, if you catch my drift.” Ronan moved behind the stunned man and wrapped the cuffs around his wrists.

Simon Westlake stood there, unmoving, looking shell-shocked. He gave his head a shake and looked at his wife, who was crying silent tears. “If she didn’t tell you what happened that night, who did?”

“Sebastian Stark,” Ronan said simply.

Simon Westlake started to laugh. He sounded completely unhinged. “Sebastian is dead, dumbass!”

Ronan didn't laugh along with Westlake. He turned to Ten. “Oh, did I forget to introduce my husband? Meet Tennyson Grimm. He's a psychic medium. He spoke to Bash last night, and he was more than happy to tell us what happened that night. How you and Amanda suffocated him and how you grabbed three of your pals to help move the body.”

“You'll never be able to prove that!” Westlake shouted. “No one will rat me out.”

“Oh, yes I will.” Amanda got unsteadily to her feet. “I've put up with your lies, abuse, and bullshit for five years longer than I should have. All I have is this child, and you can damn well better believe I'll do everything in my power to protect him.”

“If you talk, I promise I'll have that baby ripped from your arms and sent to live with my parents, who always thought you were trash from day one!” Simon threatened.

“Why would your parents get my baby, Simon?” Amanda asked, sounding innocent.

“Because they're our son's grandparents, you dumb bitch. You're too fucking stupid to realize that you can't raise a baby in prison, which is exactly where you're headed.” Simon began to laugh again.

Amanda looked at her husband with loathing in her eyes. “I may be headed to prison, but my child will never see your parents. I guaran-fucking-tee it.”

Simon stilled. He stopped laughing and focused his attention on his wife. “Who's going to raise our son? Your trashy sister? Your wife-beating father? Your alcoholic mother?”



“No, Simon, his father will raise him.” Amanda shot her husband a triumphant smile.

“You dirty fucking whore!” Simon shouted.

“Shut the fuck up,” Fitzgibbon ordered, leading Westlake toward the door. Jude followed along behind him. “Simon Westlake, you’re under arrest for the murder of Sebastian Stark. You have the right to remain silent.” His voice carried down the hall as Fitz continued to read Westlake his rights while Simon howled in outrage.

When the shouting died down, Amanda turned her attention to Ronan. “What are you going to do with me?”

“We’re going to have to arrest you for murder as well. I won’t cuff you if you promise to come without a fight,” Ronan offered.

Amanda nodded. “Let me call my father to tell him what’s going on, and we can go. Is there any way out of this for me?”

“Get a good attorney,” Tennyson said. “Tell them all about the abuse you’ve been subjected to over the years at Simon’s hands. Bash told us he threatened to kill you if you didn’t help him.”

Ronan nodded in agreement. “It’s possible you can make a deal with the DA in exchange for your testimony about what happened to Bash and any other crimes you might know about.”

Amanda’s mouth hung open. “How did you know?”

Ronan offered a cold smile, as if he didn’t relish his next words. “Your husband got away with murder, Amanda. Men like that think they’re unstoppable. Listen to my husband: tell your father to hire the best lawyer money can buy.”

Amanda nodded and turned to Tennyson. “The only way you could have known what happened that night in detail was if you spoke to Bash. I absolutely believe your gift is genuine. Can you tell me if my baby will be okay?” Tears streaked down Amanda’s cheek.

Ten nodded. “He will be just fine, and so will you. Tell the truth, use those pictures hidden on the flash drive in your shoebox—you know, the ones Simon doesn’t know about—and do everything you can to protect Simon’s child.”

“Simon’s child?” Ronan asked, stunned. “I thought you said the baby wasn’t his.”

Amanda smiled for the first time since Ronan had walked into the office suite. “Oh, this baby is definitely Simon’s, but after all the years of suffering he put me through, he deserves to twist in the wind on this one. Will you keep my secret for me?”

“What secret?” Ronan asked with a devious grin. “Ten, did you hear a secret?”

“Nope!” Ten agreed.

“Make your call, and then we’ll head to the station.” Ronan took a seat on the sofa while Amanda called her father.

Ten knew Amanda’s father wasn’t a wife-beater and had no idea the kind of abuse his daughter had suffered at Simon’s hands. Hopefully, she would let him in on all the secrets she’d been carrying.

His thoughts switching to Paul Stark, Ten said a silent prayer that the grieving father would survive the car wreck that nearly killed him. It would be his pleasure to show Stark Simon Westlake’s mug shot when he woke up.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:46 am*

Ronan

After the craziness of the day, arresting the Westlakes, being there in person to watch Simon go through the booking process, and filling Cisco in on all the details, Ronan was looking forward to going home and calling out for pizza with Ten and the kids. A message from Carson stopped that plan in its tracks. It seemed the Craig brothers were ready to sit down and talk turkey with Corny and Destiny.

Ronan invited Jace, Fitz, and Aurora to join them for dinner. The kids could eat and watch movies in the living room while the adults talked, and hopefully didn't shout, in the kitchen.

"Are you sure our house is the right place for this meeting?" Ten asked, sounding worried.

"Everything will be fine." Ronan had no evidence this would be the case, but he knew the kind of men Carson and Cole were. If they were going to start a fight with their father and his new wife, they wouldn't choose Ten and Ronan's house as the setting. Besides, if Corny got out of line, he was certain he could take a sixty-year-old man with failing kidneys in a fight.

When the doorbell rang, Everly shouted she'd get it. Ronan headed into the living room in case it was Corny. It was Fitz's family, along with Carson and Cole, both of whom looked like they'd had a sleepless night. Everly and Aurora squealed with excitement, deciding instantly that they'd watch Moana and then Frozen . Ronan made sure they were settled on the couch and got their food order: sausage pizza and mozzarella sticks.

“How are you guys doing?” Ronan asked Carson and Cole after he called in the food order.

The brothers eyed each other. “It’s been a rough couple of days,” Carson said. “Truman’s angry at me, and so are the velociraptors.”

Before Ronan had a chance to ask why, Cole chimed in, “Cassie is mad at me too. I didn’t tell the kids what’s going on, and I think that’s also part of what she’s upset about. She didn’t want to be here tonight.”

“Same for Truman,” Carson said on a sigh. “But Mom’s here. Don’t tell Corny.”

Ten nodded. “All the two of you can do is listen to what Corny and Destiny have to say and tell the truth about your feelings. All of your feelings.” Ten looked like he had more to say on the matter when the doorbell rang again.

This time, Everly didn’t volunteer to get the door. When Ronan walked into the living room, his daughter wore an uncertain look on her face. “I’ll explain later.”

Everly nodded but looked as if she didn’t want Ronan to answer the door.

“Hey, guys,” Ronan greeted Corny and Destiny. “Come on in.”

“Who are these cuties?” Corny asked, waving to the girls. Neither waved back.

“My daughter, Everly, and Fitzgibbon’s daughter, Aurora.” Ronan waved them forward. “This way. We’re all in the kitchen. I called out for pizza and salads. Food should be here soon.” He pulled out a chair for Destiny. “I’d like you both to meet Jace Lincoln, Fitz’s husband.”

Destiny’s eyes lit up. “You’re the angel who’s helping us.”

“I am,” Jace agreed. “Seems like we got a lot accomplished today.” Jace pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. “You moved into your new apartment and ordered groceries. Cornealius had an appointment with his new doctor, who ordered bloodwork, which you did, and Destiny had a physical and a GYN appointment.”

“We got to see our little girl and hear her heartbeat.” Destiny reached into her purse and pulled out a sonogram picture, which she passed to Jace. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’re doing for us.”

“I’m glad we can help.” Jace reached for Fitz’s hand. “Carson, Cole, and their families mean a lot to us. Fitz has some news to pass along as well.”

Fitz nodded. “I spoke with the district attorney in Boulder who’s handling Corny’s GoFundMe prosecution. I told her about our willingness to repay the stolen money, and I explained the health situation you’re facing. Her office is working on a plea agreement that will keep you out of jail. You’ll most likely have to report to a parole officer for a period of time, here in Massachusetts, but all of that information will be passed along to the lawyer we’ve hired for you. Reagan Pryce is a good friend. He got Ronan out of a sticky situation a while back. He’s the best defense attorney in Salem. Listen to what he tells you.”

“Oh, so you’re not as squeaky-clean as you’d have us believe, Detective O’Mara.” Corny laughed, slapping his leg.

Ronan was about to explain how he hadn’t killed the man found dead in West Side Magick, but the doorbell rang, stopping him in his tracks. “Must be the food.” Heading for the door, he could see Aurora and Everly looking much happier than they had a few minutes ago. Ronan paid the delivery driver and took the food, two pizza boxes and a handled bag filled with salad and mozzarella sticks. “I’ll bring you plates in a minute so you don’t have to come into the kitchen.” Everly looked relieved. “If there’s anything you need to know, shout for me, and I’ll come in here,

okay?”

“Okay, Dad. I don’t like him,” Everly whispered.

Join the club , Ronan thought. Ten minutes later, Ronan had brought plates and drinks into the living room for Aurora and Everly and had grabbed a slice of pepperoni for himself. The table was mostly quiet as everyone ate their pizza and salad.

“I have a couple of things I need to say,” Carson began after throwing away his empty plate. “You need to understand the amount of upheaval you’ve caused in my family life. My husband and I have been arguing for days about letting you back into my life, not to mention the disagreements we’ve had about donating a kidney and the idea that, at forty, I’m about to become a big brother. Again.” Carson sighed. “I’ve spent my entire life wondering why I wasn’t good enough for you to stick around. I know my mother felt the same way. She cried out for you on her deathbed, and you couldn’t be bothered to come home until after she’d passed, and that was just to see if she’d left you anything in her will. The only time I’ve heard from you in the last ten years was to ask for money. You never came to my wedding. You never showed up after to meet Truman. You never came to visit when our kids were born. They’re going into the third grade next month, and you’ve never met them. You never even asked their names.” Carson wore a look that said he was at a loss for words.

Corny, for his part, sat and listened to every word Carson said. “You’re right. I was never there for you. I was a horrible husband and a worse father. All I cared about was myself, and, to be honest, I did a shit job of that too. I’m a recovering alcoholic, a recreational drug user, a con man, and a fraudster. I know I don’t deserve a second chance. You and Cole have every reason to tell me to go fuck myself, and if that’s the case, I’ll accept your decisions.” Corny took a deep breath and picked up Destiny’s hand. “We got off on the wrong foot the other day, and by we, I mean me and Destiny. We showed up with bad attitudes and just expected you to take us in. I’m

ashamed of the way I treated both of you and your friends.” Corny looked around the table, his eyes lingering on Jace. “I can’t say thank you enough for your help, Jace. You’ve given our little family some stability and kept my sorry ass out of jail so that I’ll be here when our daughter is born.”

“Family is the most important thing,” Jace said. “I had a father who was ashamed that I was gay. He wanted me to stay in the closet forever and paid me to do that very thing. I understand where Carson and Cole are coming from, having grown up without a good father myself.”

“All of this Kumbaya bullshit is very touching,” Cole said, anger burning in his blue eyes. “What I want to know is what comes next? Let’s say Carson or I give you a kidney and the transplant is successful. What happens after that? Do you suddenly morph into Father of the Year? Will you spend time making amends to the people you devastated with your lies and your leaving? Will you desert your new wife and baby like you did to your first family?”

“You have every reason to hate me, Cole,” Corny said softly, with no trace of anger or bitterness in his voice.

“You’re goddamned right I do!” Cole shouted. “You left when I was two. I have no memories of you except for the times you’d call the shop and made our mother cry. Carson gave up friends and his grades to raise me, and he did one hell of a job. I can echo everything he said about not coming to my wedding and not even asking about our kids. Hell, Carson even took after you when Bertha died. Did you know he fucking conned her customers into believing he had her same psychic gifts? If we hadn’t come into our true gifts a year or so later, I don’t know where the hell we’d be right now. The only people we had to rely on were each other. Now we have spouses and kids. Amazing kids. We’ve built a life here. Made friends who are more like brothers. Carson and I have increased the size of Mom’s business. My wife opened a bakery next door. In a matter of days, you’ve spread your tentacles throughout our

extended family, and I'm scared to death. Not of giving you a kidney or of something going wrong in the operating room, but of you fucking over our friends the way you fucked over our family!"

Cole got up from his seat and paced around the kitchen. Ronan could feel his anger pulsing through the room. "I agree with everything Cole and Carson said. Know that if Cole's worst fear comes true, there won't be any second chances. No more apartment, expensive lawyer, or money to put food on the table and to keep the lights on. My only priority here is Carson and Cole's families. Like Cole said, we're closer than brothers. I love their kids like they're my own. I will do everything in my power to protect them, and that means locking your ass up if you step one foot out of line." Ronan took a deep breath. He could feel anger and mistrust welling up inside of him. "My question for you is what's your plan going forward?"

Corny stared down at his empty plate. "You've been in rehab too, Ronan. You know it's one day at a time."

Ronan nodded his agreement but stayed quiet.

"My goal right now is to put my legal troubles behind me. To agree to any terms the DA has for keeping me out of jail in Colorado. I'm going to do whatever my doctors tell me is necessary to regain my health, and I'm going to be here for Destiny and our daughter. After I'm recovered, I'd like to try to get a job. Conning people is all I've ever known how to do. Maybe I could be a used car salesman or drive for Uber. For the first time in my life, I'm willing to work hard to support my family. A family that I hope someday will include my sons."

Ronan hoped Corny was telling the truth for once and not lying to Carson's and Cole's faces. "Where do you stand in all of this, Destiny?"

"I'm going to make sure Corny does what he said when it comes to working with the



DA and getting healthier. I've got some customer service skills in my past. Legitimate skills. I'd like to get a job where I can work from home. That way, we could save on child care and could get by with one car. I made an appointment for later this week at the Salem Public Library to work with someone on writing my resume. I also noticed there was a Help Wanted sign in the window of Cassie's bakery. Maybe I could apply there? I'm willing to work hard and learn." Destiny swiped at her misty eyes. "All of my family is gone. My father left when I was still a baby, and my mother and sister died in a car crash when I was in high school. I've been on my own for so long. With this baby on the way, I want to put down roots and bloom where I'm planted." Destiny turned to Carson and Cole. "I'm sorry for coming into your place of business and causing a stir. I was immature and stupid, and I hope you can forgive the horrible first impression I made. I know Corny really fucked things up in your own family, but I'm hoping we can get to know each other as adults and that maybe, in time, you'll want to see your sister."

A small smile crossed Carson's lips. "I can't believe I'm going to be a big brother at my age."

"Baby Michelle is going to be beautiful," Everly said, walking into the kitchen with her empty plate. "She's gonna have Destiny's dark hair and Corny's blue eyes. You better save your pennies because she wants to play the piano." Everly stood beside Destiny, looking as if she wanted to set her hand on the baby bump, but she held back. "She's also gonna be a vala-stick-torian." Everly shot Ronan a confused look before turning to Carson and Cole. "I couldn't see what you were going to do the other day. You both kept changing your minds. I know what's going to happen now, and you do too. It's gonna be okay, Uncle Carson. Uncle Tru isn't really mad; he's scared. You're gonna live a long life with just one kidney. I promise." She wrapped her arms around Carson's neck and gave him a hug. "Boy, after all that work, I need a cookie. No, I take that back, two cookies!" Everly went to the cookie jar and grabbed several before running into the living room. Seconds later, Ronan heard Aurora cheering.

“What the hell just happened? Michelle is my sister’s name. How did she know that’s what I wanted to name our baby?” Destiny asked. “Is she right?”

Ten nodded. “Yeah, she’s right. Everly is always spot-on. Just remember that the future is fluid and is bound to change if you stray from the path you’re on.” Ten looked to Carson. “I won’t speak for you in regard to what Everly said.”

“My niece is pretty incredible. This whole family is. Everly knows that too. I need to speak with Corny’s doctor and the surgeon, but I’m willing to do this for you and your family.” Carson offered a smile to his father.

Ronan wasn’t completely surprised by Carson’s decision. He didn’t know what he would have done if he’d been in his friend’s shoes. His first instinct would have been to say no. Carson was a much better man than he was. That was for sure.

“I don’t know what to say.” Corny looked on the verge of tears. “I promise I’ll do everything in my power to make things up to you. For not being there when you were kids and for leaving your mother.”

Carson shook his head. “We can’t go back, Corny. All we can do is go forward. I’m willing to take that first step. Progress will be slow, especially where my kids are concerned.”

“I’m willing to take that first step too.” Tears slid down Corny’s face. He got out of his seat and moved toward Carson, who met him halfway. They hugged and cried together.

To be honest, Ronan hadn’t seen any of this coming. It was a real testament to forgiveness and the power of family. Ronan knew Carson would be true to his word, and if Corny faltered in the slightest, he would be there as an insistent Jiminy Cricket, keeping Corny on the straight and narrow.

Tennyson

Later that night, after the kids were in bed and Ronan was taking a shower, Ten sat alone in the living room watching an episode of Chopped . He had the sound down low and wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to the chefs running around the kitchen at top speed and cooking with foods he wouldn't eat on a dare. His thoughts spun around what happened earlier with Carson agreeing to give his father a kidney.

If Ten had been in Carson's shoes, he wouldn't have agreed to do it. Corny was never there for his sons physically, emotionally, or financially. The only time his sons or wife heard from him was when he needed something. Maybe he'd burn in hell for all eternity, but Ten would have gladly faced the flames with both of his kidneys.

"Oh, Tenny, what a mess," Bertha Craig said, appearing on the couch beside him.

"How much of the conversation tonight did you hear?" Ten asked.

"Every last word." Bertha looked as if she were worn to the bone. "To be honest, I wouldn't have given Corny one of my kidneys and wouldn't have let my boys do it either when they were younger."

"For Everly or Ronan, I wouldn't even think twice about it. I'd go into the kitchen, grab a knife, and carve it out myself." He was a wimp when it came to pain, so maybe he wouldn't cut it out himself.

"Same for my sons or my grandbabies. It's not that Corny doesn't deserve to live and be happy, but more a matter of how much can you give a person who only wants to

take from you? I had a lot of friends who urged me to kick his ass to the curb years before I actually did it. I kept thinking that Corny would grow up and get a real job. That he'd wake up one day and realize what an amazing kid Carson was, and he'd throw himself into being a father the way he threw himself into being a con man. It never happened. Now, Carson's got a husband and three kids of his own, and in a few weeks, only one kidney. How much more can we be expected to give this man?"

Ten understood exactly what Bertha was saying. "I've seen stories on the news where a person agrees to donate to someone they've never met before. I mean, it's one thing to donate blood or bone marrow because they replenish themselves, but it takes a different level of selflessness to do it for a total stranger, which Corny is, if you think about it."

"Of course, we have the benefit of knowing Carson's going to be just fine. There won't be any mishaps in the OR, and his recovery will be a snap. Imagine going into this surgery not knowing any of those things?"

"Very true. When it comes to doing what Carson's offering, for Ronan and my kids, I'd do it in a heartbeat. For my father, maybe not." Ten sighed. He hadn't considered himself to be a practicing Christian since a Greyhound bus drove him out of Kansas, but all the same, he knew his thoughts weren't charitable in the slightest.

Bertha poked Ten's arm. "I disagree. I was there the night you learned that David had passed. I saw you at his coffin. I could feel your sorrow over losing him. I think you would have done it."

"Not until he apologized for kicking me out of my house and my town for being a gay psychic." Ten crossed his arms over his chest. This topic was a hill he was prepared to die on.

"People are who they are, Tenny. I think if David got to know you as an adult the

way Kaye did, he would have come around. Everly wouldn't have given him much of a choice. Same goes for Ezra—there's a lot of David in that little boy."

"You got me there," Ten admitted. "I can't tell you how many times I heard the phrase 'hate the sin, love the sinner' during my lifetime. I'm not sure David would have ever gotten to a place where he'd feel like I wasn't sinning by being with Ronan."

"You may be right, but that's not your problem. It's David's." Bertha paused. "Same goes for what happened with River."

"Low blow, Bertha." Ten reached for her hand. "I don't know that I can ever forgive him for what he did to my brother, his mom, and to Kaye."

"Uh, excuse me? The last time I looked, you weren't Jesus Christ. It's not your job to forgive him for what happened with River. Which also means that it isn't my job to forgive Corny for the way he treated my sons. Shit!" Bertha pouted.

"I knew if I gave you enough space, you'd tangle yourself in that spiderweb." Ten chuckled. "It's been months since I've seen my father. I've asked Everly if he's been in touch, but she won't tell me. Can you imagine my own daughter not letting me in on what's going on with David?"

"I won't do it either." Bertha pressed a kiss to Ten's cheek. "But I will do this. Toodles!" Bertha laughed and vanished. Sitting at the other end of the sofa was none other than David Grimm.

"Hey, Ten," David said with a little wave.

"Hi, Dad." Ten should have known Bertha was up to something when she brought David up.

“I’ve done a lot of thinking about the last time we saw each other. The things I said about River and his mother, and I want you to know I regret those words.”

“Okay,” Ten said, not entirely ready to forgive his father for what happened with River, but as Bertha said, it wasn’t his job to forgive his father for that sin.

“I’m not here to make excuses for the way I acted back in the day. I just want you to know I’ve been spending time with River and his family, and they’re wonderful.” David sniffled and swiped at his misty eyes. “I don’t know how it happened, but my son is kind and gentle. He loves his daughter with every cell in his body, and so do I. Brooke is just the sweetest little girl.”

“You’re right on both counts,” Ten said with a smile. “Only seeing River twice this year isn’t enough. I think we’re going down there for Thanksgiving, and maybe they’ll come up for Christmas, but I wish he was here, living on this street with the rest of our family. Everly, Aurora, and Brooke became fast friends, and I know the girls miss Brookie very much.”

“Do you think you could help me speak with him when you’re in Florida for Thanksgiving?” David asked, looking as if he expected Ten to say no.

It was on the tip of Ten’s tongue to ask David just how satanic his gift was now, but he swallowed those words. David asking Ten to use his gift was something he’d never done before. “If River wants to speak with you, then I’ll help make it happen.”

“I can’t ask for more than that.” David smiled at his son. “Am I allowed to visit Everly and Ezra again?”

Ten nodded. “I shouldn’t have kept you from them.”

“Bertha filled me in on how they’ve been doing, but I missed seeing them myself.”

David wore a grateful look.

“I appreciate you listening to me when I asked you to stay away.” Guilt swamped Tennyson like a rogue wave in a dinghy.

“You were protecting your kids. I can’t fault you for that.”

Ten hadn’t expected this much maturity from David. “I’m hoping we can start spending time together again too.”

“We can,” Ten agreed, feeling his heart lighten. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too, son.” David offered his son a smile. “If you don’t mind, I’m gonna peek in on the kids before I go. Thanks, Ten. I love you.”

Ten felt his heart stop beating as David uttered the words he longed to hear. “I love you too, Dad.”

With his message delivered, David vanished.

All the bad feelings and ill will Ten had for his father dissipated. He felt renewed and free. Shutting off the television, Ten headed upstairs. If he was lucky, he’d catch Ronan still in the shower. Either way, he couldn’t wait to tell his husband what happened with David.

Happier than he’d been in months, Ten whistled a happy tune on his way to find Ronan.

Ronan

Five months later...

Ronan's ass was asleep. Between the hard plastic chairs in the hospital waiting room and the length of time he'd been sitting, six hours and counting, he was sure he wouldn't be able to stand up without help.

Sitting around Ronan were Ten, Jude, Cope, Truman, Cole, Cassie, Destiny, and her newborn bundle of joy, baby Michelle, Mickey for short. The baby had slept quietly while the adults had paced the room and worried after Carson and Corny.

Carson's doctor had been in two hours ago to let them know the kidney had been harvested and that Carson had been moved to the recovery room. Truman would be allowed to see him once he'd woken up from the effects of the anesthesia. According to Ten, Bertha Craig had stayed with her son through the surgery. Ronan expected Corny's doctor to be in at any moment. He'd done a lot of research on kidney transplants and knew it took about three and a half hours for the surgery.

Ronan would be the first to admit he thought Corny would have fucked this opportunity up somehow, but miraculously, he had not. Once he and Destiny were settled into their apartment, he'd been true to his word and got a job at a used car lot in Beverly. He'd been their top salesman for the last two months in a row. Thanks to his job, Corny had sick leave, short-term disability, and health insurance to help pay the costs of the surgery. Destiny worked early mornings with Cassie at the bakery until Mickey was born. She had plans to go back when the baby was three months old. In the meantime, she also worked part-time for an insurance company, taking



customer calls from the comfort of her dining room table.

Ten smacked Ronan's arm. "The doc is coming." He got to his feet and helped hoist Ronan out of his chair.

"Hey, everyone. You'll all be happy to know Corny is out of surgery and is in recovery. He woke up a few minutes ago and asked for his daughter. You'll be able to see him when he's moved to a room in the ICU. He'll be very groggy and tired, but seeing his wife and child will go a long way in speeding up his recovery. I'll send someone in to get you when he's ready for visitors."

"Thank you, Doctor," Destiny said before setting her face in her cupped hands. She whispered her thanks to God.

"Now that we know everyone's okay, I'm off to see Paul Stark. I've got a new journal for him and some snacks." Ronan hadn't been able to visit his friend in several days. Getting ready for today had kept everyone very busy. He knew Paul would understand.

"I'm coming with you," Ten said. "Call us with any updates. I'll come by tomorrow and spend some time with Carson so you can go home and grab a shower, Tru."

"Thanks, Ten. I appreciate it." Truman hugged Ten, then Ronan.

"Is Paul expecting us?" Ten asked as he and Ronan left Salem Mercy and walked toward the Mustang.

"He is. It was a rough week for him, so I wanted to make sure we got out to see him at some point." After the car accident, Paul Stark spent a week in intensive care and another week recovering at home. Ronan and Fitzgibbon had taken turns visiting him and stopping by with food and to help with things like laundry and cleaning the house. Cisco Jackson had been true to his word and helped Stark work out a deal

where he would be sent to rehab instead of jail. He'd also have to do two hundred hours' worth of community service when his time at rehab was over and would forfeit his driver's license for six months. Paul had graciously accepted his sentence and had gone off to rehab.

Paul had been at Hope by the Sea for the last four months. It was the same rehab Greeley Fitzgibbon had stayed at when he was recovering from his drug addiction and from being kidnapped by a serial killer bent on making the then-teenager his next victim.

About two weeks into Paul's stay in rehab, Bash and Maya had visited. With Bertha Craig's help, both were able to say their goodbyes. Paul watched as his family walked into the light after making him promise he wouldn't follow along for a long time to come.

"We should also make time to stop in and see Mandy Patterson," Ten said. "Between little Mickey and baby Bronson, we're certainly getting our share of baby time.

Ronan laughed. "Enough so that you've sworn off having another baby completely?"

"Ronan," Ten sighed. "We've got our hands full with Everly and Ezra. Another baby would mean one of them is sharing a bedroom, and I don't want to move out of our house. I love it and our neighborhood."

"Me too," Ronan agreed. After Mandy Westlake agreed to testify against her husband, Simon, the charges against her had been dropped. Simon had his second-degree murder charges downgraded to manslaughter in exchange for him pleading guilty. He'd been sentenced to twenty-five years in prison with the possibility of parole. With his clean record, Ronan had no doubt the son of a bitch would be out of jail in fifteen years, tops.

Paul Stark had agreed with the prosecutor's deal. All he'd wanted was for his son's

killer to be brought to justice, and he had. Paul had bigger fish to fry in rehab and his plans for his future. He would spend two more months at Hope by the Sea and then would work on his passion project, starting the Sebastian Stark Memorial Fund. It would offer scholarships to deserving kids. Jace and Fitz had already promised a sizable donation.

After Simon Westlake pled guilty, Mandy divorced her husband and, with her parents' help, was focused on raising her son to be the kind of man who would help rather than hurt the people around him.

As for Ronan, he agreed with Tennyson that their family was perfect just the way it was. Although, maybe it was time to get Everly the baby goats she'd been asking for.

THE END