



# Ghost After Dark (Haunted Souls #20)

**Author:** Pandora Pine

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** While listening to the wildly popular paranormal podcast Ghost After Dark, psychic Copeland Forbes hears a disembodied voice crying out for help. The episode was investigating the haunting of a clifftop mansion, where Domenica Fibonacci lived with her wealthy husband, Vic. On a stormy night in 1984, she tragically fell to her death. Forty years later, one question remains: did Domenica jump or was she pushed?

Detective Jude Byrne isn't convinced the cry for help was real, arguing it was a con job employed in the hopes of bringing more listeners to the podcast. When the host invites Cope onto the podcast to communicate with Domenica's spirit, Jude is against the idea, fearing the offer is a trap meant to expose Cope as a fraud.

When there's a major break in the Rothschild haunting, Jude and the cold case detectives are assigned to the case. Working together, Jude and Cope must piece together the clues to determine once and for all how Domenica died.

Did Domenica jump? Was she pushed? More importantly, what role did her husband play in her untimely death?

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Domenica

July 1984...

Domenica Fibonacci woke slowly. Her head felt as though it had been stuffed with cotton, her mouth dry as the Sahara. Slowly cracking one eye open, she could see the room was dark. Giving her fingers a wiggle, she found they moved freely. Ditto for her toes. Repeating the motions found her hands and feet unbound, but moving each limb took much more concentration than usual and strength she did not have. Although no longer shackled to the bed, the drugs held her prisoner all the same.

How long had she been out? A few hours? A few days? A few weeks? Domenica wasn't sure. The only thing she knew for certain was that she was alone in her own personal hell. At least for now.

It hadn't always been like this with Domenica's movements restricted in her own home by her husband, Vic Rothschild. When they'd met in Positano on Italy's Amalfi Coast nearly seven years ago, he'd been handsome and charming. A rich American who'd thrown money around as if it were nothing. Generous to a fault, Domenica had been helpless against his charms, of which, at the time, were many.

She'd fallen head over heels, against her father's wishes. Matteo Fibonacci was a pragmatic man. He understood his daughter's beauty would be her ticket to a better life, certainly better than the one he'd been able to provide to his family, but there had been something about the charismatic American that hadn't felt right to him.

After a whirlwind courtship and wedding, Vic had brought his new bride back to

Rothschild Manor, a beautiful mansion situated high on a cliff, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and Salem Harbor to the north. Upon seeing the house for the first time, Domenica had thought she was the luckiest woman alive. Now, she saw this monstrosity of a house as a prison. One she was desperate to escape.

According to Vic, his ancestors survived the maiden voyage of the Titanic in 1912 and the stock market crash in 1929 with their wealth intact. There were rumors of minor ties to the British royal family, but Domenica had no idea if any of what Vic told her was the truth. At this point, she couldn't care less.

Domenica wished she'd listened to her father's gut feeling. She might not have the wealth and status a life with Vic afforded her, but she wouldn't be in fear of losing that life at the hands of the man who'd vowed to love and protect her until death parted them.

Willing herself to move, Domenica sat up. The room spun. She shut her eyes and began to count backward from ten. After a few seconds, the room stilled. She scooted to the edge of the bed and set her bare feet on the floor, which was cold. Taking a deep breath, she stood up. Her first few steps were wobbly, but she managed to keep her balance.

With stilted movements, Domenica made her way to the closet. She needed to get rid of the long white nightgown Vic insisted she wear. What she needed was a pair of jeans and her favorite running shoes. Not wanting to risk turning on the light and alerting Vic that she was up, she made her way to the shoe rack and found what she was looking for. As she reached for jeans, a noise caught her attention.

Vic.

Her husband was singing from his adjoining bedroom. It sounded like "Volare," which chilled her to the bone. It was the song Vic sang when he came to visit her. A

piece of her past that he used to taunt her. There was no time for her to change now. She would have to run dressed as she was.

Slowly turning the doorknob, Domenica dared a peek into the hallway. Candles were lit, casting everything in ominous shadows. She gently shut the door behind her and crept past Vic's bedroom door on her way to the stairs. Her left foot was on the first riser when she heard Vic.

"Domenica?" Vic's call was filled with worry and what sounded like pain, but she knew better. Her husband was a world-class actor. A vile manipulator who could convince anyone that shit tasted like champagne. She wasn't going to fall for his act.

Not again.

Moving with as much speed as she dared, Domenica made her way down the stairs. She stopped to catch her breath on the landing. Looking out the large picture window, she could see the backyard and the cliff beyond. A rumble of thunder caught her attention. It was followed seconds later by a bolt of lightning, which illuminated the entire foyer.

A storm had hit; that's why there were candles lit. The power was out. Perhaps the dark would work in her favor.

"Domenica, where are you?" Vic sounded sweet and caring, but Domenica knew her husband was *una lupa vestito da pecora*. A wolf in sheep's clothing. "I brought you dinner. Your favorite chicken casserole."

Domenica's stomach threatened to revolt. Chicken casserole most definitely wasn't her favorite. The meal was a monstrosity. Overdone supermarket chicken mixed with soup in a can and mushy noodles. It was everything wrong with America in one vile bite.

Footsteps pounded behind her. Vic's face appeared over the second-floor banister. "Domenica! There you are! I was worried."

"Stay away from me!" Domenica shouted, her voice sounding weak to her own ears. She grabbed a handful of her nightgown in her left hand and hiked it up toward her thighs. Like this, she'd be better able to run. "I know you drugged me again! You're poisoning me!" She took off down the stairs, as fast as she dared. One misstep and she would fall. Just what she imagined Vic was hoping for.

Reaching the first floor, she dashed toward the kitchen. Vic kept the spare sets of car keys in the pantry. All she needed to do was grab the set for her Mercedes and she'd be gone. Freedom would at last be hers.

Her bare feet slapped loudly against the travertine marble floors. Imported from Italy, the stone tiles had been a gift from Vic to his new bride. A piece of her homeland in her own home. How she hated the very sight of them.

"Domenica, please stop, sweetheart. You've been unwell. Let me help you!" Vic's voice was closer. He'd reached the first floor and was only steps behind her.

Running on tiptoes, Domenica reached the kitchen. She skirted around the center island, the twelve-burner stove, and the rest of the French kitchen suite of appliances Vic had installed five years ago. Yet another present for his bride.

When she reached the large walk-in pantry, she flipped on the light. Nothing happened. No matter, she rummaged loudly through the shelves, looking for her keys. There was no need to hide her movements now that Vic knew she'd escaped the confines of her bedroom. Every second she wasted not finding the keys was more time for Vic to find and stop her.

Moving the flour canister out of the way, Domenica noticed the key rack was gone.

Not only were the hooks gone, but so were the holes they would have left in the plaster. Vic had done this to trick her. To prove that she was indeed insane. “This is another one of your tricks!” Domenica screamed, feeling her entire body pulsing with rage.

Stopping in the pantry door, Vic offered her a sad, pitying look. “I’m not tricking you, Dom. Please, come here.” He held a hand out to her. “Have dinner with me. If you’re not in the mood for chicken, we can have something else.”

“No! I’m leaving. You can’t keep me here. I’m your wife, not your prisoner!” Domenica tried to push past Vic, who grabbed her wrist. She turned and slapped Vic across his smug face with her free hand, which instantly stung. Her husband would bear her mark on his cheek, as she had worn his many times in the past.

“You’ve been doing so much better. Please don’t make me call Dr. Hartman. Again. ” Vic looked sad, as if he were going to burst into tears at any second. Five years ago, she would have believed this pathetic display from him, but not today.

“The man is a butcher, not a doctor.” Domenica’s entire body shuddered. “He killed my babies and drugs me into submission. Is that your idea of do no harm?” Three times she’d been pregnant, and three times Dr. Hartman had taken those precious lives from her womb.

“There were no babies, Dom.” With those words, a lone tear began to cascade down Vic’s cheek. It caught against the raised handprint on the side of his face and rolled toward his ear. “You were never pregnant. Dr. Hartman is a psychiatrist, remember?” The look in Vic’s eyes would have been devastating if Domenica didn’t know what a skilled liar he was.

With a hard jerk, Domenica pulled her wrist free. She moved toward the glass doors leading to the patio and pulled one open. A blast of wind rattled her bones, pushing

her back into the kitchen momentarily. Rain fell in sheets, soaking everything. Not that it mattered. This was her only means of escape.

Running into the rain, Domenica heard Vic bellow her name. It sounded like her husband had turned into a wild animal, which made her move faster. She ran toward the edge of the cliff. Her bare foot kicked against a small pebble, which flew over the edge. A flash of lightning illuminated its path straight down into the roiling ocean.

“Domenica,” Vic pleaded. He’d come to a stop approximately two feet from her and held out his hand, which to anyone else would have been a lifeline. To her, it was just another trick to keep her under Vic’s control. “Take my hand. We’ll go inside and talk.”

“Stand back! I’ll do it! I’ll jump!” Domenica cast a look over her shoulder. Her long, dark hair blew in the wind, tangling around her face. “You’ve ruined my life. Stole my babies. Kept me a prisoner.” She took half a step back. She felt the back of her left heel slip over the edge of the cliff. Small stones broke free and tumbled toward the raging ocean below. There was no room left to run.

“You’ve never been a prisoner. All I’ve ever done is try to keep you safe from yourself. Just take my hand. I’ll bring you back to Italy. Back home to your father. Please, don’t do this.”

Domenica stood tall. She studied Vic, who was still pleading with her to come back from the edge. He’d promised to take her home before. “Lies! All lies! You promised before, and we didn’t go.”

“You were in the hospital, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” Domenica screamed. “You forced me to go. Approved the straightjacket. The padded room. You left me to rot!”

“You’d tried to hurt yourself. Look at your wrists.”

Domenica looked at her forearms. The skin was pristine, unmarked. Vic was lying. There was no way out of this situation. Either she gave in to her husband’s demands, or she freed herself once and for all.

Which would it be?

Live to fight another day. Or jump.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

July, present day...

Jude loved Independence Day. The red, white, and blue bunting displayed around town, the scent of roasting meat at family barbecues, happy neighbors, enjoying some well-deserved time off, and last but not least, fireworks.

He had vague memories of spending the holiday in Albuquerque with his father when he was a kid, but that had all stopped when he moved to the reservation with Running Eagle. The Navajo saw the Fourth of July as a day of mourning. A time to remember all that had been taken from them. Jude had known enough to keep his mouth shut about waving the American flag, stuffing his face with hot dogs, and lying on a blanket, staring up as the sky exploded with color.

Ronan had been the one who started the tradition of hosting a cookout when Everly was five months old. Jude remembered trying to balance the baby, her bottle, and a footlong dog all at once. After mixing them up, Everly ended up trying spicy mustard that day. She'd put on a fireworks display of her own later that evening, but Jude would carry the secret to his grave, or until Everly's wedding day. The story would be hilarious to tell during his godfather speech.

The party rotated to different homes after that first year, first to Fitzgibbon's house, then to Jude's. With this year's celebration back at Jude's house, he'd come up with an idea to top all others. They were going to have a watermelon-eating contest. He'd bought several large melons, along with the other ingredients he'd need for a kick-ass feast, pork butt, hot dogs for those troglodytes who didn't like his pulled pork, along

with everything he'd need to make his famous baked beans and chipotle mac and cheese. Ten was making slaw, and Fitz was in charge of dessert. Not that anyone would be in the mood to eat cannoli after they had his food.

"Explain this to me again," Cope said when he walked into the kitchen to see Jude slicing the watermelon into wedges. "Where the hell did you get the idea for an eating contest?"

"Wolfie and I were watching YouTube videos of the hot dog-eating contest on Coney Island. You know the one where that same guy has won for like ten years in a row. Johnny Bag'a Donuts or something?"

Cope shot his husband a confused look. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Pull up YouTube and search for the Fourth of July hot dog contest." How was it possible that Cope didn't know about the famous event? It was as American as apple pie.

"Is this it?" Cope turned the phone to Jude, who nodded. His finger hovered over the Play button. "Am I going to regret watching this?"

Jude snorted. "Of course not. It's guys eating hot dogs."

Cope pressed Play. Jude stopped slicing the watermelon so he could see the beauty of the contest along with his husband. Jude could watch these videos all day and still laugh his ass off. The starter's pistol sounded, and the contestants began wolfing down hot dogs like they hadn't eaten in a month. "What the fuck?" Cope muttered when the contestants started dunking the hot dog rolls into water, squashing them and eating them with the same speed as the dogs.

"They've gotta eat the buns too, not just the hot dogs," Jude said. "But in my contest,

we just have to eat the watermelon flesh, not the rinds.”

The look on Cope’s face had gone from mildly interested to absolute horror in a matter of minutes. When the contest ended and the champ was crowned, Cope set his phone down. “That man ate sixty-two hot dogs in ten minutes?”

“He’s an elite athlete.” Jude grinned and went back to cutting the melon. “Now, that’s the kind of sport I can get behind.”

“Yeah, so instead of you blowing out your other knee playing basketball, you’ll just choke to death in front of your kids. Awesome,” Cope deadpanned, rolling his eyes. “I can’t think of anything more American than having to give my idiot husband the Heimlich on the Fourth of July.”

“How can you choke on watermelon? It’s mostly water. Says so in its name.” Jude waggled his eyebrows.

“Daddy!” Wolf shouted from upstairs. “I got my costume on!” Little feet thundered down the stairs.

“What costume?” Cope asked.

“You’ll see,” Jude said. Wolf was supposed to have waited for Jude to give their prearranged signal but had jumped the gun. He wished he could wave Wolf off, like a NASCAR pit crew, but that wasn’t possible with him stampeding down the stairs like a rogue baby bison.

“Tah! Dah!” Wolf shouted as he leapt into the kitchen, his red cape flowing behind him.

“What are you wearing?” Cope asked, his eyes wide as he stared at his son.

“It’s my melon-eating costume! I’m gonna win the Kid Division.” Wolf set his hands on his hips and grinned proudly. The little boy was wearing one of Jude’s white V-neck T-shirts tucked into a pair of Jude’s red boxers. Jude had drawn a picture on the front of the tee of Wolf with bulging cheeks, holding an empty watermelon rind. The cape was part of Wolf’s Dracula costume from last year, turned backward, so the red lining was on the outside.

“Kid Division?” Cope asked softly.

Jude nodded. He knew that tone. It was the one that said his usually mild-mannered husband was about to blow his top. The best thing he could do at the moment was damage control. “You’re such a kidder, Wolfie.” He turned to Cope. “Wolf’s my sidekick. There’s no Kid Division.”

Wolf’s face darkened. “Daddy, there is so a Kid Division. You said I was gonna wipe the floor with Everly and Aurora! I’ve been in training for three days for this contest. You said I was gonna win.”

“Did you say he was going to win?” Cope asked.

“I-I, well, I...” Jude was in the shit now. “I mean, you’ve seen him with my mac and cheese. He loves it so much that he gobbles it up in a flash.”

“Dad said I was a ringer!” Wolf grinned.

“Did he, now.” Cope turned to Jude. “Uh, snookums, may I have a word with you in the living room?” Cope grabbed Jude’s wrist and yanked him along.

“Daddy, I’m gonna have a snack!” Wolf called out.

“Not yet, Wolfie. You need to save room in your belly for the watermelon!” Jude

called back.

“Room in his belly?” Cope asked, sounding incredulous. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Uh, where to begin?” Jude tried to think of a clever comeback, but his mind was strangely blank. He knew that if he didn’t manage to talk his way out of this mess, he’d be sleeping on the couch tonight, possibly outside on the deck if things got any worse.

“I’m waiting.” Cope tapped his right foot on the floor, the same way he did with Wolf when their son was in hot water.

“Let’s face it, babe, I’ve got a big mouth,” Jude began.

“Never a truer word was spoken,” Cope said, rolling his eyes.

“What’s even bigger than my mouth is my—” Cope slapped a hand over Jude’s mouth.

“Don’t you dare say that next word. The size of your dick is irrelevant to this conversation.” Cope shook his head as if he couldn’t believe Jude’s audacity.

It was on the tip of Jude’s tongue to tell his husband just how relevant his dick actually was, but he’d save that for later, as a last-ditch plea to avoid sleeping in the backyard. “Jeez, your mind is always in the gutter. What I was going to say was that my stomach is bigger than my mouth. Ronan stepped up his hosting game last year by renting a fucking pony.” Jude rolled his eyes. He remembered how enamored of the tiny horse the kids had been last year, especially Lizbet, who’d cried when Jude tried to pull her away from the animal.

“Is that what this is about? Beating Ronan?” Cope sounded as if he finally understood Jude’s aim.

“Not entirely,” Jude said softly.

“So what is this about, then?” Thankfully, Cope sounded more interested than irritated, but Jude knew that could change in a heartbeat if he said something stupid.

“I figured with my big mouth, I’d be a shoo-in to win the Detective Division, and with Wolf’s capacity to put away a ton of food, I figured he’d win the Kid Division. We could rule the barbecue together.”

“Okay, Darth Vader.” Cope’s lips curved into what looked like a reluctant smile.

Jude set his hands on Cope’s hips, pulling him closer. “You’ve got a pretty big dick yourself, so I figured you’d have a good shot of winning the Psychic Division.”

“Wait! What?” Cope sputtered. “The Psychic Division?”

“Yeah, I didn’t want you, Ten, and Jace to feel left out.” Jude offered a sweet smile. He sure as hell wasn’t about to tell Cope that he’d invented the Psychic Division before he agreed to let Wolf participate. “I even got trophies for the winners.”

“Trophies? Okay, now I’ve heard it all.”

“Let’s face it, I’ll never win a trophy for anything, so I thought maybe this way I could be a winner, winner, chicken dinner.” Jude put on his poutiest face, hoping it would win him points with Cope, who would undoubtedly tell him that he already was a winner.

“You did manage to snag me, so I suppose that makes you a winner.” Cope snorted.

“You didn’t come with a trophy, babe. You are the trophy!” Jude pressed a kiss to Cope’s cheek. Maybe he wouldn’t have to sleep in the yard with the squirrels after all.

Cope burst out laughing. “You’re ridiculous. You know that, right?”

“Think about if all three of us win today. We’ll carry that victory with us for the next year!” In his mind, Jude could hear their friends cheering his name.

“You really think I can win?” Cope asked.

“I do! You’ve already got an advantage over the other competitors.” Jude wore a shit-eating grin.

“What, you mean that I know there’s going to be a contest so I can prepare myself mentally?”

Jude shook his head. “No, because you’re used to swallowing me. You always say more than a mouthful is wasted, and you never waste a drop, soooo...”

Cope pulled out of Jude’s arms. “This is insane. You are insane.” Shaking his head, he headed toward the kitchen.

As Cope walked away, Jude could see his husband was smiling. He was already a winner. All he had to do now was kick his best friends’ asses, and the trophy would be his.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Cope

The party was well underway. The kids were splashing each other in the paddling pool, and Cope couldn't help thinking how much fun it would be to have an inground swimming pool like Fitzgibbon. Jude, Ronan, and Fitz were standing together laughing at a story Ronan was telling, while Ten and Jace sat together at the large table, undoubtedly enjoying the calm before the storm.

"Can I have everyone's attention?" Jude clapped his hands together as he called out. "I have a big announcement."

"What's going on?" Ten asked Cope. "Are you two adopting another baby?"

Cope grinned at his friend. "No. Our family is complete. This is something else entirely." That was the understatement of the year.

"Should I be worried?" Ten looked as if he already was.

"You know, I'm still not sure myself." Cope sized up his friend. Ten didn't seem like the type to gobble watermelon competitively, but stranger things had happened.

"Last year, Ronan outdid himself, bringing a pony to the party, so I decided to take that a step further." Jude's grin widened as he spoke.

"Did you get a unicorn, Uncle Jude?" Aurora asked while bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“A unicorn!” Everly screamed. “I can’t believe it. All my dreams are coming true!” She jumped around with Aurora. Lizbet joined them, landing on her bottom after two jumps.

“No, wait. That’s not what I meant.” Jude shot Cope a helpless look.

“You dug your own hole. Time to dig yourself out.” Cope bit his lip to keep from laughing. If there was something he could do to dig his husband out of the hole he created, Cope wouldn’t hesitate, but for the moment, he couldn’t wait to see what was going to happen next.

Jude held his hands up. “Hold on, girls. You’re not getting a unicorn.”

“What?” Aurora folded her arms over her chest. She looked as if she were seconds away from melting down completely.

“We’re having a contest,” Jude said.

“And the winner gets the unicorn?” Everly asked. She patted Aurora’s shoulder.

“No, the winner gets a trophy,” Jude said lamely.

Ronan stepped up to Jude and slung an arm around his shoulder. “Let’s all put our listening ears on.” He made a motion as if he were putting on headphones.

“Thanks,” Jude whispered. “We’re going to have a watermelon-eating contest, and there are trophies for the winner of each division.”

“Okay, let me get this straight,” Everly began. “We’re not getting a unicorn. Instead, we’re gonna eat until we barf?” She shivered in the warm sun. “Great plan, Uncle Jude.”

Ronan barked a laugh from behind Jude.

“Gee, I wonder where your lovely daughter gets her sarcasm from.” Jude rolled his eyes. “In the Detective Division, there’s Ronan, Fitz, and myself. Jace, Ten, and Cope will be competing in the Philanthropist Psychic Division, and lastly, Wolf, Aurora, and Everly in the Kid Division.”

Groans sounded all through the party.

Cope felt bad for Jude. He’d done his best to outshine Ronan but was falling far short. “It’s going to be fun. I promise. I’m obviously going to win, so the rest of you can suck it!”

“Yeah, suck it!” Wolf shouted. “I’m gonna win too. My daddy says I eat like a bottomless shit!”

“Uh, that’s pit. Bottomless pit,” Jude said, but no one seemed to be listening. Instead, they were shouting the reasons they were going to win.

Cope grinned at Jude from across the yard. It seemed that he’d gotten everyone’s competitive juices flowing, which he knew was what Jude had in mind to do, until his speech was shot down by the nonexistent unicorn.

“Is this like the hot dog contest?” Ronan asked.

“Similar rules,” Jude agreed. “The adult divisions will last five minutes each, while the kids will have only two minutes. The person who eats the most pieces wins. All of the red flesh has to be gone from the rind for it to count as eaten.”

After Jude showed Cope the hot dog contest video, he’d watched several others on his own. The other big rule was that you couldn’t throw up during the contest. He’d

seen several videos with contestants spewing like Mount Vesuvius and hoped that wouldn't happen here. Maybe he should grab some kind of a barf bucket, just in case.

"The Detective Division is up first." Jude ducked into the house. When he came back a moment later, he was carrying a large Tupperware container with sliced watermelon pieces cut into wedges, like a pizza. On top of the lid was something red and white checked.

Jude set the melon on the table and handed out plastic bibs to Ronan and Fitz. He kept one for himself and tied it around his neck. "Everyone, grab your first piece. When we're ready to go, Cope will set the timer for five minutes."

"I'll record it," Jace volunteered as Ten snapped pictures with his phone.

Cope grabbed his phone and set it for the correct amount of time. His eyes wandered over the three contestants. Fitz looked like he thought this was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard of. Ronan wore a cocky look. He obviously thought he was going to win. Jude, on the other hand, looked nervous. "Is everyone ready?"

All three contestants flashed a thumbs-up.

"On your mark. Get set. Go !" Cope hit the button to start the countdown. He whispered a little prayer that Jude would be victorious.

Each of the men grabbed their first slice of watermelon. Ronan gobbled his in two bites while Jude took three. Fitz, upon seeing the competition was real, picked up his pace, taking huge bites.

Jude and Ronan reached for their second slice at the same time. Both had juice running down their chins and onto their bibs. Jude practically inhaled his piece, taking bites but not swallowing until his mouth was full. He reached for slice number

three before Fitz and Ronan finished their second.

“Two minutes to go!” Cope called.

Jude sped up with Cope’s announcement.

Cope counted five slices in front of Jude, while the others had only three. Ronan seemed to be tiring, and Fitzgibbon’s bites had gotten smaller. Jude, however, was eating like a man possessed, as if this were his final meal before a date with the electric chair. Or worse, like his life depended on his victory.

“Ten seconds!” Cope called out. “Nine! Eight! Seven!” The others joined in the countdown. “Three! Two! One! Melons down!” Cope breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone was still breathing on their own. “Jace, count the rinds.”

Jace stood behind each man, counting each contestant’s tally. “In third place is Fitzy, with four slices.” Jace applauded for his husband, and Aurora gave a mildly annoyed golf clap.

“In second place is Ronan with seven!”

“Rats!” Everly shouted, sounding as if she’d had money riding on the outcome.

“And the winner, with an astounding twelve pieces of watermelon, is Juicy Jude!” Jace slapped his back. “Congrats, man!”

“I won?” Jude’s eyes widened. He started singing a warbling rendition of Queen’s “We Are The Champions.” None of the other participants joined him.

Jude scooped Cope into his arms. His juice-stained face splatted against Cope. “Jace was right. You are Juicy Jude!”

“Christ, I’m stuck with that, huh?” Jude laughed, looking like it was a moniker he’d wear with pride.

“I’m afraid so,” Cope agreed.

“We’ll do the Philanthropist Psychic Division next! Contestants, get ready!” Jude rushed back to the table and cleared away the evidence of his victory.

While Jude cleaned up, Cope gathered Ten and Jace for an impromptu PP meeting. “Okay, that was the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen with my own eyes.”

Ten and Jace laughed. “It was worse than the day Everly accidentally tried spicy mustard and practically exploded. We had to throw away her pajamas.” His nose wrinkled at the memory.

That was a little TMI for Cope, but he knew what Ten was saying. “I’ve got a plan.” He gathered the others closer and whispered what he thought they should do.

“Okay, Psychic Philanthropists, take your places!” Jude shouted.

Cope couldn’t help but admit his husband was born for this. It was as if he’d been a carnival barker in another lifetime. He took his seat, the same one Jude had occupied, offhandedly wishing it would bring him a victory as well.

“Contestants, grab your first slice,” Jude said.

Again, Cope obeyed. He saw that Jace and Ten were ready to go. He winked at them. Butterflies flitted around Cope’s gut, which was ridiculous. It was only a backyard watermelon-eating contest, not the Olympics. Although, knowing Jude, if there was such a thing, he would have entered himself already.

“On your mark. Get set. Go !” Jude cried, with Ronan tapping his phone, presumably to start the countdown.

Each man reached for their melon and took a bite. A regular-sized bite. Not the pterodactyl bites the others had taken. Cope chewed slowly, swallowed, and took another bite.

“What the hell is this?” Jude said.

Ronan snorted. “Not fair, guys.”

“You run your race your way. I’ll run my race my way,” Ten said with a giggle.

Each of the three contestants reached for their second piece of melon at the same time. Ditto for the third piece a minute later. They kept pace with each other for the first four minutes of the race.

“One minute to go!” Ronan called.

Cope watched his friends carefully. Each of them was sticking to the plan. Jude didn’t have three trophies for each of the psychic philanthropists, but Cope didn’t mind. He’d beaten his husband at his own game.

Jace reached for his next slice of melon and inhaled it, much like Jude had done in the first round. He grabbed another and did the same, then a third.

“What the actual fuck?” Cope asked Ten, who was too busy laughing to answer.

It seemed that there was a bit of competition in Jace after all. He was three slices ahead of Cope, who decided he needed to catch up. He dove into his next slice and was grabbing the next one when Ronan shouted there were ten seconds remaining.

Cope turned on the gas, barely chewing and swallowing as fast as he could. Jude had been right: the melon was mostly water anyway.

“Three! Two! One!” Ronan shouted. “That’s it. Melons down.”

“Traitor!” Cope accused Jace.

“Me?” Jace set his hand on his chest. “You were the one getting ready to stuff your face. I saw the look in your eyes and decided to fight fire with, er, watermelon.”

“In third place is Ten with four slices.” Ronan patted his husband’s shoulder in a you’ll-get-’em-next-time gesture. “Second is Cope with an impressive eight slices. Which means the winner, with an incredible eleven slices, is Jace!”

Cope crossed his arms over his chest. “How the hell did you pull that off?”

“We used to do this back at Harvard,” Jace said proudly.

“You had watermelon-eating contests at the most exclusive college in the United States?” Cope asked. It was hard to believe kids at that school would act like something out of Animal House .

“Yup! Only we shot the melons full of vodka before we ate them on silver platters with our pinkies in the air.” Jace held his hands over his head, shaking them like a boxer.

Cope laughed. It was hard to picture straight-laced Jace cramming his face full of spiked watermelon.

“Stand by for the highly anticipated Kid Division!” Jude grabbed three plastic bibs and handed them out to Everly, Aurora, and lastly, Wolf. Cope watched while Jude

kneled in front of their son and seemed to be giving him pointers. Ronan and Fitz quickly joined in with their kids.

“Eye of the tiger, Wolfie.” Jude pointed to his eyes and back to his son’s.

Wolf’s usual smile fell from his face. Left in its place was a serious look Cope didn’t often see. The more mature version of Wolf usually came out when someone was unkind to his friends or when someone suggested the little boy couldn’t do something or another.

“Contestants, take your places!” Jude called, heading for Cope. He slung his arm around his husband. “Wolf’s gonna kick ass and take names.”

“How do you figure that?” Cope asked, curious to hear Jude’s thought process.

“Well, Aurora won’t want to get dirty. Everly will take ladylike bites. Wolfie eats like a rabid wolverine on his slowest days. He’s the absolute favorite.”

Cope had to admit Jude’s logic was sound. He noticed the upset look on Aurora’s face when Fitzgibbon helped her onto her seat. Jude had nailed her weakness perfectly. Everly had her game face on. She reminded Cope so much of Ronan when he was in the middle of a case and was determined to solve it at all costs. But even with Everly’s head in the game, there was no way Wolf wasn’t going to win. He was about to ask if any of the other parents wanted to place a bet on the winner when Fitzgibbon did something that completely changed the odds.

The former cold case captain pulled a pair of gloves out of his back pocket and helped Aurora put them on. The gloves had made a world of difference for the little girl who didn’t like to get dirty. With her gloves, Aurora could dig in the dirt to garden, eat s’mores to her heart’s content, and now, apparently, compete in the watermelon-eating contest.

“Oh, shit,” Jude muttered under his breath. “I thought Aurora was going to be the weakest link, but now she looks pissed off.”

“Yeah, well, you shouldn’t have promised her a unicorn.” Cope snorted and pulled out his phone.

“Et tu, Cope?” Jude asked, quoting Shakespeare. He snarled his top lip like Billy Idol and headed toward the table. “Ronan, will you keep time?”

“You got it.” Ronan tapped his screen and turned his attention to Everly. “Good luck, little miss! You’re gonna win.”

“I’m here to slay all day!” Everly shot a triumphant smile at Jude, as if she were coming for him once she polished off her competition.

Fitzgibbon pulled out his phone and started recording.

“On your mark. Get set. Go !” Jude cried with Ronan tapping his phone, starting the countdown.

Wolf was a machine, munching bite after bite. In between slices, he growled like a junkyard dog, but neither of the girls paid him any attention. Everly tore into each slice like a great white shark, single-minded in her purpose to emerge victorious. Aurora, seemingly emboldened by her gloves and dry hands, chomped her watermelon like a piranha. Her small, white teeth gave no mercy.

“One minute to go!” Ronan shouted. “They’re neck and neck,” he whispered to Jude.

Cope didn’t quite see it that way. Everly wore a determined look on her face. She might have eaten the same number of slices as Wolf and Aurora, but she was hungrier for the win, which would push her over the top. If Cope had learned anything from

his headstrong niece, it was to never count her out.

“Three! Two! One!” Ronan shouted. “That’s it. Melons down.”

“Phew!” Wolf sighed. “I couldn’t eat another bite.” He patted his belly and let out a burp that echoed through the yard. Aurora did the same, but not Everly—she sat quietly with her eyes on Jude. If looks could kill, Jude would be six feet under.

“Here are the results,” Fitz said. “With five slices, we have Aurora! Next, with seven slices, is Wolfie! And our winner with nine slices is Everly! Congrats, kids! Great job!”

Everyone cheered for the kids with the exception of Everly. She sat stone-faced, looking at Jude.

“Are you okay, honey?” Jude asked her. “Do you need me to grab a bucket for you?”

“No, Uncle Jude. I’d like the unicorn you didn’t deliver.” She offered him an icy smile. “No, make that two unicorns. Pink for me. Purple for Aurora. You have two days.” With a yank, Everly pulled off her bib and headed inside the house. Aurora and Wolf were hot on her heels.

“How do you like that?” Jude asked. “You try to do something fun and end up getting extorted by a pint-sized godfather.”

“I wouldn’t cross her if I were you,” Ronan said, shaking his head. “One word of advice: bigger is better.”

Jude opened his mouth, looking as if he had a comeback for Ronan, but didn’t say a word. He simply nodded.

“Looks like we’re going to the toy store tomorrow.” Jude slung an arm around his husband.

“What’s this we? Have you got a mouse in your pocket?” Cope laughed at the very confused look on his husband’s face. “Bring Wolf along too. Stop for ice cream on the way home. Make an afternoon of it.”

Jude grumbled at Cope’s suggestions. He knew Jude would do that exact thing, which would give Cope time to plot his revenge.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

Back in the office after the long Fourth of July weekend, Jude started a pot of coffee and grabbed the Webster case. Before the holiday break, they'd decided the murder of mother and bank loan officer Jessi Webster would be the next case to investigate.

Jude didn't know all that much about the circumstances of the case and figured getting into the office early would give him the perfect opportunity to familiarize himself with the evidence and the reasons why this case went cold seven years ago.

Flipping to the crime scene photos, Jude saw a woman lying face up on the tiled kitchen floor. There was no blood at the scene, but the cause of death became apparent when Jude flipped to the next picture, showing the victim from the chest up. Four ugly dark bruises marred the skin on the left side of her neck, with one lone mark on the right. The marks were in the shape of a human hand. Jessi Webster had been strangled to death.

Moving on to the autopsy, Jude viewed photos of petechial hemorrhaging in the victim's eyes, another telltale sign of strangulation. Other photos showed bruises in various stages of healing on her upper arms, as if someone had grabbed and perhaps shaken her, and others over her ribs and upper thighs, which might be from angry fists. Was her husband abusing her long before her murder?

Jude scribbled down notes to himself, things he wanted to check over as he read the transcripts of the four interviews with Tony Webster. Over the course of those chats with police, Tony had revealed he'd been having an affair with a nineteen-year-old woman named Aimee, who was thirty-one years his junior. A quick check on Google

revealed that he and Aimee had gotten married two years after the murder, when the case had gone ice-cold. The happy couple had a five-year-old daughter named Hope, who'd been born a few months shy of their one-year anniversary.

Typing Tony's name into the database revealed that the man hadn't been issued so much as a speeding ticket since his wife's murder. There were no ER trips for the new Mrs. Webster, and Tony had become enraged when the original detectives had asked about Jessi's bruises, which only made police more convinced that the husband was their man. Even with his dramatic outbursts, no arrest had been made in the case.

What Jude found interesting in the interviews was Tony's assertion that Jessi had her own secrets. Secrets that could have gotten her killed. She'd been a member of the Salem School Board and was a mortgage officer with the First Salem Bank. Tony stated multiple times that the Websters' house had been egged on several occasions in the months leading up to the murder and that Jessi had gotten death threats delivered by mail to her office and their home. Tony did not have any of these threats to share with police.

Curiouser and curiouser.

"Hey, Jude," Ronan said, walking into the office. He was dressed in dark dress pants and a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt patterned with parrots and bananas.

"Hey, Magnum." Jude rolled his eyes. "Where the hell did you get that ugly shirt?"

"It was a present from my husband."

"I see Ten's been shopping at Ugly Shirts 'R Us again." Fitzgibbon snorted from the doorway.

"If we were on vacation at the beach, you'd both love this shirt and be begging me to

tell you where I got it so you could get your own.” Ronan wore a defiant look.

“Over my dead body,” Fitz said.

“Ditto!” Jude crowed. “I wouldn’t wear that shirt if I were freezing to death and it was the only thing between me and death.”

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but your commentary on my fashion choices will never hurt me.” Ronan shot Jude a so-there look and headed for the coffeepot.

“How far have you gotten on the Webster case file?” Fitz asked, taking his usual seat across from Jude.

“I’ve been through the crime scene photos, the autopsy report, and the interviews with the husband.” Jude sighed. “With all those bruises on her limbs and torso, it seems pretty open-and-shut that the husband did this, but he was never arrested.”

“The reason I chose this case was because life has gone back to normal for Tony Webster. He’s got a new wife and a baby. I’m not saying that he’s guilty, but he’s settled, secure in his knowledge that he’s basically in the clear.”

Jude knew the man had gotten comfortable, but Tony’s time in the lap of luxury was rapidly drawing to a close. He’d make sure the murdering thug was behind bars with enough evidence to see him rot there.

“The other thing that caught my attention was that people would have moved on from the squabbles of the school committee and would have gotten over being turned down for a mortgage seven years ago. Folks might be more willing to speak with us and might feel a bit more empathy for the victim than they had years ago.”

Jude mulled over Ronan’s thoughts. “Remember that dick last year who thought

Cope should be removed from the PTA because he married a man?"

Ronan nodded. "He was part of that same group of parents who tried to come for Ten when he was involved with the Christmas Pageant."

"Exactly," Jude agreed. "We know from firsthand experience how local politics and disagreements can spiral out of control into something larger and uglier." Thankfully, Jude had listened to Cope when he'd said to stop engaging with the dickfaces trying to hurt their family. Cope had seen how easily Jude could be pushed to the edge when his family was involved, and Jude hadn't liked that look one bit. "Do we know what the issue was with Jessi Webster and the school committee?"

"Yeah." Fitz nodded. "The issue was money in the budget. There wasn't enough to fund football and the arts. You know, music lessons, art supplies, and the salaries to pay the teachers and aides. Three members wanted to put the money toward the arts, while the other three members wanted it to go to football. Jessi Webster was the deciding vote."

"Tale as old as time," Ronan muttered. "How did she vote?"

"For the arts," Fitz said, sounding puzzled. "She had two nephews on the football team, which made the other members think she was going to vote with them, but when the final vote was tallied, she'd gone the other way. According to the police report, a fight broke out between some of the parents, while others charged at Jessi Webster. Witnesses claim they heard Jessi shouting, 'Let me explain!' but she never had the chance. She was murdered in her kitchen four hours later."

"Huh," Ronan muttered to himself. "Did the husband have any idea why his wife voted the way she did?"

"No one ever asked him," Jude said. "All of the interrogations and interviews Tony

went through were aimed at getting him to confess that he'd killed his wife. Whenever he tried to insist that his wife had been threatened at work and at home, the detectives would steer the discussion back to Tony being the one who killed her."

"I hate stubborn detectives like that." Ronan shook his head. "People who are unwilling to entertain the possibility that someone else could have committed the crime. While they were being horses' asses, the real killer got away with the crime."

"For now," Fitzgibbon said with a smirk. "We're going into this case with our eyes wide open and are going to look at every possible angle and interview everyone who had anything to do with Jessi and Tony. In fact, I spoke with him this morning on my way into the office. We've got an appointment to see him and his wife, Aimee, at ten."

"Shit, wouldn't it have been better to just show up and surprise him with the information that his wife's case had been reopened?" Ronan wore a disappointed look.

"I told him that I had questions about Jessi's acquaintances. I figured that if he thinks we've moved on from him as a suspect, then he'll be more willing to tell us anything we want to know. I want him to feel even more relaxed with the fact that he's not under suspicion where we are concerned."

Jude approved of Fitzgibbon's plan. "I'll spend the rest of the morning familiarizing myself with the case." He wanted to be as prepared as possible. Memories changed as time passed. Something Tony might not have thought was important at the time of the murder could be the one clue they needed to solve the case now.

"By the way," Fitzgibbon said. "Aurora is wildly in love with her new unicorn. You didn't have to do that, you know. It wasn't your fault the girls incorrectly assumed what you had planned on the Fourth of July."

“I know. To be honest, it was fun being out with the girls. Shows me what I’ve got to look forward to with Lizbet as she gets older. Right now, all she does is run around and screech like Godzilla, but I have a feeling once she starts talking in registers that humans, as well as dogs, can hear, she’s going to be unstoppable, especially where Mothra is concerned.”

Fitzgibbon snorted. “Cope sent me the cutest pic of Aurora chowing down on the watermelon. Her cheeks were bulging like a chipmunk, and her eyes were determined. She’s never had so much fun getting dirty before.” He sniffled and cleared his throat.

“She’s come a long way, Fitz, thanks to all the love and support you and Jace give her.”

“It’s not just us. It’s all of you. Aurora has this big, crazy family that would do anything for her. She knows she can count on you to always be there for her.”

It meant the world for Fitz to say these words. Jude had always loved Aurora, and Everly, for that matter, but sometimes he wasn’t sure that love shone through as clearly as he wanted it to. He was a grumpy son of a bitch at times, and his bark was bigger than his bite, but he couldn’t love Aurora more if she were his daughter. “I learned the hard way that the moral of the story is to always have unicorns on hand no matter the situation.”

“Good plan.” Fitz reached for his copy of the Webster case file and flipped it open.

Turning his mind back to the case, Jude mentally reviewed the interviews with Tony Webster. He wished they’d been recorded so he’d be able to see the man’s body language while he was being asked questions. Was he fidgety? Did he break eye contact or not make it at all?

You could tell a lot about a potential suspect by the way they held themselves and the way they reacted to what was being asked of them. Jude was going to watch Tony Webster like a hawk, and hopefully, the man would spill a previously unknown detail that would help convict his murdering ass.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Cope

Cope was sitting in his reading room, trying to meditate. He had a busy day coming up with two of his regular clients and six out-of-towners who'd seen videos of Cope online and had booked him to speak with their lost loved ones.

From next door, in Ten's office, he could hear a ruckus. It almost sounded like Jude and Ronan when they were cheering for Tom Brady, but who the hell was Ten cheering?

Getting up from his table, Cope opened his office door and stepped out into the main office. He could hear hoots and gasps and knocked on Ten's door.

The commotion stopped all at once. "Come in, Cope."

He opened the door, not sure what to expect, but Carson and Cole sitting at the reading table with Ten wasn't remotely on the list of what he thought he'd see. "I could hear you guys in my office. Is something wrong?"

"Sorry about that," Cole said. "A customer tagged us on a Facebook post that included a snippet from a podcast called Ghost After Dark . I had never heard of it before, and neither had Carson. Apparently, the host of the show, Kit Savage, investigates one ghost story per season."

"He's a local guy," Carson added. "Was born and raised in Hull, on the south shore, and has over a half million subscribers."

“Right,” Cole said, picking up the conversation again. “Fans had been writing to Savage and asking him to do a local story, not anything to do with the Salem Witch Trials or the Revolutionary War, a haunting that no one had ever heard of or investigated before.”

“And that’s exactly what he did. The first episode dropped last night, and it was a doozy. Cole called me at half past eleven and got me to listen to the clip, and it blew my mind.” Carson’s blue eyes, ringed in dark circles, glowed with excitement. “Have you ever heard of Domenica Fibonacci?”

Cope shook his head. The name wasn’t ringing a bell, but then again, he’d been born and raised in New Orleans. “I’ve heard of the Fibonacci sequence. Is this any relation to that?”

“No,” Carson said. “Domenica was born and raised in Italy. She met Vic Rothschild when he was doing his grand tour of Europe in 1977.”

“Oh, that big house on the cliff?” Cope asked. “I’ve always wanted to tour it, but Jude isn’t interested in that kind of thing.”

“Right, Rothschild Manor,” Cole said. “The gist of the story was that Domenica and Vic married after a whirlwind courtship and settled into the cliff house. According to everyone who knew them, the couple was very much in love, until an incident in 1983.”

Cope felt himself being drawn into the story. He’d done a little research on the cliff house when he’d seen an ad on television announcing that it was open for the public to tour the luxurious home and the family’s riches from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Nowhere in his readings did it mention the house being haunted or there being any kind of newsworthy event taking place in the 1980s. “Ohhh, what happened?”

“Domenica was committed to a mental institution for six months. Rumor had it that she came out a different person entirely. Some said she’d been given a lobotomy, but others thought something far more sinister had gone on at the old Danvers State Hospital.” Cole bounced his eyebrows as if to say the plot had thickened.

Carson took over the story, “It wasn’t an actual hospital. The place was known to locals as the Danvers Lunatic Asylum. A lot of shady things went on there from the time it was opened in 187 until it was closed in 1992. The building and what happened behind its walls was such a stain on the town that it was demolished in 2006.”

Cope sat with that information for a second. While Ten had trouble visiting prisons, thanks to the decades of evil built up within its walls, Cope had trouble with psychiatric hospitals. They scared the life out of him. Just the idea of being trapped there and being unable to prove his own sanity sent a cold shiver down his spine. When he’d read former psychiatric patients, he hadn’t been a casual observer; it was more like walking in the person’s shoes. The experiences were chilling, to say the least, often ending with Cope being out of commission for weeks at a time. He didn’t often agree to do readings for that reason alone.

“They used that building to film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. You know, the old movie with Jack Nicholson?” Carson asked, sounding as if he’d been rambling on while Cope had been stuck in his own head, wallowing in his own personal horror story.

“I’ve heard of the movie, but I’ve never seen it,” Cope managed to say. “What happened to Domenica?”

Cole grinned. “One dark and stormy night during a hurricane in 198, she plunged to her death from the top of the cliff.”

Cope's eyes widened. "She jumped?"

"No one knows," Cole said. "Her husband said she jumped, but there was a lot of talk that her husband pushed her."

"The body was, of course, mangled by the fall, and with Hurricane Mitzi spinning up giant waves along the Massachusetts coast, it was days before the medical examiner was able to recover the remains. The autopsy was inconclusive, and the manner of death was listed as undetermined."

"That's one hell of a story." Cope shook his head. In his mind's eye, he could picture Domenica falling from that precipice. She would have known death was imminent, and by that point, it would have been too late to take back her rash decision to jump. On the other hand, if she'd been pushed, she went to her grave knowing her husband hated her enough to kill her. "I get that there's a sensational angle to this story with the whodunnit, but what had all of you hooting like the Celtics scored a touchdown?"

"I was wondering when you'd get around to asking." Carson tapped his phone, and a deep voice filled the room.

Welcome to Ghost After Dark . I'm your host, Kit Savage. This season, we'll be exploring the haunting of Rothschild Manor by the dead wife of the last member of the family to inhabit the stately manse. Domenica Fibonacci was a peasant girl from Italy who married well. When she came to live in the United States, she had the world on a string. A handsome and rich husband. A glorious house in which to live and start a family. Sounds like happily ever after, right? Wrong! There were rumors of infidelity. Domenica was involuntarily committed to an insane asylum, and one year later, she was dead at the bottom of a cliff. How did things go so wrong? Join me, won't you, in delving into the mystery of the Cliffside Horror.

Spooky, spine-tingling music began to play.

Cope opened his mouth to ask what the big deal was about this intro when a second voice came out of Carson's phone. "No! No ! No !" Each time the word repeated was louder and more forceful than the last.

"Hello?" Kit's voice sounded frightened.

"They're not very good actors," Cope muttered. Everly could have done a more convincing job.

"Listen," Cole urged.

"Lost. I'm lost. Aiuto! Aiuto!" the voice began to cry.

"What does Aiuto mean?" Cope asked, having a feeling he already knew.

"It means help," Carson supplied.

"The voice you are hearing is not mine," Kit Savage said. "It does not belong to any member of my staff. Domenica, is that you? Are you here with us tonight? What do you need my help with?" Kit's question went unanswered. "I'm going to take a short break and be right back."

Cole tapped the phone, stopping the podcast. "Nothing else happens after this. Kit Savage recaps what happened and reiterated that the voice was not something he or his producers added in. He closed the episode by asking if there were any psychic mediums listening that could help him out. He mentioned you and Tennyson by name."

Even with his gift working at full strength, Cope hadn't seen that coming. "I would need to do a lot more research on this guy before I committed to anything. Ten?"

“Same,” Ten agreed. “The voice might not have even belonged to Domenica Fibonacci. It could have been some sort of internet glitch or background noise from someone else’s phone.”

“I would have agreed with you up to the point where the voice spoke in perfectly accented Italian.” Cope sighed. He’d heard pain and desperation in the woman’s voice. Under other circumstances, he wouldn’t hesitate to get involved, but according to what Carson said, this podcast had over half a million subscribers. That was a huge amount of people who would be able to judge him, harangue him, blame him if things went wrong. Not to mention, potentially unstable people would easily be able to find out where he lived with his family. Cope turned to Ten and could tell by the look on his face that he was thinking the same thoughts.

Maybe Cope would get involved if he could arrange some private time in the clifftop house without cameras and microphones monitoring and recording his every word. His every step. Either way, he wasn’t going to make a decision without talking it over with Jude.

It might be fun to get involved with an investigation like this, but there were so many unknowns. What if the voice was an actress or Kit Savage’s sister, wife, or daughter? What if it was Kit’s plan to lure in an unsuspecting psychic just to unmask them as a fraud? More than one famous psychic had been caught up in operations like that in the past. Cope wouldn’t allow himself to be next in line.

But what if that wasn’t the case?

What if the voice heard on the podcast was actually Domenica Fibonacci? The woman had been dead for forty years. If she had a message to pass on or had something to say, wasn’t it Cope’s responsibility to bring that truth into the open?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

Jude sat in the back seat of Fitzgibbon's SUV, half listening to Ronan ramble on about an episode of Dexter . Jude had initially been intrigued by the idea of a serial killer who only butchered bad people. Murderers, rapists, and others who'd managed to wriggle out of being punished by the justice system for their crimes. With the sort of work they did for a living, the last thing Jude wanted to do in his free time was watch a show that glorified the kinds of offenses he worked to solve.

"Take a left up here," Ronan said, swiveling in his seat to look at Jude. "You okay? You're awfully quiet back there."

"I'm good. Just got my head stuck in this case. A woman died in her own kitchen, and seven years later, there have been no arrests. I can't imagine what Jessi's family has been through over all this time. Not only is Jessi Webster gone, but there are no answers to explain why."

"Tony Webster has been under suspicion in his wife's death for the last seven years. Imagine living with that if he's innocent. All the friends it would cost you. Maybe family too. Your reputation is dirt, and until the cops arrest someone that isn't you , there's no way to convince people you're actually innocent."

Jude raised a quizzical eyebrow at Ronan. "You're on Tony Webster's side here?" Usually, Ronan was the first one calling for the suspect to be strapped to the electric chair. This certainly was a change from his usual stance, especially where a murdered woman's husband was concerned.

“I’m not on anyone’s side. Dexter taught me to see crime from both sides of the coin.” Ronan grinned as if he’d just discovered the secret to life. When Fitz parked across the street from the Webster house, Ronan hopped out, whistling a happy tune.

“Seriously?” Jude asked, eying Fitzgibbon in the rearview mirror. “Should we be worried about him?”

“I think he’s fine. If he starts buying rolls of plastic sheeting and garbage bags, then we’ll worry.” Fitzgibbon shook his head and got out of the SUV.

Jude followed behind them. As he approached the house, he took stock of the two-story Cape Cod. The shingle siding was painted grey. He could smell the freshly cut grass. Sitting in the driveway were two older-model Toyota sedans and a small plastic tricycle, suitable for a toddler. Lizbet had one just like it. She’d howl like a banshee when he or Cope tried to pull her off it.

By the look of things, a normal American family lived in this pretty house, but what dark secrets did it hide? This was the house Jessi Webster had been murdered in. He couldn’t help but wonder if Tony saw his dead wife on the floor every time he entered the room. If he could still smell the decomposing body or the bleach the crime scene cleanup team would have used to remove the odor. Jude wouldn’t be able to live here, that was for certain.

The sound of the doorbell chiming brought Jude out of his head. He hurried to catch up to the others who were standing on the front walk.

“Captain Fitzgibbon?” a young woman asked, opening the front door.

“That’s me.” Fitz held up his badge. “And these are my detectives, Ronan O’Mara and Jude Byrne.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Aimee Webster. Please come in.” The short blonde ushered them into the house. According to the case file, Aimee was twenty-six years old. She looked much younger. Barely over five feet tall, she had the compact body of a gymnast. Jude wouldn’t be surprised at all to discover she’d competed in her youth. Aimee wore a sports bra and workout leggings, which left nothing to the imagination. There were no signs that she’d had a baby.

“Mama!” a tiny voice squealed from the kitchen.

“Mama’s here, Hope.” Aimee grabbed a container filled with Cheerios and added some to the baby’s high chair tray. “Tony will be down in a minute. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?”

“We’re good, thank you.” Jude took a seat at the round kitchen table, his eyes glued to the spot near the sink where Jessi Webster’s body had been discovered.

Ronan looked as if he were about to object until he followed Jude’s line of sight. Apparently, he didn’t want a drink from the murder kitchen either.

“Sorry, I’m late,” an older man said, breezing into the kitchen. “There’s my lovebug!” He pressed a loud kiss to the top of the baby’s head.

“This is my husband, Tony.” Aimee made quick work of the introductions.

As she spoke, Jude studied the man who’d been married to Jessi when she was killed. He wore relaxed-fit jeans and a blue polo shirt, which stretched a bit to cover his expanding gut. If he had to guess, Jude would say the extra pounds were thanks to beer. More importantly, Webster looked relaxed, not at all nervous to have three cold case detectives sitting at his kitchen table. “Captain Fitzgibbon, you said over the phone that you’re reopening my wife’s case.”

Jude was watching Aimee when Tony called Jessi his wife. A dark look passed over her eyes. If he hadn't been watching so closely, he would have missed it.

Fitzgibbon folded his hands in front of him on the table. "Technically, the case was never closed, as it hasn't been solved. My team and I reexamine cold cases to see if there's new evidence available that could help find your wife's killer."

"The murder happened seven years ago. How could there possibly be more evidence to find?" Tony's eyes drifted to the spot near the sink where Jessi's body had been discovered.

"There are continual advances in DNA," Ronan began. "Samples that may have been too small to test at the time of death might be able to be tested now. Same goes for discovering DNA and other trace evidence that wasn't found originally on items of evidence that were collected from the scene."

"It's also possible that people who weren't willing to come forward with information back in the day will want to speak with us now. The enemy of guilt is time. It never gets easier to bear the burden," Jude said.

"Relationships change as well," Fitz said, looking as if he were trying to keep a smile off his face. "Spouses and/or lovers who provided a fake alibi at the time of the crime are usually very cooperative in these instances."

Very cooperative was an understatement. Jude had worked several PI cases where ex-wives were eager to speak with him, which didn't often happen in the course of those investigations.

"Can you tell us what happened the night Jessi died?" Fitzgibbon asked, sounding conversational rather than accusatory.

“It was Wednesday, my night to work late.” Tony made air quotes. “Jessi had a school committee meeting, which I knew would keep her busy until around nine and maybe later if some of the members went out for a drink to discuss what went on.” Tony sighed. “I picked Aimee up from the dorm a little after five that evening. We got takeout burgers that we ate in the car and then found a place to park. We spent the rest of the night in the back seat. I came home around eleven to see every light in the house was on, which scared me. Jessi always went to bed around ten or so and only ever left the kitchen light on for me.”

“Why did the lights being on scare you?” Ronan asked.

“I assumed it meant Jessi had somehow found out about my affair with Aimee. She was only nineteen, a sophomore in college, and it wasn’t the first time I’d cheated on her.” Tony had the good sense to look ashamed of himself.

Jude studied Aimee, who wore a triumphant look on her face, although he had no idea why. If Tony would cheat with her, he’d cheat on her, and with his track record, Jude wouldn’t be surprised to learn Tony hadn’t kept it in his pants during this marriage. “What happened when you walked into the house?”

“I called for Jessi and got no response. To be honest, I thought she was going to come at me like a wildcat when I walked through the door. The fact that the house was eerily quiet was unsettling.” Tony took a deep breath, his eyes glued to the spot on the floor where Jessi was discovered. “I walked in here and could see her left arm stretched out, as if she’d been reaching for something. I ran toward her, and that’s when I saw that her lips were blue. I skidded to the floor and checked her pulse, but there wasn’t one. I called 911, and they walked me through CPR. I knew chest compressions weren’t going to save my wife but did them until the paramedics arrived. They declared her dead, and that’s when the police came in to speak with me.” Tony scrubbed a hand over his face.

Jude was impressed with Tony's show of emotion. If he hadn't seen Jessi's autopsy and read about the bruises and broken bones the woman had suffered, he might almost believe the widower was telling the truth. "You said in your first police interview that you thought Jessi had a heart attack."

Tony nodded. "My wife was in her thirties. She was healthy, ran several mornings a week, and competed in Roller Derby. She took care of herself. I assumed something had gone very wrong, like a heart attack or a stroke."

"Roller Derby?" Jude asked.

"Yeah, Jessi was a jammer for the Salem Spellcasters. She loved it but was always coming home bruised." Tony wore a wistful look.

"Speaking of bruises, you didn't notice the ones around her neck?" Fitzgibbon asked gently.

Tony shook his head. "No. It wasn't until I saw her body at the funeral home later that I saw the marks. We had to bury her in a turtleneck to hide the bruises."

It was on the tip of Jude's tongue to press the man harder. Yes, this was a fact-finding mission to see if there were details Tony would drop about the night of the murder that hadn't been previously divulged, but that didn't mean they had to go easy on this dirtbag. Jude knew it sometimes took a while for bruises to develop postmortem, but the crime scene photos had clearly shown the marks on her neck. If the police and crime techs had seen them, why hadn't Tony?

"Is the timeline right, Aimee?" Ronan asked.

"Yeah. He picked me up at five and dropped me off around ten. I didn't know what happened to Jessi until the next afternoon. I'd been texting Tony all morning, and he

hadn't responded to me. He called me later that night and told me what happened and that he'd been interrogated several times by the police. I remember thinking my wildest dream and worst nightmare had come true all at once."

"Your wildest dream?" Jude asked, trying and failing to keep the shock out of his voice.

"I was nineteen and in love for the first time, Detective Byrne. I'd been begging Tony to end it with his wife for months, but he kept telling me the time wasn't right and that he needed to let her down easy." Aimee rolled her eyes, showing Jude the nineteen-year-old version of herself she'd been that night long ago. "Jessi being out of the picture was exactly what I wanted, but I also knew that Tony would be a suspect in the murder."

"Did you think he'd killed her?" Jude couldn't believe the callousness of the young woman sitting in front of him. Aimee might have been beautiful with a killer body, but on the inside, she was rotten to the core.

Aimee shook her head. "Of course not. I knew Tony could never hurt anyone like that. He's a bit of a wimp, you know? Cries at romantic movies, that sort of thing. When you manually strangle someone, you're right in their face, and my husband wouldn't have had it in him to be that confrontational. Hell, he'd spent the last ten years being henpecked by that woman. If it was me, I would have snapped long before then."

"Your sorority sisters backed your alibi in terms of when you came home?" Jude already knew the answer. He'd read the police interviews with the other women, but he wanted to see Aimee's reaction to the question.

"Right. After I got home, I gave the girls the down and dirty details about my night with Tony. And those details were very dirty, weren't they, honey?" Aimee grinned

lasciviously at her husband. Jude had a feeling that she'd like to throw him onto the table right now and ride him like a prize-winning stallion.

"Is there anyone you can think of who would have wanted to hurt your wife?" Fitzgibbon had his pen out and ready to go.

"Read my interrogations, Captain Fitzgibbon. I know I gave several names from the school committee, other parents, and bank customers who Jessi had turned down for mortgages."

Fitz wore an annoyed look. "You've been the top person of interest for seven years, and you can't even give me a name?"

"I didn't kill my wife. I'd been seeing Aimee for eighteen months behind her back. Jessi had no clue. I was getting the best of both worlds. I had a smoking hot side piece who swallowed my dick like it was candy and didn't nag me about getting the car serviced or taking out the trash and a frigid wife who cooked my meals, washed my clothes, and took care of the house. Why the hell would I ruin a good thing?"

Jude's eyes were on Aimee as Tony spoke. Her face stayed impassive, as if she'd heard this line of bullshit before. She looked almost bored. Jude couldn't help but wonder if Aimee had turned into a nag and if Tony had a new side piece. He opened his mouth to ask when Fitzgibbon stood up.

"Thank you for your time. We'll be in touch if we have any more questions." Fitzgibbon nodded to the couple and headed for the front door. Ronan and Jude followed behind.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Ronan muttered when they were back in the SUV. "It felt as though they'd put this murder behind them and that they were offended we're working on the case."

“Something isn’t right here,” Fitz said, shaking his head. “Tony told that story like he was recapping a movie he’d seen rather than an event he lived through. Ronan, resubmit all the physical evidence for DNA, especially the shirt Jessi wore that night. Maybe the fucker who strangled her was yelling while he was in her face, and we’ll get lucky with saliva or epithelial cells on her clothes. Jude, start looking into the school committee members. Find out if there’s film of that meeting in the archives. I want the names of the people who argued against Jessi that night. I’ll get busy with loan customers.”

“You got it, Cap,” Ronan said.

Jude would do exactly what Fitzgibbon asked of him, even though he was more certain now than ever that Tony Webster brutally murdered his wife. Once all other possible suspects were eliminated, they would be able to refocus their efforts on the husband and bring the fucker down once and for all.

6 Cope

After dinner, with the kids splashing in the pool, the adults sat around Fitzgibbon’s patio table. They’d had a potluck dinner with Ten and Ronan bringing potato salad and brownies while Jude and Cope made deviled eggs and a charcuterie board filled with meats, cheeses, and fruit. Jace made a chicken on the rotisserie. The meal had been delicious.

“Have you guys ever heard of the Ghost After Dark podcast?” Cope asked after Ronan and Fitz finished talking about the cold case they were investigating.

“No, what is it? A call-in show for all the unfulfilled spirits out there?” Jude asked.

“It’s one of those sexy love song shows. Where you request songs for your dearly departed.” Ronan snorted.

“Assholes,” Ten muttered under his breath.

“Bad! Word!” Everly yelled, breathless from splashing.

“You did not hear me say a bad word.” Ten folded his arms over his chest.

“Oh, yes I did! Add a dollar to the swear jar!” Everly laughed. “We’re one step closer to Water Country!”

“What the hell is Water Country?” Jace asked. “Aurora’s been singing a song about it for two weeks.”

“It’s a water park in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. They have water slides and a wave pool. I don’t know how you’ve missed it. I swear the commercials are on every ten minutes,” Ronan said.

“Ah, well, that explains it. When I’m home at night, Fitzy and I don’t watch television. Do we, babe?” Jace wagged his eyebrows. “Maybe we should call that Ghost After Dark show and ask them to play some Marvin Gaye.”

Ronan burst into a surprisingly on-key chorus of “Sexual Healing” before nuzzling Ten’s neck.

“Get a room!” Aurora called from the pool.

“Okay, that’s my fault.” Fitz laughed. “We were on our way back from a doctor’s appointment yesterday, and there were these two kids making out at the light near Essex and Washington.”

“That’s not like you to stick your nose in other people’s business like that.” Ronan rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, but you know how teenagers kiss like goldfish with those big mouths who gulp at the surface of the water for food? That’s what those two looked like. I was performing a public service.” Fitzgibbon grimaced, as if he were seeing it again in his head.

“What was their reaction?” Ten asked.

“They told me to get fucked, but at least I stopped their kissing or whatever the hell that was.” Fitz grimaced.

“Anyway, back to Ghost After Dark ,” Cope said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. “It’s a podcast where the host examines different ghost stories. The first new episode dropped last night, and a bunch of us were tagged in a Facebook post about what happened.”

“What did happen?” Jude asked, perking up. He’d been a bit down since he’d gotten home from work, but with the potluck, Cope hadn’t had much of a chance to ask him what was going on.

“They’re doing a story about Domenica Fibonacci,” Cope began.

Fitzgibbon’s eyes widened. “Jace and I visited Rothschild Manor when we were dating. They’d opened it for tours during the summer. The guide was interested in telling our tour group about the architecture and the artists who painted the artwork hung in the mansion, but all people wanted to talk about was Domenica’s death and if she jumped or was pushed off the cliff.”

“That’s what Kit Savage wants to investigate with this podcast. He was setting up the story in the first episode when a female voice could be heard asking for help in perfect Italian.” Cope’s eyes moved around the table, looking at the reactions of the detectives.

Ronan raised a quizzical eyebrow. “And you believed it was a ghost speaking?”

“Don’t look at us like that, Ronan.” Ten slapped his husband’s hand. “We’ve all heard ghosts speak before.”

“This is the podcast’s fifth season, and there’s never been anything like this before. The show’s got half a million followers,” Cope added.

“Exactly. You know the powers that be want to increase that to a million, two million, ten million. More listeners means more advertising dollars and more consumers buying those goods and services. Rinse. Repeat.” Ronan shook his head. “I don’t buy this for a second.”

Fitzgibbon nodded in agreement. “The best way to get new followers is for something like this to make headlines. Look at all the attention Steven Avery and his nephew got when their story was investigated on a podcast and then on the follow-up Netflix show. This Savage guy is looking for his own viral moment to go big-time. Get himself on Good Morning America or CNN. Hell, he could become the Dr. Phil of the paranormal.”

Cope sighed. To be honest, after everything Ronan and Fitz had seen over the years investigating cases with the help or sometimes hindrance of spirits, Cope thought they would be fascinated rather than skeptical. “Anyway, at the end of the podcast, Kit Savage asked for psychics to come on a broadcast and see if the voice spoke again. He named West Side Magick and Ten and I by name.”

“Did you agree to go on the show?” Ronan asked.

“No,” Ten said. “We just wanted to run this past you.”

Jude looked back and forth between Ten and Cope. “You want to do this. Both of

you.”

“I do. Maybe,” Cope admitted. “This woman has been dead for forty years. We could settle the circumstance of her death once and for all.”

“If the voice was actually Domenica.” Jude wore an annoyed look, as if he couldn’t believe his husband was this gullible. “If this was some sort of trick to titillate listeners or to trap a psychic into saying her spirit was really with them when the producers were the ones who set up the voice in the first place, then you’re both walking into a world of trouble.”

“I agree,” Ronan said softly, as if trying to spare Ten’s feelings.

Jude wasn’t saying anything Cope didn’t expect. His husband had always been skeptical of the things he and Tennyson could see and hear with their gifts. Jude’s belief in spirits was situational, not a blanket acceptance of every incident being of a paranormal nature. “Well, I guess that’s that.” Cope got up from the table and headed into the house.

After he’d finished with his last client of the day, Cope had gone back and listened to the rest of the first episode of *Ghost After Dark*. He paid particular attention to the facts of the case, just like Jude would have done in his official capacity. At the end, he heard Kit Savage’s public appeal for psychics to join the investigation. Cope wanted to help. No, that wasn’t quite right. He needed to help.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jude asked, startling Cope.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” Cope shrugged as if he weren’t upset over Jude’s dismissive attitude.

“Don’t take that tone with me.” Jude pulled Cope into his arms and pressed a kiss to

his cheek. “My number one priority is the safety of our family. You’ve put your gift on display for the public before, and it hasn’t always gone well. Remember those Titanic families?”

Cope nodded. There had been an incident at one of the public readings with the distant relatives of those lost in the long-ago tragedy. Cope’s appearance and the ripples it caused only served to make his appointments book up faster. “I do remember. There were some angry people, but at the end of the day, my popularity grew, and the shop got a ton of new bookings. I still see a couple of those clients. The same thing happens to Tennyson every time the Michael Frye episode of Dateline airs in reruns. The phones explode with people wanting to book readings.”

“I get that, Cope. I really do. I just don’t want you to get hurt. Ten too.” Jude sounded perfectly reasonable, but Cope knew his husband was just trying to change his mind.

Cope felt a flame of anger flare to life. “How is this any different than what you do?”

“I don’t—” Jude began before Cope held up a hand to silence him.

“This is a cold case, just like the ones you and the guys investigate. If Domenica was murdered, her husband can be arrested and prosecuted for her death. There’s no statute of limitations on murder, as you and Ronan always point out.” Cope knew he could help solve the mystery.

“Cope, I just don’t think this is a good idea.” Jude’s voice had taken on a patronizing tone.

“Why? Because I’m not Tennyson? How many cases did he work with Ronan when he was with the Boston Police Department? How many more has he worked since then? All I wanted was a little support from you, Jude, and you can’t even give me that.” Cope felt his hands bunch into fists at his sides.

Jude took a step back from Cope. “Are you saying you’ve made up your mind to contact Kit Savage?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying.” Cope set his hands on his hips. “I just expected more from you.” With those words, Cope stormed back out to the patio. “Okay, kids, time to go home.”

Watching his disappointed son trudge out of the pool hurt Cope’s heart. He should have just gone home alone and left Jude to wrangle the kids, but he hadn’t wanted to upset anyone with him walking out in a huff.

Why was it that Cope looked out for everyone else’s feelings but his own while all Jude did was think about himself? What the hell was the big deal about appearing on a podcast?

Cope was about to find out. He was going to help solve the mystery of the night Domenica Fibonacci with or without Jude’s help.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

### 5 Jude

Jude sat in the back seat of Fitzgibbon's SUV, half listening to Ronan ramble on about an episode of Dexter . Jude had initially been intrigued by the idea of a serial killer who only butchered bad people. Murderers, rapists, and others who'd managed to wriggle out of being punished by the justice system for their crimes. With the sort of work they did for a living, the last thing Jude wanted to do in his free time was watch a show that glorified the kinds of offenses he worked to solve.

"Take a left up here," Ronan said, swiveling in his seat to look at Jude. "You okay? You're awfully quiet back there."

"I'm good. Just got my head stuck in this case. A woman died in her own kitchen, and seven years later, there have been no arrests. I can't imagine what Jessi's family has been through over all this time. Not only is Jessi Webster gone, but there are no answers to explain why."

"Tony Webster has been under suspicion in his wife's death for the last seven years. Imagine living with that if he's innocent. All the friends it would cost you. Maybe family too. Your reputation is dirt, and until the cops arrest someone that isn't you , there's no way to convince people you're actually innocent."

Jude raised a quizzical eyebrow at Ronan. "You're on Tony Webster's side here?" Usually, Ronan was the first one calling for the suspect to be strapped to the electric chair. This certainly was a change from his usual stance, especially where a murdered woman's husband was concerned.

“I’m not on anyone’s side. Dexter taught me to see crime from both sides of the coin.” Ronan grinned as if he’d just discovered the secret to life. When Fitz parked across the street from the Webster house, Ronan hopped out, whistling a happy tune.

“Seriously?” Jude asked, eying Fitzgibbon in the rearview mirror. “Should we be worried about him?”

“I think he’s fine. If he starts buying rolls of plastic sheeting and garbage bags, then we’ll worry.” Fitzgibbon shook his head and got out of the SUV.

Jude followed behind them. As he approached the house, he took stock of the two-story Cape Cod. The shingle siding was painted grey. He could smell the freshly cut grass. Sitting in the driveway were two older-model Toyota sedans and a small plastic tricycle, suitable for a toddler. Lizbet had one just like it. She’d howl like a banshee when he or Cope tried to pull her off it.

By the look of things, a normal American family lived in this pretty house, but what dark secrets did it hide? This was the house Jessi Webster had been murdered in. He couldn’t help but wonder if Tony saw his dead wife on the floor every time he entered the room. If he could still smell the decomposing body or the bleach the crime scene cleanup team would have used to remove the odor. Jude wouldn’t be able to live here, that was for certain.

The sound of the doorbell chiming brought Jude out of his head. He hurried to catch up to the others who were standing on the front walk.

“Captain Fitzgibbon?” a young woman asked, opening the front door.

“That’s me.” Fitz held up his badge. “And these are my detectives, Ronan O’Mara and Jude Byrne.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Aimee Webster. Please come in.” The short blonde ushered them into the house. According to the case file, Aimee was twenty-six years old. She looked much younger. Barely over five feet tall, she had the compact body of a gymnast. Jude wouldn’t be surprised at all to discover she’d competed in her youth. Aimee wore a sports bra and workout leggings, which left nothing to the imagination. There were no signs that she’d had a baby.

“Mama!” a tiny voice squealed from the kitchen.

“Mama’s here, Hope.” Aimee grabbed a container filled with Cheerios and added some to the baby’s high chair tray. “Tony will be down in a minute. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?”

“We’re good, thank you.” Jude took a seat at the round kitchen table, his eyes glued to the spot near the sink where Jessi Webster’s body had been discovered.

Ronan looked as if he were about to object until he followed Jude’s line of sight. Apparently, he didn’t want a drink from the murder kitchen either.

“Sorry, I’m late,” an older man said, breezing into the kitchen. “There’s my lovebug!” He pressed a loud kiss to the top of the baby’s head.

“This is my husband, Tony.” Aimee made quick work of the introductions.

As she spoke, Jude studied the man who’d been married to Jessi when she was killed. He wore relaxed-fit jeans and a blue polo shirt, which stretched a bit to cover his expanding gut. If he had to guess, Jude would say the extra pounds were thanks to beer. More importantly, Webster looked relaxed, not at all nervous to have three cold case detectives sitting at his kitchen table. “Captain Fitzgibbon, you said over the phone that you’re reopening my wife’s case.”

Jude was watching Aimee when Tony called Jessi his wife. A dark look passed over her eyes. If he hadn't been watching so closely, he would have missed it.

Fitzgibbon folded his hands in front of him on the table. "Technically, the case was never closed, as it hasn't been solved. My team and I reexamine cold cases to see if there's new evidence available that could help find your wife's killer."

"The murder happened seven years ago. How could there possibly be more evidence to find?" Tony's eyes drifted to the spot near the sink where Jessi's body had been discovered.

"There are continual advances in DNA," Ronan began. "Samples that may have been too small to test at the time of death might be able to be tested now. Same goes for discovering DNA and other trace evidence that wasn't found originally on items of evidence that were collected from the scene."

"It's also possible that people who weren't willing to come forward with information back in the day will want to speak with us now. The enemy of guilt is time. It never gets easier to bear the burden," Jude said.

"Relationships change as well," Fitz said, looking as if he were trying to keep a smile off his face. "Spouses and/or lovers who provided a fake alibi at the time of the crime are usually very cooperative in these instances."

Very cooperative was an understatement. Jude had worked several PI cases where ex-wives were eager to speak with him, which didn't often happen in the course of those investigations.

"Can you tell us what happened the night Jessi died?" Fitzgibbon asked, sounding conversational rather than accusatory.

“It was Wednesday, my night to work late.” Tony made air quotes. “Jessi had a school committee meeting, which I knew would keep her busy until around nine and maybe later if some of the members went out for a drink to discuss what went on.” Tony sighed. “I picked Aimee up from the dorm a little after five that evening. We got takeout burgers that we ate in the car and then found a place to park. We spent the rest of the night in the back seat. I came home around eleven to see every light in the house was on, which scared me. Jessi always went to bed around ten or so and only ever left the kitchen light on for me.”

“Why did the lights being on scare you?” Ronan asked.

“I assumed it meant Jessi had somehow found out about my affair with Aimee. She was only nineteen, a sophomore in college, and it wasn’t the first time I’d cheated on her.” Tony had the good sense to look ashamed of himself.

Jude studied Aimee, who wore a triumphant look on her face, although he had no idea why. If Tony would cheat with her, he’d cheat on her, and with his track record, Jude wouldn’t be surprised to learn Tony hadn’t kept it in his pants during this marriage. “What happened when you walked into the house?”

“I called for Jessi and got no response. To be honest, I thought she was going to come at me like a wildcat when I walked through the door. The fact that the house was eerily quiet was unsettling.” Tony took a deep breath, his eyes glued to the spot on the floor where Jessi was discovered. “I walked in here and could see her left arm stretched out, as if she’d been reaching for something. I ran toward her, and that’s when I saw that her lips were blue. I skidded to the floor and checked her pulse, but there wasn’t one. I called 911, and they walked me through CPR. I knew chest compressions weren’t going to save my wife but did them until the paramedics arrived. They declared her dead, and that’s when the police came in to speak with me.” Tony scrubbed a hand over his face.

Jude was impressed with Tony's show of emotion. If he hadn't seen Jessi's autopsy and read about the bruises and broken bones the woman had suffered, he might almost believe the widower was telling the truth. "You said in your first police interview that you thought Jessi had a heart attack."

Tony nodded. "My wife was in her thirties. She was healthy, ran several mornings a week, and competed in Roller Derby. She took care of herself. I assumed something had gone very wrong, like a heart attack or a stroke."

"Roller Derby?" Jude asked.

"Yeah, Jessi was a jammer for the Salem Spellcasters. She loved it but was always coming home bruised." Tony wore a wistful look.

"Speaking of bruises, you didn't notice the ones around her neck?" Fitzgibbon asked gently.

Tony shook his head. "No. It wasn't until I saw her body at the funeral home later that I saw the marks. We had to bury her in a turtleneck to hide the bruises."

It was on the tip of Jude's tongue to press the man harder. Yes, this was a fact-finding mission to see if there were details Tony would drop about the night of the murder that hadn't been previously divulged, but that didn't mean they had to go easy on this dirtbag. Jude knew it sometimes took a while for bruises to develop postmortem, but the crime scene photos had clearly shown the marks on her neck. If the police and crime techs had seen them, why hadn't Tony?

"Is the timeline right, Aimee?" Ronan asked.

"Yeah. He picked me up at five and dropped me off around ten. I didn't know what happened to Jessi until the next afternoon. I'd been texting Tony all morning, and he

hadn't responded to me. He called me later that night and told me what happened and that he'd been interrogated several times by the police. I remember thinking my wildest dream and worst nightmare had come true all at once."

"Your wildest dream?" Jude asked, trying and failing to keep the shock out of his voice.

"I was nineteen and in love for the first time, Detective Byrne. I'd been begging Tony to end it with his wife for months, but he kept telling me the time wasn't right and that he needed to let her down easy." Aimee rolled her eyes, showing Jude the nineteen-year-old version of herself she'd been that night long ago. "Jessi being out of the picture was exactly what I wanted, but I also knew that Tony would be a suspect in the murder."

"Did you think he'd killed her?" Jude couldn't believe the callousness of the young woman sitting in front of him. Aimee might have been beautiful with a killer body, but on the inside, she was rotten to the core.

Aimee shook her head. "Of course not. I knew Tony could never hurt anyone like that. He's a bit of a wimp, you know? Cries at romantic movies, that sort of thing. When you manually strangle someone, you're right in their face, and my husband wouldn't have had it in him to be that confrontational. Hell, he'd spent the last ten years being henpecked by that woman. If it was me, I would have snapped long before then."

"Your sorority sisters backed your alibi in terms of when you came home?" Jude already knew the answer. He'd read the police interviews with the other women, but he wanted to see Aimee's reaction to the question.

"Right. After I got home, I gave the girls the down and dirty details about my night with Tony. And those details were very dirty, weren't they, honey?" Aimee grinned

lasciviously at her husband. Jude had a feeling that she'd like to throw him onto the table right now and ride him like a prize-winning stallion.

"Is there anyone you can think of who would have wanted to hurt your wife?" Fitzgibbon had his pen out and ready to go.

"Read my interrogations, Captain Fitzgibbon. I know I gave several names from the school committee, other parents, and bank customers who Jessi had turned down for mortgages."

Fitz wore an annoyed look. "You've been the top person of interest for seven years, and you can't even give me a name?"

"I didn't kill my wife. I'd been seeing Aimee for eighteen months behind her back. Jessi had no clue. I was getting the best of both worlds. I had a smoking hot side piece who swallowed my dick like it was candy and didn't nag me about getting the car serviced or taking out the trash and a frigid wife who cooked my meals, washed my clothes, and took care of the house. Why the hell would I ruin a good thing?"

Jude's eyes were on Aimee as Tony spoke. Her face stayed impassive, as if she'd heard this line of bullshit before. She looked almost bored. Jude couldn't help but wonder if Aimee had turned into a nag and if Tony had a new side piece. He opened his mouth to ask when Fitzgibbon stood up.

"Thank you for your time. We'll be in touch if we have any more questions." Fitzgibbon nodded to the couple and headed for the front door. Ronan and Jude followed behind.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Ronan muttered when they were back in the SUV. "It felt as though they'd put this murder behind them and that they were offended we're working on the case."

“Something isn’t right here,” Fitz said, shaking his head. “Tony told that story like he was recapping a movie he’d seen rather than an event he lived through. Ronan, resubmit all the physical evidence for DNA, especially the shirt Jessi wore that night. Maybe the fucker who strangled her was yelling while he was in her face, and we’ll get lucky with saliva or epithelial cells on her clothes. Jude, start looking into the school committee members. Find out if there’s film of that meeting in the archives. I want the names of the people who argued against Jessi that night. I’ll get busy with loan customers.”

“You got it, Cap,” Ronan said.

Jude would do exactly what Fitzgibbon asked of him, even though he was more certain now than ever that Tony Webster brutally murdered his wife. Once all other possible suspects were eliminated, they would be able to refocus their efforts on the husband and bring the fucker down once and for all.

Cope

After dinner, with the kids splashing in the pool, the adults sat around Fitzgibbon’s patio table. They’d had a potluck dinner with Ten and Ronan bringing potato salad and brownies while Jude and Cope made deviled eggs and a charcuterie board filled with meats, cheeses, and fruit. Jace made a chicken on the rotisserie. The meal had been delicious.

“Have you guys ever heard of the Ghost After Dark podcast?” Cope asked after Ronan and Fitz finished talking about the cold case they were investigating.

“No, what is it? A call-in show for all the unfulfilled spirits out there?” Jude asked.

“It’s one of those sexy love song shows. Where you request songs for your dearly departed.” Ronan snorted.

“Assholes,” Ten muttered under his breath.

“Bad! Word!” Everly yelled, breathless from splashing.

“You did not hear me say a bad word.” Ten folded his arms over his chest.

“Oh, yes I did! Add a dollar to the swear jar!” Everly laughed. “We’re one step closer to Water Country!”

“What the hell is Water Country?” Jace asked. “Aurora’s been singing a song about it for two weeks.”

“It’s a water park in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. They have water slides and a wave pool. I don’t know how you’ve missed it. I swear the commercials are on every ten minutes,” Ronan said.

“Ah, well, that explains it. When I’m home at night, Fitzy and I don’t watch television. Do we, babe?” Jace wagged his eyebrows. “Maybe we should call that Ghost After Dark show and ask them to play some Marvin Gaye.”

Ronan burst into a surprisingly on-key chorus of “Sexual Healing” before nuzzling Ten’s neck.

“Get a room!” Aurora called from the pool.

“Okay, that’s my fault.” Fitz laughed. “We were on our way back from a doctor’s appointment yesterday, and there were these two kids making out at the light near Essex and Washington.”

“That’s not like you to stick your nose in other people’s business like that.” Ronan rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, but you know how teenagers kiss like goldfish with those big mouths who gulp at the surface of the water for food? That’s what those two looked like. I was performing a public service.” Fitzgibbon grimaced, as if he were seeing it again in his head.

“What was their reaction?” Ten asked.

“They told me to get fucked, but at least I stopped their kissing or whatever the hell that was.” Fitz grimaced.

“Anyway, back to Ghost After Dark ,” Cope said, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. “It’s a podcast where the host examines different ghost stories. The first new episode dropped last night, and a bunch of us were tagged in a Facebook post about what happened.”

“What did happen?” Jude asked, perking up. He’d been a bit down since he’d gotten home from work, but with the potluck, Cope hadn’t had much of a chance to ask him what was going on.

“They’re doing a story about Domenica Fibonacci,” Cope began.

Fitzgibbon’s eyes widened. “Jace and I visited Rothschild Manor when we were dating. They’d opened it for tours during the summer. The guide was interested in telling our tour group about the architecture and the artists who painted the artwork hung in the mansion, but all people wanted to talk about was Domenica’s death and if she jumped or was pushed off the cliff.”

“That’s what Kit Savage wants to investigate with this podcast. He was setting up the story in the first episode when a female voice could be heard asking for help in perfect Italian.” Cope’s eyes moved around the table, looking at the reactions of the detectives.

Ronan raised a quizzical eyebrow. “And you believed it was a ghost speaking?”

“Don’t look at us like that, Ronan.” Ten slapped his husband’s hand. “We’ve all heard ghosts speak before.”

“This is the podcast’s fifth season, and there’s never been anything like this before. The show’s got half a million followers,” Cope added.

“Exactly. You know the powers that be want to increase that to a million, two million, ten million. More listeners means more advertising dollars and more consumers buying those goods and services. Rinse. Repeat.” Ronan shook his head. “I don’t buy this for a second.”

Fitzgibbon nodded in agreement. “The best way to get new followers is for something like this to make headlines. Look at all the attention Steven Avery and his nephew got when their story was investigated on a podcast and then on the follow-up Netflix show. This Savage guy is looking for his own viral moment to go big-time. Get himself on Good Morning America or CNN. Hell, he could become the Dr. Phil of the paranormal.”

Cope sighed. To be honest, after everything Ronan and Fitz had seen over the years investigating cases with the help or sometimes hindrance of spirits, Cope thought they would be fascinated rather than skeptical. “Anyway, at the end of the podcast, Kit Savage asked for psychics to come on a broadcast and see if the voice spoke again. He named West Side Magick and Ten and I by name.”

“Did you agree to go on the show?” Ronan asked.

“No,” Ten said. “We just wanted to run this past you.”

Jude looked back and forth between Ten and Cope. “You want to do this. Both of

you.”

“I do. Maybe,” Cope admitted. “This woman has been dead for forty years. We could settle the circumstance of her death once and for all.”

“If the voice was actually Domenica.” Jude wore an annoyed look, as if he couldn’t believe his husband was this gullible. “If this was some sort of trick to titillate listeners or to trap a psychic into saying her spirit was really with them when the producers were the ones who set up the voice in the first place, then you’re both walking into a world of trouble.”

“I agree,” Ronan said softly, as if trying to spare Ten’s feelings.

Jude wasn’t saying anything Cope didn’t expect. His husband had always been skeptical of the things he and Tennyson could see and hear with their gifts. Jude’s belief in spirits was situational, not a blanket acceptance of every incident being of a paranormal nature. “Well, I guess that’s that.” Cope got up from the table and headed into the house.

After he’d finished with his last client of the day, Cope had gone back and listened to the rest of the first episode of *Ghost After Dark*. He paid particular attention to the facts of the case, just like Jude would have done in his official capacity. At the end, he heard Kit Savage’s public appeal for psychics to join the investigation. Cope wanted to help. No, that wasn’t quite right. He needed to help.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jude asked, startling Cope.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” Cope shrugged as if he weren’t upset over Jude’s dismissive attitude.

“Don’t take that tone with me.” Jude pulled Cope into his arms and pressed a kiss to

his cheek. “My number one priority is the safety of our family. You’ve put your gift on display for the public before, and it hasn’t always gone well. Remember those Titanic families?”

Cope nodded. There had been an incident at one of the public readings with the distant relatives of those lost in the long-ago tragedy. Cope’s appearance and the ripples it caused only served to make his appointments book up faster. “I do remember. There were some angry people, but at the end of the day, my popularity grew, and the shop got a ton of new bookings. I still see a couple of those clients. The same thing happens to Tennyson every time the Michael Frye episode of Dateline airs in reruns. The phones explode with people wanting to book readings.”

“I get that, Cope. I really do. I just don’t want you to get hurt. Ten too.” Jude sounded perfectly reasonable, but Cope knew his husband was just trying to change his mind.

Cope felt a flame of anger flare to life. “How is this any different than what you do?”

“I don’t—” Jude began before Cope held up a hand to silence him.

“This is a cold case, just like the ones you and the guys investigate. If Domenica was murdered, her husband can be arrested and prosecuted for her death. There’s no statute of limitations on murder, as you and Ronan always point out.” Cope knew he could help solve the mystery.

“Cope, I just don’t think this is a good idea.” Jude’s voice had taken on a patronizing tone.

“Why? Because I’m not Tennyson? How many cases did he work with Ronan when he was with the Boston Police Department? How many more has he worked since then? All I wanted was a little support from you, Jude, and you can’t even give me that.” Cope felt his hands bunch into fists at his sides.

Jude took a step back from Cope. “Are you saying you’ve made up your mind to contact Kit Savage?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying.” Cope set his hands on his hips. “I just expected more from you.” With those words, Cope stormed back out to the patio. “Okay, kids, time to go home.”

Watching his disappointed son trudge out of the pool hurt Cope’s heart. He should have just gone home alone and left Jude to wrangle the kids, but he hadn’t wanted to upset anyone with him walking out in a huff.

Why was it that Cope looked out for everyone else’s feelings but his own while all Jude did was think about himself? What the hell was the big deal about appearing on a podcast?

Cope was about to find out. He was going to help solve the mystery of the night Domenica Fibonacci with or without Jude’s help.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

Jude was exhausted. After he and Cope got the kids to bed, he'd tried to talk to Cope, but his husband was having none of it. He'd curled up in bed with a book and was sound asleep when Jude came to bed around ten. Not wanting to wake Cope, Jude lay beside him, either catnapping or staring at the ceiling until the rising sun started to lighten the room.

They hadn't seen each other before work. Cope was in the shower when Jude got up and had gotten dressed and gone downstairs while Jude had been changing and dressing Lizbet. When Jude had gotten out of the shower, Cope was gone, already having dropped the kids at Ten's with Nana Kaye. When he got to West Side Magick, Cope was in his reading room with the door closed. Not wanting to disturb him and possibly ignite another argument, Jude ordered a dark roast with a shot of espresso and headed up to their office. Ronan sat at the table, going over witness reports.

"Look what the cat dragged in. You look like you didn't get any sleep at all." Ronan offered a grin. "There's nothing better than makeup sex."

"There was no makeup sex," Jude said, his spirits sinking even lower.

"Correction, there's nothing better than angry sex." Ronan waggled his eyebrows. "Makes me want to start a fight with Ten just to get to the good stuff."

"There was no sex, Ronan. Just me staring at the ceiling all night while trying to grab snatches of sleep." Jude and Cope didn't argue very often, so feeling like they were in a full-blown fight was foreign to him. Anxiety chirped in the background of his mind,

making him feel insecure about the state of his marriage and his ability to be a good husband.

Ronan sat up straighter and looked to be studying Jude. “What the hell happened? Did you say something idiotic when you and Cope were in Fitz’s kitchen talking? I didn’t think anything you said at the dinner table was objectionable.”

“Cope’s angry that I was skeptical about the voice on the podcast, which I didn’t even hear. I mean, shit, there are all kinds of ways something like that could have been faked.” Hell, with all of the new and terrifying AI technologies available, it was possible that someone could have cloned the voice from snippets of Domenica speaking in home movies. Anything was possible.

“I think that last sentence is what Cope’s upset about. You and I both know ghosts exist. Hell, I saw them myself back when I hit my head on the kitchen floor.”

“I remember,” Jude said. It hadn’t been an easy time for Ronan or the people around him. Thinking back on the argument, Jude remembered something key in his husband’s words. “Cope said this was a cold case like the ones we work all the time.”

“He’s not wrong,” Fitz said, walking into the office. “I checked out the police report last night. Domenica’s case is technically still open. The medical examiner couldn’t tell if her death was a suicide or a murder and listed the manner of death as undetermined. The husband claimed she jumped. He was the only witness to her death and made several mentions of her shaky mental health and her stay at a psychiatric hospital.”

“Do you think Cope wants to get involved in this case? Is that why he was so angry?” Ronan asked.

Was that what this was about? Cope wanting to take on the case? “I don’t know if he

wants to solve the mystery of her death like we would, but I know Cope wants to help her spirit. He'd hate the thought of Domenica suffering for forty years."

"I agree with that, but I'm not sure I trust this podcast guy." Ronan reached for his computer. "I'm going to run a background check on him."

"We have our own case to solve, Ronan," Fitzgibbon said. "We shouldn't be wasting the department's resources on a case that's not even a case."

"Duly noted." Ronan's fingers moved over the keys. "Okay, here we go, Christopher Kit Savage. Born in 1984. Oh, shit. We've got a bingo." Ronan grinned at Jude over the top of his screen. "He's got priors for wire fraud."

"What?" Jude asked. A criminal record was worse than he imagined, but he'd rather know this information now than after Savage hung Cope out to dry on his podcast.

"It seems he was working for one of those hinky check-cashing places and was accused of check washing." Ronan shook his head.

"What the hell is that?" Jude asked. How the hell were they expected to keep up with these criminals if he wasn't even aware of all kinds of crimes being committed?

"It's when you take a check that's been written to someone else, and you remove that name to substitute another, along with changing the amount of that check. So, in theory, if you wrote Fitz a check for ten dollars, I could not only change it to my name but also make it for ten thousand dollars."

"Holy shit, and he was in a perfect position to do it working at the check-cashing place." Jude shook his head. "How much did he get away with?"

"I don't have a grand total, but Savage was caught after he cashed a check issued

from Bank of America for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The check's amount triggered an internal review, and one of the accounts saw that the name and amount on the check were fraudulent. Savage pled no contest and was sentenced to a year in prison, which he'd already served waiting for his case to go to court. There was also a fine involved, but it doesn't say here if he has paid it in full."

"Do you think his listeners know about his criminal past?" Fitzgibbon asked.

"I don't know," Jude admitted. "Maybe I need to do some research on this guy before I go home tonight. Cope obviously feels some kind of connection to Domenica Fibonacci. Maybe I should take him out to do a tour of the house like Fitz and Jace did."

"Talk to your husband," Fitzgibbon said with no sign of sarcasm in his voice. "Trust me when I say this. I almost lost Jace twice because I kept everything bottled up inside until I was about to explode. Find out what Cope's intentions are with this podcast and go from there."

"Cope doesn't have another client for half an hour," Ronan said, looking up from his phone.

"Okay," Jude said, knowing good advice when he heard it. "If I'm not back in thirty minutes, start a rescue operation."

"No way am I walking in on angry sex," Ronan said on a chuckle.

"Ronan, I'm not having makeup sex with my husband in the office. The walls are too thin." Jude grinned.

"Actually, they're not." Ronan waggled his eyebrows and burst out laughing. Fitzgibbon joined him.

“Remind me not to take a seat in Ten’s reading room.” Jude grimaced.

“No worries, it was the table!” Ronan cackled.

Jude grabbed his phone and shoved it in his back pocket before hurrying downstairs. He’d have a quick word with Cope, settle their argument, and then get back to the Webster case. He had several calls to make to the members of the school board in order to set up interviews.

When Jude reached the bottom of the stairs, he heard an unfamiliar voice talking with Cope. Ronan must have been wrong about Cope not having a reading client. The guy could be a walk-in. Ten talked about those kinds of readings all the time.

“Enjoy your reading with Cope, Mr. Savage,” Carson said before walking past Jude on his way back to the store.

“Mr. Savage?” Jude asked, sounding more insulted than shocked. Jude took a second to look him over. The man was average all over. He looked to be about five seven and had dark eyes and mousy brown hair. What really caught Jude’s eye was the leather jacket Kit was wearing. It was July, with the temperature expected to be in the high nineties. Why the hell was he dressed in leather?

Cope swung around in Jude’s direction. A triumphant look lit up his face. “Jude, this is Kit Savage, host of the Ghost After Dark podcast. He walked into the shop and asked for a reading. Kit, this is my husband, Jude Byrne.”

“Ah, the infamous Jude.” Kit stuck out a hand.

Jude reached out to shake with him. Kit’s cold hand slid against his own. He found himself wanting to yank back and walk away, but Jude wasn’t going to do that. “It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Ditto, man. Hope you don’t mind that I’m stealing your guy.” Kit laughed. He sounded like a braying donkey.

“Why don’t we get started?” Cope’s eyes were on Jude as he spoke, as if he were looking for some kind of outward reaction from his husband.

If that’s what Cope wanted, Jude wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. “Enjoy your reading, Kit. I wonder what kinds of deep, dark secrets Cope will unearth?”

Kit offered a self-deprecating grin. “I’m an open book. Boring but open.”

“Have a seat at the table, and I’ll be with you in a minute. Can I get you anything? Water? Coffee?”

“A bottle of cold water would be great, Cope.” Kit winked at him and headed into the reading room.

“What do you want, Jude? Are you monitoring my clients now?” Cope set his hands on his hips and glared at his husband.

“I came down to see if we could talk for a few minutes. I had no idea you had a walk-in customer or that it was the podcast guy.” Jude studied his husband for a second. “I know I’m pretty dense most of the time, but what am I missing about this Kit Savage thing?”

The triumphant look fell from Cope’s face. “Dense is right,” Cope agreed. “I’ve stood behind you, supporting everything you’ve done since we met. Starting your own detective agency, working cases with Ronan and Fitz, joining the Salem Police force. Now that there’s something I’m interested in doing, you’re standing in front of me, trying to stop me.”

“You’re interested in getting involved with Kit Savage?”

“That’s all you would see.” Cope shook his head and blew out an exasperated breath. “I want to do what I always do: help spirits. What if I can help solve how Domenica died? Ronan never had a problem with Ten working on cold cases, so why do you?”

“First of all,” Jude said, feeling his anger stir in the pit of his stomach, “Ronan did have a problem working with Tennyson. He hated putting Ten in danger. Christ, over the years, Ten has been kidnapped, shot at, blown up, and stabbed.”

The hard look in Cope’s eyes softened, but he stayed silent.

“Here’s what worries me about this situation.” Jude took a deep breath, hoping to keep his temper in check. “I know how much you love your job and the reputation you’ve built here in Salem. If this podcast guy tries or succeeds in exploiting you and your gift, how are you going to recover from that professionally? Or personally? Ten knew the stakes when he agreed to work with Ronan. What the hell kind of husband would I be to let you walk into this situation blind to the dangers?”

“You must really think I’m stupid, Jude.”

“No, Cope, that’s not what—”

“Save it. I’ve got work to do. See you tonight.” Cope walked away without a look back.

“What the hell just happened?” Jude asked himself.

“I might be able to answer that question,” Ten said from the door of his reading room. The psychic had obviously been listening to his conversation with Cope.

Nodding, Jude followed Ten.

“It’s weird having you in my reading room,” Ten said with a laugh. “You’re the last person I ever expected to see sitting at my table.”

“True.” Jude set his hands on the table in front of them and noticed they were shaking. “I don’t understand what’s going on with him, Ten.”

“Cope wants to explore this case. For some reason, he feels a kinship to Domenica Fibonacci.”

“I get that, but he keeps mentioning you in relation to solving cases with Ronan. Does Cope want to do that kind of work too? To be honest, it never crossed my mind that he’d want to be a part of solving cold cases.”

“Have you ever asked him what he wanted?” Ten asked, sounding more like a shrink than a psychic.

Jude opened his mouth with a ready answer but then closed it again. He’d never asked Cope what he wanted. Ever. Jude told Cope he wasn’t interested in a relationship when they first noticed the attraction between them. He’d told Cope he was adopting Wolf. He told Cope he was joining the Salem Police. “Our relationship has been me doing whatever I wanted and dragging Cope along for the ride without asking how he felt about my decisions or asking him to make them with me.” Jude’s mouth hung open. He felt like he’d been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer.

Ten nodded. “My relationship with Ronan moved along a similar path, but when we were getting ready to conceive Everly, and he was putting himself in dangerous situations, and Fitzgibbon suspended him from the department, I sort of broke. I realized that I needed a partner and a co-parent. I told Ronan what I needed him to be and let him take it from there. I’m guessing that maybe Cope has reached that point

too.”

Jude remembered what Ten was talking about. Ronan was working a case with the Salem Witches, and their enemies had quickly become his. Jude didn't think his situation with Cope was as dangerous as what Ronan put Ten through, but he was smart enough to see the similarities. “What do I do, Ten? I know you're going to tell me that I need to look inside my heart and figure it out myself.”

“I'm not a Disney princess, Jude. I can't solve your problems with a catchy song.” Ten offered a grin. “Bring home dinner. Put the kids to bed and ask Cope one question.”

Jude's mind was blank. He was failing the test badly. “What the hell is the right question to ask?”

“What do you want?” Ten said simply. “It's an open-ended question, and I'm sure Cope will roll his eyes and ask if you're serious or paying lip service to get your cock sucked.”

Jude snorted. He hated to admit it, but Ten had nailed him. When he and Cope had argued in the past, it was always Jude's plan to say what he needed to say in order to get his dick wet. “That's exactly what he'll do.”

“It's your job to convince him that you're ready to listen.” Ten studied Jude for a few seconds, as if he could somehow see into his soul. “When Cope does open up and tell you, listen. Understand. Do whatever you can to see where he's coming from. Then, when he's finished talking, ask him how you can help.”

Jude sighed. He felt his emotions rising to the surface. If this kept up, he'd be bawling on Ten's shoulder. “I've never once asked him that question about anything.”

“I know,” Ten said softly.

Ten’s simple statement was another blow Jude hadn’t been expecting. How did Ten know so much about his marriage? Had he read Cope? Was Cope complaining to Ten about him?

“This conversation isn’t a condemnation of the kind of husband you’ve been up to this point. Think of it more as a wake-up call. We all change and grow with time. Let this be a time of growth for you, Jude. I promise you it will be worth it.” Ten patted Jude’s hands.

Jude stood up and headed to the door. “Thanks, Ten. I really appreciate you taking the time to explain all of this to me.”

“I’m always here if you need help. I know you usually go to Ronan, but he’s always going to give you the kind of advice he’d follow. The two of you are so much alike. You really are more like brothers than friends.”

“You’re right,” Jude agreed. “I’ll do what you said. Thanks.” Feeling a bit embarrassed, Jude left the room.

From the time he was young, Jude always thought highly of himself. He’d always assumed he was an excellent friend, but thinking about Ten’s words made him realize he was severely lacking. Was it too late to teach an old dog new tricks?

Jude was about to find out.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Cope

No one was more surprised than Cope when Carson knocked on his door and said Kit Savage was asking to see him. With all of Ten's experience working with the BPD, Cope assumed his friend would have been the first psychic on Kit's list, but here he sat.

"Are you familiar with Ghost After Dark , Cope?" Kit asked, his dark eyes glowing with excitement.

Cope felt himself blush, which was completely ridiculous. This guy was a local podcast host, not Robert Downey Jr. "Not until yesterday. I've got small children at home and don't really have a lot of free time. Carson let Ten and I know you'd mentioned us during the podcast, so I listened to the first episode." He wasn't about to tell Kit that he'd also spent an hour or so last night researching the man himself, reading his Wikipedia page and searching the archives of People magazine for articles about him and the podcast. Nor was he about to divulge that he often did the same thing with RDJ.

"That's completely understandable. I don't suppose that husband of yours could wrangle little Wolf and Lizbet while you take some much-deserved time for yourself."

Cope was taken aback by the fact that this stranger knew his kids' names. He opened his mouth to say as much when Kit interrupted.

"I googled you. There were several articles about your kids and your heroic husband,

who almost gave his life to catch a killer at Salem Mercy Hospital last year. That alone would make for one hell of a compelling story.”

Relaxing back into his seat, Cope nodded. “Having Jude use himself as bait wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when he mentioned having a plan to catch the killer. He’s the sort to ask for forgiveness after the fact rather than to ask for permission at the outset.” What the hell was he doing? Yes, what he’d said was the absolute truth, but this stranger didn’t need to hear details of his marriage that weren’t available for public consumption.

“I get it. I’m the same way. When I’m working on a new season of the podcast, I do whatever I have to do in order to uncover the story and report the facts.” Kit wore a cocky grin, which reminded him of Jude.

Cope found himself studying Kit Savage. Sitting here in the small reading room, he felt like a force of nature. A whirlwind that, if Cope wasn’t careful, would consume him. “Why are you interested in me, Mr. Savage?”

“Please call me Kit.” He offered a smile, which Cope thought wasn’t entirely sincere, reminding him of a used car salesman. “So many of my listeners have been asking me to profile a local haunting. The others I’ve done took place at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and at the Winchester House in California, among others. The one angle I’ve never pursued before was having a psychic medium on the podcast. After we heard the voice of Domenica Fibonacci, I knew now was the time to bring someone on board who had more experience in the paranormal than I did. Like I said, I googled Salem psychics, and your name came up, along with your partners here at West Side Magick. You have an established reputation and a large following yourself, which makes you an ideal choice.”

“What exactly are you looking for this psychic to do on the podcast?” Cope asked, wanting to leave the discussion as hypothetical as possible. He didn’t know if he

wanted to be a part of the project, despite Jude thinking he was ready to jump in blind to a situation that could be detrimental to his reputation.

“I want to host a live séance. Usually, my episodes are prerecorded and dropped online on specific days, but I think in this situation, it has to be live so that we can’t be accused of manipulating the audio.”

“What about the voice heard on the first episode? Was it real?”

“I was hoping that’s what you’d be able to tell my audience.” Kit offered another charming smile. “I can tell people until I’m blue in the face that the voice was real, but there will always be doubt in some people’s minds until someone in your profession can validate the haunting.”

Cope couldn’t help but notice Kit hadn’t actually answered the question. “Even with someone in my profession, it will still be difficult to get everyone to believe the voice was real.”

“Maybe so, but I think someone with your charisma would be very compelling. The two of us working together could be great for both of our careers. You’ll bring in more listeners for me, and I’ll bring in more customers for you. Why don’t you think it over and get back to me?” Kit pulled out his wallet and slid a business card across the table to Cope. “My cell number is on there as well. Call anytime. And I do mean any time!” Kit stood up.

“Hold on, don’t you want me to do a reading for you?” Cope opened his gift and felt as if he’d hit up against a brick wall. Why was a simple podcaster able to block him like this?

“Why don’t we save it for the podcast?” Kit offered another smile. “Call me.”

Before Cope could object, Kit was out the door.

What the hell had just happened? Cope felt like he'd been swept off his feet.

A knock on his door startled Cope. "Come in, Ten."

"Hey, I just passed Kit in the store. He seemed to be in an excellent mood. Did you agree to do his podcast?" Ten stepped into the room and shut the door behind him before taking the seat Kit had just vacated.

"No, I didn't agree to anything. He offered for me to come on the podcast and hold a séance in hopes that Domenica will reveal herself."

Ten shook his head. "How do you feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. There are a lot of traps and pitfalls involved in doing this sort of reading live." Cope took a deep breath. "It's hard enough to prove what we do is real, but throw in the fact that this is only going to be heard and not seen, and that presents all sorts of room for doubt. Same goes for all the AI-related technologies and their growing list of uses."

"I totally agree with you, but this is a show about hauntings. Most of the people who subscribe are likely to be into the paranormal in the first place. It's not a 60 Minutes piece where facts are paramount."

Cope had to admit Ten had a point. "I hear you. I am interested in doing this, but this fight with Jude really has me feeling like I'm completely off-balance."

"After you stepped into your reading room with Kit, I had a little chat with Jude."

"You did?" Cope was surprised Ten would do that for him.

“I did,” Ten agreed. “Jude and Ronan were so much alike when they first met, which is why I think they were like oil and water for a while. As their friendship and professional partnership has grown, they’ve each picked up things from each other, which makes them more alike than ever. I figured I was uniquely situated to offer some advice in this situation.”

“I agree.” Cope had noticed the similarities between his husband and Ronan. Not all of them were positive. “What did you talk about?”

“Jude seemed confused about what was upsetting you.” Ten nibbled his bottom lip, as if he were nervous to explain the conversation.

“Why does that not surprise me?” Jude had never been good at dealing with his own feelings, never mind handling Cope’s.

“He came to a very important realization.”

Cope wasn’t about to get his hopes up that this revelation would be life-changing. “What was that?”

“Jude realized he never asks how you feel about anything. He just tells you what’s going to happen, and since you always agree, Jude never thought to question his actions.”

“Wow, that is really deep.” Cope meant every word. He’d noticed that tendency in Jude years ago, when he’d told Cope he was happy to fuck him but didn’t want a relationship. Cope merely bided his time until Jude came to the realization that he wanted a relationship with Cope more than anything. Most of their major decisions over the years had followed a similar pattern, with Jude telling him what he wanted and Cope trying to figure out how he could live with that decision.

“I think he’ll have a different attitude when you get home tonight.” Ten paused, looking unsure if he should ask his next question. “What are you going to do about Kit Savage?”

“I don’t know. I need to do more research on him and to hear what Jude thinks of his offer. I’ll text you later and let you know what I decided. Do you want to be involved in this podcast?”

Ten shook his head. “No, thanks. I’ve had my fifteen minutes of fame with that Dateline episode. This is all yours if you want to take it on. Of course, I’m here to help if you need me.”

“I appreciate that, Ten. Now all I have to do is figure out how to talk to Jude.” It wasn’t going to be as easy as it sounded to get through to his stubborn husband.

What Cope needed to do was figure out if he actually wanted to be involved. If the answer was no, then there was no real need to rock the boat.

Maybe Jude could help him make up his mind. The way to his man’s heart was through his stomach. He’d make Jude’s favorite meal and go from there. Having Jude on his side would mean the world to Cope. The question was if he would be willing to do this podcast without his husband’s support.

Time would tell.

Jude

Jude had spent the rest of the day working on the Webster case. He'd set up an interview for the next day with Angel Martinez, who was one of the women who'd been at the school committee meeting the night Jessi had been murdered. Ronan had also scheduled a meeting with the president of the First Salem Bank. It was a good jumping-off spot to find out if there were actually people sending Jessi death threats at work.

He'd hoped keeping his mind on the case would keep his mind off Cope and his meeting with Kit Savage. Had Cope agreed to go on the podcast? Had he turned the man down? Jude knew Cope always discussed big decisions with him but wasn't sure that would happen now.

The one thing Jude was absolutely certain about was following Cope's advice. He was going to pick up Cope's favorite dinner at Lotus Blossom. He'd bathe and put the kids to bed while Cope took a long, hot shower, and they'd share the cherry cheesecake Jude had picked up while they discussed what an idiot Jude had been for their entire marriage. And also what happened with the podcast guy.

"Babe? I'm home. I brought dinner!" Jude called from the front door. He was trying to balance the bag of food in his arms while he wrangled his shoes off. While he did so, he thought he smelled tomato sauce. Shit, had Cope made dinner too?

"Kitchen!" Cope called back.

Sure enough, tomato sauce bubbled on the stove. A pot of boiling water sat on the

burner next door, waiting for pasta to be added. “I grabbed Chinese. I had no idea you were making spaghetti.”

“No worries. We’ll just have pasta tomorrow night.” Cope shut off the burner under the sauce and water pots and grabbed paper plates.

“Are you sure? I mean, if you want pasta, we can have pasta.”

“Jude. It’s fine. I wanted to make your favorite meal. It looks like we had the same idea.”

“Where are the kids?” Jude realized it had taken him nearly five minutes to realize they weren’t here. Wolf always ran to greet him, with Lizbet toddling behind.

“They are having dinner at Ronan’s. Ten is making his famous mac and cheese and invited the kids to eat with them.”

“Ten and I had a long talk after you went into the reading room with Kit Savage. I assume he kept the kids so that I’d have time to tell you about it.” Jude was grateful to Tennyson for helping them out. He’d make sure they kept Everly and Ezra for a sleepover soon.

“He told me.” Cope grabbed the stapled, brown paper bag from Lotus Blossom and opened it up.

“Okay,” Jude said, not sure where to go from there. He watched quietly while Cope unpacked the kung pao chicken, crab Rangoon, shrimp fried rice, and spring rolls.

“Ten knew you were going to talk to me tonight and wanted to help me out too. He knew I was angry and that I tend to lash out when I’m mad.”

“So he gave us both something to think about.” Jude reached for the rice and spooned some onto his plate.

“Exactly,” Cope agreed.

“I’m sorry I didn’t support you when you mentioned the idea of going on the podcast. I should have listened to what you were saying instead of thinking about how you doing this would affect me.”

“I know you’re worried about my safety and my reputation, Jude. Thinking like that isn’t selfish at all. I just wish that sometimes you’d give me the benefit of the doubt. I wasn’t about to rush into any kind of agreement with Kit Savage, regardless of him stopping by the shop today.”

Cope’s words felt like an icy fist squeezing his heart. He had been worried that Cope would get himself in over his head. “I’m not sure why I thought that. You’re such a capable man. I guess I just felt like I was going to have to run in and rescue you.”

“Rescue me from what?” Cope asked, reaching for the spring rolls. “It’s an hour-long podcast. Kit wants me to try to contact Domenica Fibonacci. He also mentioned my reputation in the psychic community and thought that it would lend credence to his insistence that the voice we heard was actually Domenica.”

“Was it?” Jude asked.

Cope shook his head. “I don’t know. I asked Kit the same question, and he didn’t really answer me. It’s definitely possible that the voice was a gimmick.”

“Would you call that out?” Jude asked.

“Yes. Absolutely!” Cope half shouted. “Like you said, my reputation will be on the

line if I agree to do this, and there's no way in hell I would risk that for some fucking podcast that I'd never heard of until yesterday."

"I know you're an honest man, Cope. I guess I'm just wondering why you? Not because there's anyone better or more deserving, but why does he want you to be the guest?"

Cope bit into his spring roll and seemed to be thinking over his answer. "He thinks that with my reputation, I can bring him new listeners. I guess that if I let my social media followers know that I'm going to appear on the podcast, then maybe they'll subscribe. Kit also thinks that my appearance could bring more customers to West Side Magick."

Jude had expected that would be Cope's answer.

"You don't think he's after me, do you?" Cope nibbled his lower lip.

"Is he?" Jude asked. "He seemed kind of flirty when I met him. Maybe he's one of those assholes who gets off stealing another man's husband along with his money."

"His Wikipedia page mentioned his troubles." Cope shrugged as if Kit's record didn't matter much to him.

"Troubles? The man's a convicted felon. Ronan read the police report. He could have been brought up on dozens of charges, but the feds decided the Bank of America fraud was the one with the strongest evidence."

"Jude, again, this is one podcast appearance. I'm not going to marry this guy or let him babysit our kids. I'll make sure to leave our checkbook at home if I decide to do this appearance."

Jude laughed. He couldn't help himself. The idea of Kit Savage stealing Cope was ridiculous. He'd married Jude twice already, and they had two young kids. Cope would never give that up for some asshole felon who'd spent time in the county lockup. "What is it you want to do about this podcast? Whatever that is, I will support you one hundred percent."

Cope grabbed the fried rice and took his time serving himself. "If I'm being absolutely honest with myself, the first thing I want is for you to keep asking what I want instead of assuming it's the same thing you want."

"Ouch. Duly noted. I do a lot of assuming in this relationship. I promise to do my best to get better at that." Jude didn't think Cope was going to come for him, but here they were. "What else do you want?"

"I want to help Domenica, first and foremost. She's been dead for forty years and isn't resting in peace. If that really was her voice on the podcast, then she has something to say. I want to help her say it and then do whatever I can to help her cross over. If that means solving her murder in the process, then so be it."

Jude thought back to something Cope had said about Tennyson working cold cases. "Do you want to work with us like Ten does? Speaking to murder victims and reading their friends and family to help figure out if they're the killer?" He'd always assumed that if Cope wanted to assist them, he'd say so. Of course, that was Jude assuming again.

"Maybe," Cope admitted. "I mean, if Domenica was pushed, it would have to be her husband, right?"

Jude shook his head. "Not necessarily. Vic Rothschild said he was alone with Domenica in the house that night, but we have no way of knowing if that's the truth. That house had several servants—what if one of them was home that night and had a

grudge to settle with Domenica or Vic? Same goes for Vic's business rivals. People who have that kind of money are ruthless when it comes to keeping it. Vic is at the top of the list for me. Spouses always are."

"I've heard you say that a hundred times."

"I know you have. Husbands have the greatest access to their wives. Rothschild had the money to cover up what really happened to his wife, if he did indeed kill her." Jude was quiet for a few seconds. "Domenica will be lucky to have you in her corner if you decide to help."

"Do you really mean that, Jude?" Cope asked.

Jude reached across the table for his husband's hand. "I do."

"But?" Cope asked, his lips curling into a grin.

"But I'm hoping that you'll let me help you on the law enforcement side of things. We can pull the police report from the night that Domenica died and familiarize ourselves with what happened."

"I would like your help," Cope admitted. "There's something I didn't tell you about my meeting with Kit."

Jude felt a frisson of fear wrap around his spine. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

Cope shook his head. "After we spoke about the podcast, Kit got up to leave. I asked him if he wanted a reading, and he said to save it for the podcast, but when I opened my gift to him, he was blocking me. It felt like running headlong into a brick wall."

"That almost never happens." Jude knew Cope couldn't read him, thanks to Running

Eagle using an old chant over him when he was an infant, but he'd never heard his husband refer to that bit of magic as a brick wall.

"That's what scares me," Cope admitted.

"Who the fuck is this guy?" Jude asked.

"Let's find out together."

Jude nodded. "Couldn't have said it better myself." He would do everything in his power to find out what the hell Kit Savage's endgame was and what the hell he wanted with Cope.

God help the asshole if he thought he could come for Jude's family and not pay for it.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Cope

Several days later and after careful consideration of all the facts his and Jude's research dug up on Kit Savage, Cope decided to accept his invitation to be a guest on Ghost After Dark . The podcast host agreed to record the live séance at West Side Magick. He was allowed to set up in the conference room an hour after the shop closed for the night.

Savage's team had gone through the entire room with a fine-toothed comb, presumably looking for any kind of device that would make the table shake or emit ghostly sounds during the broadcast. Cope had told them not to bother wasting their time, but the team kept up their search, eventually concluding there was nothing in the room that could be used to fool listeners.

Everyone was standing in the office area, watching Kit and the other members of his team set up microphones and the equipment needed to record.

"I really appreciate you all being here," Cope said. All three of the detectives had stayed late, along with Carson and Cole, who wanted to be on hand to make sure their store was portrayed in a positive light. Thankfully, Jace was home with the kids, who were happy to hang out in the pool and eat pizza from Greek Life. It was the first time Jace had handled all five kids by himself, but at least Kaye was across the street if he needed her.

"We're all set, Cope. If you'd like to come in and take a seat, we'll get you hooked up for sound." Kit beckoned him forward.

“I’m coming too,” Jude said, escorting Cope toward the conference room.

“We don’t need your help, Mr. Byrne. You can watch the broadcast from out here with your friends.” Kit turned and started to walk away.

“Not going to happen.” Jude’s tone had gone from cooperative to hard as nails. “If I’m not allowed in the room, then Cope and I walk out.”

Savage rolled his eyes. “I’ll just grab one of the others. Carter and Carl will do.”

“You mean Carson and Cole?” Jude asked. “No, they won’t. What you fail to understand is that this has been a thriving business for decades. First under the ownership of Bertha Craig and now with her sons, Tennyson, and Cope. We’re not going to allow anything that happens here tonight to affect the reputation of this shop or the people who work here.”

“What exactly do you think is going to happen, Mr. Byrne? Do you think we’re going to burn your husband as a witch? Or proclaim his psychic gifts are bogus? I have just as much to lose here as Cope does.”

“I’ve met several members of your staff who are here to protect your interests. That’s exactly what I’m doing. My sitting in a corner away from the microphones won’t matter, now, will it?” Not waiting for an answer, Jude shouldered past Savage and walked into the conference room.

Somehow managing to keep a shit-eating grin off his face, Cope followed behind Jude. He trusted his husband to know when to pull the plug if this séance started to go sideways, whereas Savage would mine the situation for ratings gold.

Fifteen minutes later, after several microphone tests, Savage was ready to go. “We’re going to shoot this straight. We can go back in later and do edits before I post this to

the podcast channel.”

“No,” Cope said.

“What do you mean no? You never asked for right of first refusal.” Savage looked annoyed. Again.

“You have to air this as is. If you start editing things in or out, then no one will believe in the authenticity of this reading.”

Savage raised an eyebrow.

In an instant, Cope understood what was going on here. “You don’t believe in my gifts, and you’re hoping to exploit that during your broadcast.”

“I believe what I can see and hear with my own senses. You’re going to need to convince me your gifts are genuine before I believe them.”

If Savage needed convincing, Cope was happy to oblige him. Several spirits were milling around the room at the moment. Bertha Craig was one of them. She didn’t look pleased with Kit Savage’s attitude. “He’s still got his guard up, Cope, but he’ll drop it soon enough. I’ll make sure to help things along.”

Cope was glad for the help, but there was something more important at stake. “Thanks, Bertha. I’m here for Domenica.”

“We’re all here for Domenica, pal,” one of the sound techs said in a scoffing tone, “but now that we’ve swept the room and gotten rid of your sound machines, she’s not going to show up, is she?”

“Sound machines? What the hell are you talking about?” Cope asked, turning in his

seat to look at Jude, who looked just as baffled.

“All that shit in the corner.” The tech pointed to a side table that was piled high with the telephone and the sound station they used for conference calls.

Cope opened his mouth to explain what the devices were but decided to keep quiet. If Savage’s team thought those devices could be used to make fake ghost sounds or to project Domenica’s voice from a stand-in, so be it. “How is it that you all work on a podcast that deals with hauntings and none of you believe in ghosts?”

“I’ll believe in ghosts when I see one.”

“Fair enough.” Cope knew Bertha would be more than happy to oblige if push came to shove. Cope opened his gift wide and was thrilled to realize the sound tech was an open book. His mother had died when he was fifteen, and there had been a bit of a mystery surrounding her sudden death. A mystery Cope now held the key to.

The door opened, and one of Savage’s guys motioned Kit forward. The two men spoke in hushed tones before the man stepped away and closed the door behind him. “We’re ready to begin.” He took his seat across the table from Cope and adjusted his microphone. “This is Kit Savage, and welcome to a special live edition of Ghost After Dark . I’m at West Side Magick, a psychic shop in my hometown of Salem, Massachusetts. Witch City. My guest this evening is psychic Copeland Forbes. Originally from New Orleans, Cope made the move north about six years ago and has become a valued member of the community, along with his husband, cold case detective Jude Byrne. Welcome to the podcast, Cope.”

“Thanks for having me.” An unsettled feeling tickled his gift. Something was going on. Cope could feel triumph radiating from Kit Savage but couldn’t nail down why he felt that way. The man was hard to read, holding his secrets close.

“Last week, while we were recording episode one of this season of Ghost After Dark , we heard the ghostly voice of Domenica Fibonacci asking for my help. I reached out to the psychics here in hopes that one of them would be able to communicate with Domenica’s spirit.”

Cope felt sick to his stomach over the way Savage had sneered the word psychics . This was definitely a setup, but the question was why? What the hell did Kit Savage have to gain by seeming to exploit him or the others who worked here? The one thing Cope knew for certain was that he wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Over the last forty years since Domenica’s death, it seemed everyone formed an opinion over how the mentally ill wife of Vic Rothschild died. Some say she was pushed. Others say she jumped. Still more believe her death was a tragic accident caused by the wind and torrential rain of Hurricane Mitzi. We asked for Cope’s help to speak with Domenica to settle the debate once and for all, but in the effort to be impartial, I’ve invited one other guest to join us.” Savage smirked at Cope. “Come on in!”

A tall man in an impeccable suit walked into the room. His once dark hair had turned to shades of grey. His sharp, dark eyes glittered with determination. He might be forty years older than the night Domenica died, but Cope would recognize the man anywhere. “Vic Rothschild,” he said tightly.

“Very good, Cope. It’s almost as if you somehow knew he was coming here tonight.”

From behind him, Cope sensed movement. Jude was on his feet and ready to end this shitshow. Giving his husband a shake of his head, Cope turned to Rothschild and tried to take his measure. He wasn’t getting very much.

“Welcome to Ghost After Dark , Mr. Rothschild. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Savage held out his hand to shake.

Cope took a deep breath. If Savage thought that Rothschild showing up unexpectedly was going to ruffle his feathers, then he most definitely had another thing coming. “Mr. Rothschild,” Cope said genially.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Forbes. I knew your father. We made quite a bit of money together. Buford was a hell of a man, but I’m sure you already know that.” Rothschild offered Cope a cold look.

“Indeed he was.” Hearing his father’s name was a surprise, although it shouldn’t have been. Rothschild and his father were of an age. Money made money, as the saying went.

Savage looked absolutely delighted by the bit of drama he’d created. “Mr. Rothschild, I know this is going to be hard for you, but could you tell us about your wife and the night she died?”

Rothschild nodded and let out a shuddering breath. “Domenica was the most beautiful woman I’d ever met in my life. I knew instantly I had to have her as my wife.” The wistful look on his face fell away, and what was left chilled Cope to the bone. “I wish now that I’d spent more time getting to know her before our quick wedding. Domenica suffered severe mental illness that she and her father both kept from me long enough for me to put a ring on it.” Again, the cold smile was back.

As Rothschild spoke, Cope read the man. He was telling the truth, so far.

“When did this illness rear its ugly head?” Savage asked, his full attention on Rothschild.

“The night I brought my bride home from Italy after our honeymoon. She was cagey and couldn’t seem to settle down. I assumed at the time she was dealing with jet lag. It’s always worse when you travel from east to west. I just chalked her behavior up to

being in a new place, and that was that. Until it wasn't. Over the next few years, I was subjected to her mood swings, her restless nights, and rages. That's not to say that there weren't times when she was the sweet woman I'd fallen in love with, but as the years went on, there were more bad days than good."

"Leading up to the night you had to commit her to a psychiatric hospital." Savage sounded appropriately solemn, but Cope knew it was all an act geared toward making Rothschild look like the victim.

"That's right. Letting the attendants take my beloved amore away from me was the worst moment of my life. She stayed in the hospital for several weeks before she was released back into my care, heavily medicated to keep her manic depression, as it was called back then, under control."

"What led up to that tragic last night in the eye of the hurricane?"

Cope fought to keep from rolling his eyes at Savage's amateur dramatics.

"Domenica was sound asleep in her bedroom. We slept in adjoining rooms because she often had restless nights, and she didn't want to disturb me. I heard her get up and start to scream. When I got to her room, it was empty. She was running down the stairs, telling me to get away from her. Before I knew what was happening, Domenica was outside, racing toward the edge of the cliff. The power had gone off in the storm, and it was raining so hard that you couldn't see more than a few inches in front of you. She stopped at the edge and turned to face me." Rothschild took a hitching breath. "She said she never loved me and that her life was hell on Earth. Then she jumped." He brought his hands to his face and began to cry. Loud, gasping sobs that would have won the man an Oscar had this been a movie.

"I know how hard it must be for you reliving that awful night." Savage patted the weeping man's shoulder.

Rothschild's hands fell from his face. As Cope suspected, his eyes were dry. Not even a long crocodile tear was visible. "It's not nearly as hard as having spent the past forty years being accused of murdering my precious wife. My amore ."

As Rothschild continued to pour his heart out to Savage, Cope read the man. His emotions were all bullshit. The man was thrilled to be getting this kind of attention. Cope couldn't help but wonder what Rothschild's endgame was. Was he trying one last time to clear his name? Or his conscience?

"What are your psychic gifts telling you about that tragic night, Cope?" Savage asked, turning away from Rothschild.

Cope felt as though he were trapped like a lion in a cage. Did he tell the truth or hedge what his gifts were telling him? He took a deep breath and hoped he didn't live to regret his words. "I could clearly read Mr. Rothschild's emotions as he recalled the night in question. I saw flashes of the man's memories, chasing Domenica through the house that last night, the red-hot rage that burned within him. Those memories abruptly stopped when he confronted his wife at the cliff's edge. Not a total surprise since events with high emotions and trauma tended to be recorded in the memory as a blur. People often report tragic circumstances happening so fast. In the blink of an eye. That's thanks to the heart pounding and adrenaline surging through the body. In those situations, the human body reverts to its fight- or-flight instinct, not in recording memories. I can't tell one way or another if Domenica fell or if she was pushed."

"So, you're a doctor as well as a psychic?" Rothschild made air quotes. All traces of his earlier grief were gone. Rage burned in his eyes. His hands were wrapped around each other so tightly that they'd gone white.

In that moment, Cope was scared. He was seeing a flash of the monster that Domenica confronted on that last night. The beast she'd spent seven years living

with. Her only desire was to escape and survive. Both were denied to her.

The last thing Cope was going to do was confront the widower and accuse him of killing his wife. Rothschild knew he was an only child and that Buford's assets were over the billion-dollar mark when he died. It would be an easy lawsuit to win with Cope's own words serving as his own personal hangman.

"No, Mr. Rothschild, I'm not a doctor. If I were, I would diagnose you with narcissistic personality disorder, as other armchair psychiatrists have done over the years." Cope paused and watched the man's volcanic temper continue to rise. "You're not upset that your wife died. You're upset because forty years later, people, including the Salem Police, believe you killed her. Your wife was terrified of you. Her only goal was to escape your viselike grip and go home to Italy."

"How fucking dare you try to tell me that I don't grieve the loss of my wife? Her death broke me, mentally and financially. The Fibonacci family sued me for wrongful death. They won. I had to sell off my assets to pay them and my other debts, which were called in under the assumption I'd be arrested and convicted of her death. " His teeth ground together as he spoke. "I lost everything!"

"Lies!" an angry voice cried out. "All lies! Bugiardo! "

Cope didn't need to speak Italian to know Domenica was calling her husband a liar. "Domenica, is that you?" Cope asked, knowing damn well it was.

"What the hell is going on?" Rothschild shouted. "You arranged this all! Someone recorded that bullshit voice to torment me."

"No one arranged anything, Mr. Rothschild." Cope felt annoyance building inside of him. "Domenica, tell me how to help you."

“I want to be free,” Domenica said. “ Liberta .” The voice faded and was gone.

“I wish there was more I could do to help Domenica,” Cope said gently. “There’s obviously something keeping her here, trapped in this realm, that isn’t allowing her to cross over. Mr. Rothschild, I think if you give her permission to go, she will.” Asking for his help was the best Cope could do. He could see the outrage plainly written on Rothschild’s face. Cope didn’t need his gift to see the man wasn’t going to lift a finger to help his wife’s suffering spirit.

“I don’t have to sit here and listen to this manufactured bullshit!” Rothschild stood quickly. His wheeled chair shot backward, crashing into the wall, as he practically ran out the door.

Savage’s mouth hung open, but no sound came out.

“I’m here, Domenica, if you ever want to talk. Let me help you cross over and find the peace you deserve.”

Domenica didn’t answer, but Cope knew she heard him, just like he knew she’d be back and would be willing to spill every last detail.

It was only a matter of time before he’d know if Domenica jumped or was pushed.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

Jude stayed in the conference room while Kit Savage's team broke down their sound gear, and Fitzgibbon ordered pizza. Savage, himself, had left the room shortly after Vic Rothschild. When all of the Ghost After Dark crew members were gone, Ronan helped to put the conference room back to rights.

"Are you okay?" Jude asked Cope for what had to be the tenth time in the last hour.

"Yeah, I'm great. I'm not happy with being blindsided by Vic Rothschild showing up, but there was nothing I could do about that."

"It was a setup from the get-go, in my opinion," Fitzgibbon said as he walked into the conference room carrying three pizza boxes. Ten and the others followed behind with paper plates and napkins from the break room.

"They were hoping to rattle Cope and put him off his game," Ronan agreed.

"What did you get from the asshole?" Carson asked.

"Which asshole?" Cope asked with a grin, taking a plate filled with sausage slices from Jude. "There were two."

Carson snorted a quick laugh. "Either. Both."

"I could feel that Savage was hiding something. His energy was expectant, like before you shout 'surprise' at a birthday party. I didn't know what was coming with

Rothschild. Savage managed to keep that hidden. We won't know what that thing was since he bounced out of here like a spoiled child."

"I was getting the same thing from him," Tennyson said. "Reading Savage felt like looking through a peephole, catching a glimpse of something but then losing it before it crystalized in my mind."

"Same for us," Carson said, motioning between himself and Cole. "He's been taught how to block psychic gifts."

"Why do you say that?" Ronan asked.

"None of us could get anything from him," Cope said. "Right now, you're thinking about grabbing two more slices of pepperoni, but you know you'll need new pants if you keep eating like this."

"He's also thinking about wanting to get some later and not wanting me to think he's unattractive." Ten wagged his eyebrows. "As if I could ever feel that way about you, snookums."

"The Mustang is almost out of gas," Carson said.

"And you're worried that the Webster case isn't going to be as straightforward as you thought it would be." Cole took a slice of pepper and onion and walked back to his seat.

"See?" Cope said. "We all read different things from you because you broadcast mostly wide open. The only person more open is Fitz. Which, no offense, I could use a little less of, especially where leather riding crops are involved."

Fitzgibbon blushed hard and fast. He opened his mouth to presumably defend himself

but sat back in his seat with a shit-eating grin on his face. “I’ll shoot you the website if you’re interested.”

“Jesus Christ,” Ronan muttered. “Can we get back to the subject at hand?”

“What the hell is the subject?” Cope asked. “What can we do except get ready to do damage control when that podcast episode airs?”

Fitz sat up straight in his seat. He had his game face on. “When the idea of you doing the podcast came up, Ronan ran Savage’s criminal record, which was how we found out about his arrest for fraud. We can do a deeper dive on him. Ronan?”

“On it,” Ronan mumbled through a mouthful of pizza.

“Jude, I want you to take a closer look at Vic Rothschild. Get the police report, autopsy, and any other information you can find about Rothschild. See if financials were pulled at the time of Domenica’s death. Was there any life insurance on Domenica? Was it paid out?”

“You got it,” Jude agreed. “What about the Webster case? I’ve got an interview lined up on Monday with one of the school board members.”

“We’re putting that case on hold for the moment. I’m going to look into Domenica. See if I can get her medical records and possibly treatment notes. We need to find out as much about her as we can.” Fitzgibbon grabbed his slice, folded it in half, and took a bite. “Cope, keep trying to get in touch with Domenica. Were you able to read anything from her? She sounded off to me, like maybe she was drunk or something.”

“I felt something like that too. If she’d been hospitalized in a psych ward for bipolar disorder, she would have been on some heavy-duty meds. Lithium, for a start, and possibly other mood stabilizers, not to mention antidepressants and anti-anxiety

meds, like Xanax, which are highly addictive. With Rothschild's money and influence, I'm guessing it would have been easy to get docs to keep prescribing high doses even after Domenica's discharge."

"The meds plus addiction would have kept her compliant."

"Until she wasn't," Ronan said. "What did you guys get from Rothschild? I didn't like his air of invincibility. I've seen that attitude more times than I can count with husbands who've killed their wives."

"I'm gonna call Cisco Jackson tomorrow and see if there are any retired cops I can speak with who might have been on duty that day or were involved in the death investigation." Fitzgibbon grabbed another piece of pizza.

"See if you can run a check of 9 calls originating from Rothschild Manor. Or that mention his or Domenica's name. It's so much easier now that all those calls have been digitized," Jude said quietly.

"Good suggestion." Fitzgibbon grabbed his phone and started tapping out notes.

"What can we do?" Carson asked, looking eager to help.

"Did your mother keep records of her customers?"

Cole exchanged a questioning look with his brother. "Mom's notebooks."

"Right." Carson nodded his head. "What did we do with those boxes when you and Cassie moved out last year?"

"I think I took them because we've got more storage than you do at the townhouse. Why do you ask, Ronan?"

“I’m wondering if Domenica or any of the Rothschilds were customers of the shop,” Ronan said, getting up to throw his empty plate in the trash. “There are over a hundred psychics working in dozens of shops in and around Salem at the moment, but the only one mentioned by Kit Savage was West Side Magick, and the only psychics named work here. I’ve been doing this job for far too long to believe in coincidences.”

Cole grinned. “Detective Craig at your service.” He snapped off a salute.

“I’ll dig in to help,” Carson added. “I remember telling Mom to get a computer to keep the shop organized and to help order supplies that were getting low, but she just laughed at me and said she was managing just fine with her old melon. Then she knocked on the side of her head. Wouldn’t it just be easier to ask Mom who she remembers?”

“If we find out Domenica or the Rothschilds were customers, then we’ll talk to her and see what she remembers,” Fitzgibbon said.

“Good point,” Carson agreed.

“Let’s make this investigation as quick as possible. Things are heating up in the Webster case, and I don’t want to leave it dangling for too long,” Fitz said.

“I already sent a request to records for Domenica’s case file and the evidence collected that night to be sent over. Usually, those requests come through within twenty-four hours.” Ronan paused. “I imagine this might take longer since the crime is forty years old.”

“Files from that long ago are stored off-site.”

“Do you think it’s possible to get DNA after all this time?” Jude asked.

“We’re gonna find out real quick.” Fitzgibbon grinned brightly. “I’ll also reach out to Cisco Jackson to give him the heads-up about what’s going on.”

“Already done,” Ronan said. “The last thing I want to deal with tomorrow is a tongue-lashing from the chief.”

“You and me both,” Fitzgibbon agreed.

“Do you guys think I should make a statement about the podcast interview and the reading?” Cope asked.

“Let’s stay away from that until we see the fallout from this.” Fitzgibbon’s eyes were on Jude as he spoke.

“I’ll draft a statement on behalf of West Side Magick standing behind Cope and letting people know we were watching the reading as it went on.” Carson grabbed a clean napkin and began jotting notes.

Jude felt better now that they had a battle plan. He found himself being thankful Cope had gone against his advice and did the interview. It just might be possible to solve this forty-year-old murder with some good old-fashioned police work and a little help from Domenica Fibonacci.

### Cope

For the first time in his adult life, Cope sat in an interrogation room at the Salem Police Department. The room was small, with battleship-grey walls, the longest of which was mostly taken up by the one-way mirror. Cope gazed at his reflection and saw his usual features: sandy-blond hair, blue eyes, his tanned skin. There was something else there as well; he somehow felt more worldly and, oddly enough, finally part of the in crowd.

Ronan had connected with Cisco Jackson the night before and had filled him in on the podcast and Cope's interview with Kit Savage and Vic Rothschild. He'd brought up the possibility of them working on the Domenica Fibonacci case. The Salem Police chief had asked them all to come in for a chat first thing in the morning.

When Ronan called to let Jude know what was going on, he insisted Cope be part of the discussion and the casework, if Cisco allowed them to work on it. Cope sat to Jude's left, while Ronan and Fitz sat opposite. The three detectives were calm and unfazed by their surroundings, while Cope's heart felt like a jackhammer in his chest. He couldn't help but wonder if Tennyson felt this way when he'd attended meetings like this in the past.

"Good morning," Cisco said, shutting the door behind him. He carried a manila folder in his left hand and a cup of coffee in his right. "I'm glad you're here, Cope. It's good to have you on board." He took the seat at the head of the table.

"Thanks." He wasn't sure if he was supposed to make a little speech about being excited to be part of the team, so he stayed silent. Cope flipped his new notebook

open to a blank page and pulled his pen out of the spiral.

Cisco looked around the table before opening the folder he'd brought with him. "At this point in time, the Domenica Fibonacci case is one of the oldest unsolved cases in Salem."

"Why wasn't this case listed on the ones available to us to work?" Ronan asked, sounding accusatory.

Sighing, Cisco sat back in his chair. "To be honest, it's because of the sensitive nature of Domenica's death."

"And the prominence of the Rothschild family," Ronan added.

"Fuck a duck, Ronan!" Cisco half-shouted. He clenched and unclenched his fists, taking a deep breath. "Let's face it, you're not exactly known for your tact. A case like this, where manner of death isn't definitive, needs a softer touch. I wasn't sure you could provide that to the family."

"I get that the family has money and has prominent ties that go beyond Salem. However, it's our job to investigate cold cases regardless of whether the victim was a prince or a pauper."

"After that podcast episode dropped last night, my phone started ringing off the hook. I heard from Salem's mayor, the district attorney, and the governor. All of them want this case reexamined. It never fails to amaze me what a game-changer the internet is. People from all over the world heard that episode last night and have been emailing the department about solving Domenica's murder if, in fact, she was murdered." Cisco sunk his head into his hands. "I don't need this bullshit, guys. I don't need DA, who's running for reelection, up my ass, not to mention the governor."

“We’re the best detectives you’ve got, Cisco,” Jude pointed out. “We’ve already got a plan of attack and are ready to hit the ground running right now. All you have to do is say the word. Fitz is an expert in dealing with bureaucratic bullshit; he can be your point man with the district attorney, the mayor and governor, if need be. Ronan has a knack for getting people to spill their guts. I’m ready to dig in on the research side of things, and Cope has been trying almost nonstop to reach out to Domenica’s spirit.”

Cope turned to his husband, amazed by Jude’s demeanor. He’d never worked with his husband before and hadn’t seen this side of him. The calm, orderly Jude, who made a compelling argument without arguing.

“Was that actually the spirit’s voice or some audio trick?” Cisco asked, sounding tired.

“It was Domenica,” Cope said. “Without going into too much detail, I think there’s something wrong with her spirit, which is why I haven’t been able to connect with her.”

“What do you mean, something’s wrong? Domenica is dead. It doesn’t get more wrong than that.” Cisco reached for his coffee and took a large sip.

Cope nodded. “If Domenica was being treated for bipolar disorder, then she was likely on some heavy-duty meds. It’s possible her spirit is still being affected by those drugs now.”

“Are you saying Domenica is high in the afterlife?” Cisco wore a dubious look on his face.

“Spirits are affected by a lot of factors. The biggest one is how they died. A lot of times, murder victims are traumatized by what happened to them, and that carries over to the afterlife. They can still feel the trauma and fear they experienced, which

can affect the way they speak and communicate, just like it would to any of us. I know we've only heard her speak a few words, but she sounded impaired to me. Woozy and slow, the way you'd expect someone on tranquilizers to act and sound. It's possible that even if I do manage to connect with Domenica, she might not be able to tell me if she was pushed, jumped, or accidentally slipped over the edge, which makes the detective work more important than ever."

"The shit's gonna hit the fan with this one." Cisco sighed heavily. "With the popularity of the podcast, everyone is interested in this case. There was an op-ed in the paper this morning asking why this case is still unsolved after four decades and that maybe it's time for a change in leadership at the top of the Salem Police Department. We've obviously got to reexamine this case. There's going to be media involvement, which means the entire investigation will be under a microscope. I want to keep Cope's involvement on the down-low, and the rest of you chuckleheads need to be on your best behavior."

Ronan snorted.

"I'm talking to you , asshole!" Cisco slapped a hand on the table. "I don't need this shit, Ronan. The stress and scrutiny of an investigation like this is the last thing any of us needs. One wrong move could end my career in law enforcement. Do you understand what's at stake here?"

"I do," Ronan agreed. "I'm sorry for being a dick, Cisco. I was just trying to lighten the mood. You know we'll do everything in our power to get to the truth and solve this case. I expect there's going to be a lot of pushback from Vic Rothschild's attorney."

"Let me worry about that." Cisco carded a hand through his hair. "I spoke with the head of our records department about this case before you got here. I told her we're going to need the entire case file and all of the evidence collected. You can head over

to our off-site storage to pick it up. I also contacted the Essex County Medical Examiner and let them know you'd be by later to talk about this case."

"You'd already put us on the case before we'd even gotten here?" Ronan rolled his eyes. "You could have saved yourself a lot of stress if you'd led with that fact."

"Your cocky attitude needed to be knocked back a peg. You've had an impressive solve rate since the three of you joined the department, and I needed to make sure you're all going into this with your egos in check and understanding what's at stake here. As much as I hate to admit it, I want Ronan to be the face of the case with the media. You've got a knack for dealing with the bullshit reporters will throw at you. I've got a press conference scheduled for you at two. Wear a suit. Comb your hair. Make sure none of your lunch is stuck in your teeth." Cisco's hard demeanor cracked for the first time with a small smile.

"You got it. I'll be my usual charming self."

"I'll keep you in the loop with updates," Fitzgibbon said.

"There's no one better than you at quarterbacking these kinds of cases, Fitz. If there's anything you need, call me day or night. I mean it." Cisco nibbled his bottom lip. "The mayor's call hit me hard. I know politicians like to talk big, but I got the distinct impression that my job hangs in the balance here. Maybe I've taken this job for granted and have gotten a bit lazy here."

"Bullshit!" Jude said. "No one could run this department like you do. It's the height of the summer, and this city has an extra hundred thousand people a day coming here, and the crime rate is still low because you know how to police this city and the tourists who visit."

"I appreciate that, Jude."

“Where do we stand with exhuming the body of Domenica Fibonacci?” Fitzgibbon asked. “I’m just laying my cards on the table here while we’ve got you.”

Cisco pursed his lips. “If you need to do it, I’ll sign off on it. Vic Rothschild and his attorneys aren’t going to like that one bit.”

“We’re not in this business to win popularity contests,” Ronan said, his eyes practically glowing.

Cope didn’t need his gift to see that Ronan was ready to go to battle against Vic Rothschild and anyone else who stood in their way of solving this case.

“Agreed,” Cisco said, “but let’s not poke the bear unless we have to.”

“Understood. We’ll be in touch.” Ronan headed for the door with Fitzgibbon behind him.

“Do what you can, Cope,” Cisco said as he stretched his arms over his head. “If you need any help working a case like this, I’m sure Tennyson would be more than happy to give you advice.”

“Right,” Cope agreed. He knew Ten was going to be an excellent resource, but there was a part of him that was hoping to do this on his own without needing to lean on the more experienced psychic.

“I’m not talking about the psychic stuff. I’m talking about dealing with these guys. If you’ve got something to say, say it. To witnesses, suspects, the medical examiner, or my detectives. Got it?”

Cope grinned. “Got it. I won’t hold back.”

“You ready to do this?” Jude grinned.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Cope agreed. He followed Jude out of the interrogation room and into the hallway.

When they walked out into the hot July sun, Jude pulled Cope aside. “I know you and Ten have your own self-imposed rules about not reading people without their permission. It’s absolutely admirable, but there’s no place for that in a murder investigation. Get whatever information you can from people, and we’ll figure out how to get people to admit to what you know is true. Ronan’s excellent at that, but don’t tell him I said so. His ego is big enough as it is.”

“I’ll do anything I can to help Domenica.”

“I know you will,” Jude said as the SUV’s horn honked. “Asshole.”

Cope climbed into the SUV. He could feel the change in everyone’s energy. Before, they’d been hoping to have Domenica’s case assigned to them; now, all three of them were revved up and ready to go. Cope hoped he could keep pace.

The most important thing was to make sure Domenica found peace at long last. There was no better group of people to bring that gift to her.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

It had been a long morning. After getting the go-ahead from Cisco to start working on the Domenica Fibonacci case, they'd headed to the off-site storage archive to pick up the case file. Unfortunately, the boxes weren't where they were supposed to be.

Jude, Ronan, Fitz, and Cope spent three hours digging through the hot, dusty room, climbing wheeled ladders to check out boxes stacked high out of reach on shelves before they'd found what they were looking for. Five boxes filled with documents and evidence collected from Rothschild Manor.

When they got back to the office, everyone collapsed into chairs around the conference table.

"I don't think I've ever been this dirty in my life." Jude could feel the dust and grit of the warehouse in places dirt should never be. His eyes were itchy, constantly watering, and he couldn't stop sneezing.

"Same," Ronan agreed. "I'm so itchy."

"Wash your face and hands, then take some Benadryl," Fitzgibbon ordered. "We've got a shit ton of work to do before Ronan's press conference. I want to head over to the ME's office after he's finished charming the Boston media. The sooner we can get the biological samples submitted to the lab, the better."

Jude grabbed the first box and pulled off the lid. "This is part of the case file documents."

“Yeah, so is this one,” Ronan said, shoving his box toward Jude.

“I’ve got physical evidence and the log sheets.” Fitzgibbon grabbed for another box. “Same here and here.”

“Three boxes of evidence and two with documents. I can’t believe that’s all there is.” Ronan shook his head.

“You have to remember Domenica died in 1984. There wouldn’t have been the kind of evidence collection we have now. There was no DNA technology at that time, and with Domenica having been in the water for several days after her fall, there isn’t going to be any hair or fiber evidence either. The best thing we can hope for is Vic’s clothes. Pray there’s touch DNA on his shirt.”

“I’ll take the evidence,” Ronan said. “See what I can turn over to the lab for testing.”

“Jude and I will read the case file.” Fitzgibbon rummaged through the box and pulled out a binder marked with Domenica’s name.

“Can I touch the evidence?” Cope asked. “I might be able to connect with Domenica if I touch her things.”

“You can touch them through the plastic evidence bags, but I’d rather you not take them out until the lab has gone over everything. The last thing we need is cross-contamination with the way you’re all sneezing and have drippy noses.” Fitzgibbon went back to the report he was reading.

Ronan motioned Cope to his side of the table and handed him two sheets of paper. “This is the evidence log. It lists each object and gives it a number. You’ll find that number written on the bag. The first thing we need to do is make sure it’s all here, and then we can go from there.”

“Is it strange for you to not be working with Ten on this case?” Cope whispered.

“A little bit, but he never did this sort of work with us. He sat in on witness interviews and did his best to connect with the spirit of the murder victim, but he’s not one to sort through evidence or to read the police report and autopsy.”

Cope nodded. “I get that. I sort of feel like I need to see everything to get a better picture of what happened to Domenica that last night.”

“Do you think you’ll pick anything up psychically from the pictures or the evidence?” Ronan sounded truly interested in hearing Cope’s answer.

“Maybe. I’m curious to see what will happen when I hold Vic’s clothing.”

Ronan sorted through the boxes and pulled out a bagged black T-shirt with some sort of printing on it. “Here, try this.”

Cope took the bag and held it in both hands. His eyes slid shut as he took a deep breath and opened his gift. “You’re so excited to be working this case. Fitzgibbon is praying you stay on topic and don’t write any checks your ass can’t cash. Jude’s quiet as the grave, but I can feel a sense of calm radiating from him. As for this shirt, all I can feel is rage. It’s thick and black and almost suffocating.”

“What is the rage directed toward?” Jude asked, his chair creaking as he sat forward. Cope’s gift never ceased to amaze him. If he could pull a little detail from the shirt, they could use that when they interviewed Vic Rothschild.

“I don’t know. Everything. Everyone. It’s all-encompassing.” Cope sighed, his eyes opening slowly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t see anything else.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Fitzgibbon said. “That shirt has been sitting in an evidence room

for forty years. I wasn't sure we were going to get anything from it at all. Good job."

"Here are Domenica's wedding rings." Ronan took the shirt and handed the next bag to Cope. "It's a wonder they didn't slide off her hand when she was in the water."

Cope took the bag and gasped.

"What is it? What do you see?" Ronan asked.

"I was falling toward the sea." Cope gasped for breath.

"Go back to that moment where you felt yourself falling. Could you feel the ghost of Vic's hands on your chest or back?"

Jude was impressed with Ronan's calm, gentle handling of Cope. If he'd been the one asking the questions, he would have been spitting them out rapid fire, which would have made his husband anxious.

"All I feel is a horrible fear. Domenica fought against it, tried to reach out to the cliff to slow her fall. She didn't want to die. I can hear the roar of the ocean, but I can also hear her voice."

"What's she saying?" Ronan asked.

"Ave, O Maria, piena di grazia, il Signore e con te," Cope recited.

"It's the first line of the Hail Mary in Italian." Fitz held up his phone. "It's nice that she was praying before her death, but is there anything you can read about her husband?"

Cope shook his head. "There's nothing about Vic, and I don't think she jumped. Her

thoughts are ordered but slow.”

“Because of the drugs?” Ronan asked.

“Feels that way. There’s no regret. No remorse. Just her fervent wish to meet her lord and savior.” Cope opened his eyes, which were watery. He looked down at the rings. “Domenica, can you hear me? My name is Cope Forbes. I want to help you.”

“Try it in Italian,” Fitz said. “ Mi chiamo Cope. Voglio auitarti .”

Cope repeated after Fitzgibbon. “ Per favore , Domenica. Please let me help you.” Cope rolled the rings around with his fingers. “She’s not here. Damn.” He handed the bag back to Ronan.

“You did great, Cope. Keep trying to reach out.”

“That translation app is neat,” Jude said. “You should download it in case Domenica comes to you and is speaking Italiano.”

Cope nodded. “I’ll do it now.”

“The police work done on this case was shit. No offense, guys, but there’s barely anything here. The cop first on the scene, an Officer Lavoie, writes about using his flashlight to illuminate the edge of the cliff but that he didn’t venture out too far for fear of falling over the edge. Officer Downs interviewed Vic Rothschild, who he claims was overcome with grief for his dead wife, insisting again and again that Domenica jumped. There are notations that he collected Vic’s shirt, which was rain soaked and sitting in a heap in the upstairs bathroom.” Jude shook his head. “They didn’t collect his pants, shoes, or socks. No one checked his body for marks and scratches. There was no other evidence collected from the house either. I would have expected the police to have collected Domenica’s pill bottles, at the very least, if Vic

was insisting her death was a suicide.”

“How the hell did he have time to change his clothes before the police arrived?” Cope asked.

“He didn’t call 911 immediately after the fall. That’s also why there are no pill bottles to be found.” Ronan sighed. “The son of a bitch cleaned up.”

“Officer Downs made mention of Vic wearing creased dress pants and a white button-down shirt with a tie. He was completely dry, even his hair. The 911 call was made after 10:00 p.m., in the middle of a hurricane, and this guy is dressed like he’s about to walk into a business meeting. That makes no sense.” Jude tossed the police report onto the table with a look of disgust.

“Appearances are everything, after all,” Ronan said. “Not to mention that those clothes covered his arms and legs, hiding any scratches or bruises he might have gotten from Domenica fighting for her life.”

“With my gift not giving us anything and no physical evidence from Vic, what do we do next?” Cope asked.

“Let’s see what the medical examiner has to say this afternoon. I want to go over all of these reports in detail so that when we interview Vic Rothschild, there won’t be any surprises. I’m going to request he run a drug toxicology panel to see what was in Domenica’s system when she died, if there are biological samples still available for testing. Maybe we can get pharmacy records to see what had been prescribed and at what dosage.”

Jude knew Fitzgibbon was grasping at straws. Unless they found some sort of smoking gun like handprints on Domenica’s back or chest, Vic was going to continue to get away with his crime.

Jude was going to do everything in his power to get justice for Domenica.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Cope

It was a day of firsts for Cope. First time at a police station, reading a police report, and seeing autopsy photographs. Being present at a news conference on the steps of City Hall was another thing Cope had never done before. How many more firsts were to come in the course of investigating this case?

Cope stood off to the left of the steps, watching as media members jostled one another for the best spot. Cameramen tested their gear while audio techs set their microphones and digital recorders on Ronan's podium.

At exactly 2:00 p.m., Ronan stepped out of City Hall and walked down the steps. Fitzgibbon flanked his left and Jude his right. All three were dressed in dark dress pants and crisp white button-down shirts. With temps in the nineties and the high humidity level, those shirts weren't going to stay crisp for very long. Each of the detectives wore mirrored aviator sunglasses, like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. In fact, Jude, Ronan, and Fitz all looked like they'd just stepped out of central casting. Tall, with movie star good looks, each of them oozed confidence. Cope wished he could bottle it and use it himself on days when he felt a little low.

"Good afternoon. My name is Detective Ronan O'Mara. This is Detective Jude Byrne and Captain Kevin Fitzgibbon. We're with the Cold Case Unit of the Salem Police Department. Earlier this morning, Chief of Police Cisco Jackson asked us to reopen the Domenica Fibonacci case. It's our aim to determine once and for all if she jumped or was pushed off that cliff in 1984."

"Where does the investigation stand right now?" a voice called from the crowd of

reporters.

“We spent the morning going through the case file and evidence collected the night Domenica died. I’ve sent items to the state crime lab for DNA testing, including the shirt Vic Rothschild wore that night and the nightgown Domenica was wearing when her body was recovered. DNA technology as we know it today wasn’t available in ’84, and there have been great advances in hair and fiber technologies. We’re hopeful we’ll uncover evidence that wasn’t collected at the time of the incident. I’ve put a rush on the samples.”

“Why are you putting a rush on evidence that’s forty years old? Do you think this case is more important than current cases the Salem PD is working?” John Jameson asked.

Cope had always thought the reporter was handsome, but looking at him now, gunning for Ronan, showed the man in an entirely different light. He looked like a shark, ready to devour Ronan for the slightest slipup.

“No, John, we don’t think this case is more important than any other. Domenica and her family have waited forty years for the events of her last night to be revealed, and as a citizen of Salem, she deserves justice if she was murdered or to be left to rest in peace if she indeed took her own life.” Ronan took a deep breath. “While we’re waiting for the results to come back from the lab, we’ll be interviewing those who knew Domenica back in the day. I’d welcome anyone who has information about this case to come forward. The Salem PD has a dedicated tip line. Please call if you know anything. The smallest detail could be what breaks the case open. I’ll take a few questions now.”

“Argyle Tanenbaum, NPR. Are you going to arrest Vic Rothschild for the murder of his wife?”

“Not at this time. We do not yet know if Domenica was murdered. We will be setting up an interview with Mr. Rothschild to go over the events leading up to his wife’s death. Please remember he is innocent until proven guilty.”

Ronan pointed to a blonde reporter who’d been waving her hand in the air like a first grader who needed a potty break. “Purple dress.”

“Vanessa Carlton, CBS Boston. Detective O’Mara, my sources tell me Chief Jackson could be on his way out if this case isn’t solved. What do you have to say about that?”

“With all due respect to Cisco Jackson, this case isn’t about him. It’s not about Captain Fitzgibbon. It’s not about me. We’re here today for Domenica Fibonacci. So much emphasis is being placed on Vic Rothschild. Did he or did he not kill his wife? Reopening this investigation isn’t about him either. My goal here is to follow the evidence to determine how this victim died.

“Green vest.” He pointed to a dapper-looking reporter wearing a matching bow tie.

“Kent Miller. WBZ Radio. Will you be exhuming the body of Domenica Fibonacci?”

Cope gasped at the question. It made him uncomfortable at the thought of Domenica’s husband hearing about this possibility for the first time from a press conference rather than from Ronan or Fitz in person.

“That will depend on several factors, one of which having to do with tissue and blood samples being available from the original autopsy. If those items are available for testing, it’s my hope the step of exhumation will not be necessary.”

“How dare you!” an angry voice shouted from behind Cope. “How dare you stand here in front of reporters and talk about digging up my wife’s grave! Have you no

shame?”

Cope turned to see Vic Rothschild advancing toward Ronan’s podium.

Ronan held his hand up. “Mr. Rothschild, all investigative options will be discussed with you when we sit down to meet.”

“I’m not meeting with any of you!” Rothschild bellowed. “It’s been forty years. Leave my wife to rest in peace.”

“Sir, I’m sorry for your loss, but I don’t think now is the time or place to discuss this matter.”

“This is exactly the time and place. In front of cameras so everyone can see how the Salem Police Department conducts itself. Browbeating innocent widowers amid the threat of prying my beloved wife out of her coffin and subjecting her remains to yet another invasive procedure. I’ll be forced to submit a DNA sample, which will be added to a national database forever, even if I’m found to be innocent, which I am. I’ll have to give blood and hair samples. A violation of my right to privacy. My home will be invaded and searched. When will this end?” He took a gasping breath. “I’ll tell you where it ends—with me being arrested and convicted for a crime I most certainly did not commit. I’ll be railroaded and bullied up until I confess my sins or take my own life as my poor wife did. Domenica knew all about living in a world that did not understand her. She was forced to conform herself to this world rather than it accommodating her. If she were standing beside me today, she would tell you what a travesty of justice this is. Hasn’t my family suffered enough?”

“You’re talking about the Rothschild family, right? At the time of Domenica’s death, yours was the sixth richest family in America. From the media accounts at the time of Domenica’s death, it was thought that you bribed the Salem Police to look the other way, destroying evidence and making sure that a charge of murder couldn’t be made

against you, much less prosecuted. I'm not one to pay much heed to rumors or lip service, but you can damn well better believe I will do everything in my power to make sure you pay for your crime if you killed your wife. No man is above the law, and you're about to see that in action, up close and personal." Turning from the podium, Ronan strode up the stairs and into City Hall with Jude and Fitzgibbon behind him.

"You!" Rothschild screamed, striding toward Cope. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Cope watched in horror as all the television cameras swung toward him when Rothschild advanced on him.

"Are you trying to communicate with my wife's spirit again? You're nothing but a charlatan! A flimflam man! A con artist! You're the one who should be arrested, Mr. Forbes, for cheating people out of their hard-earned money. I'll make sure you get what's coming to you." Rothschild lunged forward with a roar, shoving Cope with all his strength.

Cope flew backward, landing hard on his ass before his head cracked against the pavement. He tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness and nausea washed over him. He laid his head back and shut his eyes, which stopped the world from spinning but did nothing to block out Vic Rothschild slandering his name, his reputation, and his family.

"Jesus, Cope, you're bleeding. Are you okay?" Jude asked, kneeling down beside him.

"No," Cope whispered. "Don't let him come at me again. He's pure evil. I'm gonna be sick." He managed to roll to his side and vomited. As he retched a second time, he heard Ronan's voice telling Vic Rothschild he had the right to be silent, followed by

the metallic clink of handcuffs being applied to the still-shouting man.

The last thing Cope heard before he lost consciousness was Vic Rothschild screaming he would get Cope if it was the last thing he did.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

Jude sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair in the emergency room, waiting for Cope to come back from his CT scan. He'd never forgive himself if his husband was seriously hurt. What the hell had he been thinking, asking Cope to stand off to the side like he wasn't part of the team? Tennyson was always front and center when he worked on cases so Ronan could keep him safe. Jude had failed his husband. It was day one of Cope being on the case, and he was in the hospital.

"Jude?" Tennyson asked, walking into the room. "Ronan called to say Cope was in the ER. I came as fast as I could."

"I'm so glad you're here." Jude held his hand out to Tennyson, wishing for once the psychic could read him so he wouldn't have to recount his pain out loud.

Ten took his hand and held on tight. "He's going to be fine. A little sore, but fine."

"Did you run into the doc in the hallway, or is your gift telling you that?" Not that it mattered. Ten's word was as good as hearing it from the doctor himself.

"My gift." Ten patted Jude's shoulder and took the empty chair beside him. "What happened out there? I was watching Ronan's press conference online, and when it ended, I shut off the video feed, so I missed everything that happened next."

"We walked into City Hall. Ronan needed a minute to calm the hell down. I was standing by the glass doors and saw Vic Rothschild run up on Cope. I could see him screaming, and I ran out the door to get to Cope. Members of the media and guys

with cameras swarmed Cope, so I couldn't get close to him before Rothschild shoved him. Cope fell backward and landed on his back, hitting his head. There was so much blood." Jude felt tears scalding down his face. "This is all my fault, Ten. I should never have left him unprotected. I couldn't have hurt my husband worse if I'd shoved him myself."

"That's not true, Jude," Ten said softly. "You had no way of knowing what was going to happen."

"I knew Rothschild was enraged, and fucking Ronan shouting at him in return didn't help. Jesus, Cisco begged him to stay on point. Said that everyone would be watching the way we handled this case. That we'd be under a microscope and subject to more scrutiny than ever before."

"The man is unhinged," Ten said.

"Which is another reason I shouldn't have left Cope to fend for himself." Jude was beside himself. His emotions swamped over him like a tidal wave.

"Cope was fending for himself just fine," Cope said as the orderly wheeled him back into the room. "I didn't want to put my hands up and have people think I was going to fight a sixty-year-old man."

"Next time, put your hands up," Cisco Jackson said as he came into the room. "Are you okay?"

"I'm sore, and I'm seeing three of you, but other than that, I'm fine." Cope rested his head back against the pillow.

"One Cisco is bad enough," Ronan said, pushing his way into the room. Fitzgibbon followed behind him.

“What is the doctor saying?” Fitz asked.

“Cope needed twenty-two stitches to close the gash at the back of his head. The docs think he’s got a mild concussion, but since he slammed the back of his head against the concrete sidewalk, they wanted to do a CT scan to make sure he didn’t fracture his skull.”

“The only thing fractured is my pride,” Cope said. “What happened with Rothschild?”

Ronan lifted a questioning eyebrow at Jude, who nodded. “I arrested him for assaulting you and for disorderly conduct. Fitz and I brought him to the station and turned him over for booking and processing before we came here. He ranted and raved the whole way back to the station that we were trampling his rights and that he was going to sue all of us to within an inch of our lives.”

“Fuck,” Jude mumbled. The last thing he needed was to be sued by that raving lunatic.

“Is he mentally ill or just filled with rage?” Cisco asked.

“Yes,” Cope said.

“Yes, what?” Jude asked, looking confused.

“Yes, he’s mentally ill, and yes, he’s filled with rage. Weren’t you listening?” Cope sounded exhausted.

Jude knew he should get everyone out of the room so his husband could rest, but he needed to hear what Cope thought of Rothschild. “When I got to you on the ground, you said Rothschild was pure evil. What told you that?”

“I felt it when he put his hands on me. I would swear his hands burned my skin.”

“Pull down your hospital gown so I can see your chest,” Jude ordered, getting out of his seat to stand at Cope’s bedside.

“This is hardly the time for a bit of afternoon delight, don’t you think?” Ronan asked.

“God, you’re an asshole.” Jude rolled his eyes.

Cope pulled down the gown to reveal his chest. He was black and blue.

“Jesus Christ,” Ronan muttered. “Jude’s right. I am an asshole.”

Jude didn’t have time to gloat. He was staring down at the bruises on Cope’s chest. He could clearly see the heels of Rothschild’s hands marking his husband’s skin. “We need photographs of these marks.”

“If Rothschild had the strength in his sixties to send Cope flying, imagine the strength he would have had against his wife forty years ago. There were no autopsy photographs of Domenica’s chest or back. I hate to say it, but we might need to exhume her remains.” Ronan’s eyes were on Fitzgibbon.

“I already made out the request. All I have to do is submit it to Judge Rodgers. I’ll wait until we speak with the medical examiner and get a look at Domenica’s file.”

“Do it,” Cisco said. “If there’s any pushback, we’ll use the photos of Cope’s injuries to bolster our case.”

“I hate to say it, but the medical examiner could have been in the Rothschilds’ pockets. That’s why the body wasn’t photographed properly.” Fitzgibbon was out of his seat and pulling out his phone. “Ronan, let’s head over there now. Jude, stay with

Cope and get him home safely. I'll call you later to update you."

"Thanks, Cap." Jude sat on the edge of Cope's bed, tracing his hands over his husband's bruises.

"I'll take you guys home. We can keep Wolf and Lizbet tonight so you two can have a chance to rest. I'll be in the waiting room. Let me know when Cope is discharged."

"Thanks, Ten." Jude turned back to his bruised and stitched husband. "Nothing like ending up in the hospital on day one."

"I'm going to be fine, Jude." Cope reached for his hand. "I feel like one of you guys now. I've got a groovy scar I'll be able to show off when you all compare your injuries like Quint and Hooper in Jaws."

Jude barked a laugh. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Jude. Really. I mean it. None of us thought Rothschild would show up at the press conference and act the way he did. I didn't see it coming either." Cope's eyes slid shut. "He charged like a rabid dog when he recognized me. As if I were the one responsible for what was happening to him. He didn't have to appear on the latest episode of Ghost After Dark. I know he was brought in to psych me out, but all he did was bring more attention to his wife's death. He single-handedly brought this case back into the public eye. How could the Salem Police not reopen it?"

"I know. I totally agree." Jude's admission didn't make him feel any better about the situation.

"What's our next step?" Cope's usually bright eyes were dull and looked out of focus. Jude could clearly see the effect the concussion was having on his husband.

“Our next step is to get you home and into bed. I promise to take such good care of you.” Jude felt his emotions rising again. He wasn’t usually an emotional man, but seeing his husband on the ground and bloodied was something he’d never forget or forgive himself for.

“Jude, I’m not a child. I feel much better already.” Cope squeezed his husband’s hand. “You always take good care of me. Go find the doctor so he can spring me, and we can go home.” Cope’s eyes slipped shut.

“I’ll be right back.” Jude hurried out of the room in search of the ER doc who’d done Cope’s initial assessment. All he wanted to do was get his husband home. He’d promised Cope to keep him safe, and he’d broken that promise today.

The one person who wasn’t going to be safe was Vic Rothschild. Jude was going to make sure the man paid for killing his wife and putting Cope in the hospital.

Jude knew that was one promise he could keep.

Cope

Cope's stomach rumbled when Tennyson set a bowl of his famous chicken and dumplings in front of him. It smelled heavenly. While Cope had been waiting for the doctor to discharge him from the hospital, Ten had run out to the supermarket to get all the fixings for dinner. He'd put the meal together in the Crock-Pot while Jude got Cope settled in bed. That was four hours ago. Thankfully, Cope felt well enough to have dinner in the kitchen with the rest of the adults. "Thanks, Ten. This looks amazing."

"Kaye used to make this meal for me when I was sick as a kid. I would feel better when I ate it and thought the meal had magic powers."

"I'll take all the magic I can get at this point," Cope said before digging in.

"How are you feeling?" Ronan asked, watching Cope with a critical eye.

"My head hurts, and my back is sore. I think I tensed up when Rothschild shoved me, and that hurt me more than hitting the ground. What happened to him after he was booked into the jail?"

Ronan shot Jude a questioning look.

"Guys, I'm fine. Please tell me what happened to Rothschild and what you learned at the medical examiner's office." Cope looked back and forth between Ronan and Fitzgibbon, knowing that if he waited long enough, one of them would start to talk.

“Rothschild was booked on disorderly conduct charges, along with the assault and battery on you. He’s spending the night in the county jail and will be arraigned in the morning around ten or so. He’ll most likely be granted bail since he has no criminal record. We can get a restraining order against him to keep away from you, but that would also mean that you wouldn’t be able to take part in any interrogations we have with him going forward.” Ronan offered Jude an apologetic look before continuing. “When we went to see the coroner, he wasn’t prepared for us. He hadn’t located any of the evidence or the original photographs we’d asked to see. He promised to have it for us first thing in the morning.”

Cope forked up a pillowy dumpling and thought over what he was about to say. Jude wasn’t going to like it, not one bit. “I want to go to Rothschild’s court appearance tomorrow. He might have had the first word, but I want the last.”

“You should take the day to rest.”

“Jude, I’m fine.” Cope knew there would be pushback from his husband. “I’m also coming with you to the medical examiner’s office.”

“Jesus, Cope. What the hell is wrong with you? Rothschild could have killed you, and you want to keep pressing your luck?”

Cope took a deep breath. The last thing he wanted to do was fight with Jude. “All I’m going to do is sit in the courthouse and listen to proceedings. It might help the judge decide to hold Rothschild if she can see my bruised face and the bandage covering my stitches.” Jude opened his mouth to interrupt, but Cope held up a hand to stop him. “All we’re going to do at the ME’s office is look at pictures and maybe evidence. It’s not like I’ll be performing an autopsy. I’ll sit and listen. I promise to come home and rest afterward.”

Jude got up from the table and paced to the fridge. He opened the door, and Cope

could hear things rattling around. This was Jude's favorite way to buy himself some time. Usually, he let his stubborn husband get away with it, but not today. "I'm part of this team. I want to do my part." Like Tennyson, he thought but didn't say out loud.

Jude shut the fridge door. He had a can of ginger ale in his hand, which he cracked open and took a sip from.

"I know when I'm outnumbered." Jude sat down. "Okay, you're in, but if you're feeling headachy or dizzy, you need to tell me. Got it?"

"Got it," Cope agreed, trying not to celebrate his victory. He dug back into his meal. Now that he didn't feel as though the Earth was spinning off its axis, he could actually think. Not being able to speak with Vic Rothschild was a nonstarter. He needed to get a firm read on the man to help figure out what actually happened the night Domenica died.

With all the reaching out to Domenica's spirit, Cope assumed he would have heard back from her by now, but there had been no contact other than the day at West Side Magick when they'd recorded the podcast episode. "Since I haven't been able to reach Domenica, do you think I should reach out to Bertha Craig and see if she can lend a hand?"

"I have a confession to make," Ten said sheepishly.

Cope felt his stomach tighten and threaten to revolt. "Don't tell me your chicken and dumplings actually came from the freezer section of the supermarket."

Ten grinned. "No, I made dinner from scratch. What I need to tell you is that I've also been reaching out to Domenica. It's not that I didn't think you could reach her—I just figured two heads might be better than one in this situation."

Cope felt his body sag with relief. “Thanks for doing that, Ten. I’ve never worked with a spirit who was this elusive after asking for help. It’s probably a safe bet that Carson and Cole have probably been reaching out to her as well.”

“And maybe every other psychic in Salem,” Ten agreed, wearing a worried look. “Do you think that’s what’s keeping Domenica away from us? I might not want to talk either if two dozen people were trying to get my attention all at once.”

Cope shook his head. “I would absolutely agree with you if it weren’t for the episode of the podcast we appeared on. Up to that point, no one knew if the voice heard during the first episode was Domenica’s or a ploy to get more listens and subscribers. When I reached out to her that day at West Side Magick, there wouldn’t have been all of those other people trying to get her attention.”

“What if Domenica really was mentally ill?” Fitzgibbon asked softly. “I know we usually fall on the side of the victim when we investigate cold cases, but what if she was in need of a psychiatric intervention when her husband had her admitted to Danvers State Hospital?”

“I haven’t wanted to go there, but it is a possibility,” Cope admitted. “I haven’t worked with a lot of spirits who were still mentally ill on the other side.”

“Neither have I,” Ten chimed in.

Jude shook his head as if to clear it. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. I thought everyone was healed when they died, like Bertha. The breast cancer killed her, but there’s no sign of it now.”

“That’s usually what happens. We’ve spoken to so many murder victims over the years, and we never see their spirits as they were when they died. We usually see their best version of themselves.”

“I can only think of two spirits I’ve ever spoken to who were affected in death by what ailed them in life. One was a teenager who’d died by her own hand and wanted people to see what her pain caused her to do. It seemed like such a typical teenage thing to do. The other one was Elvis.”

“Elvis Presley?” Ronan asked. “You met the ghost of The King? Why didn’t we know about this?”

“I knew. Cope mentioned it when we were working the Kotter Brighthouse case,” Ten said.

“And you never told me?” Ronan asked incredulously. “You know what a huge fan I am.”

Ten patted Ronan’s arm. “That’s right, snookums. You’re Elvis’s biggest fan. I didn’t tell you because Cope said there was something wrong with him.”

“I thought he was still messed up from all the drugs that killed him. He wasn’t interested in crossing over or being reunited with his family. I’m not a shrink, but he seemed to be wallowing in his past failings, like he thought he didn’t deserve to walk into paradise.”

“That’s awful,” Ronan said.

“You can lead a spirit to the white light, but you can’t make them cross into it. Not until they’re ready.”

“Do you think that’s the case with Domenica? That she isn’t ready to cross over, or do you think her mental illness is keeping her from it?”

Ten shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

“What if Domenica is stuck in a time loop?” Cope asked.

Ten’s eyes widened. “That’s a definite possibility.”

“What’s a time loop?” Jude asked.

“It’s when a spirit is stuck reliving a single moment over and over again. Like that movie Groundhog Day , only in Domenica’s case, I’m guessing she’s reliving the moment she died.” Cope had helped people in time loops before, but it wasn’t easy to get them to break free. “A lot of spirits feel like it’s their penance. The Catholics think it’s purgatory. It’s neither of those things. I think of it as a skipping record that plays the same snippet of a song over and over again until you bump the needle to a different groove.”

“How do we bump Domenica’s needle?” Fitzgibbon asked.

“I hate to say it, but I need to speak with Vic Rothschild.” Cope knew Jude wasn’t going to be happy with his solution.

“No!” Jude shook his head vehemently. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you get within fifty feet of that asshole.”

“Jude, I need to know if he recognizes the words Domenica said during the podcast as things she said that last night on the cliff. We need to walk him through everything that happened that night.”

“Are you saying you don’t think he pushed her off the cliff?”

Cope shrugged. “Vic Rothschild has been proclaiming his innocence for the last forty years. Maybe he’s telling the truth.”

Jude didn't look convinced.

"We need to interview Rothschild anyway," Ronan said. "Instead of interrogating him, let's do what we did with Tony and Aimee Webster. Let him tell us what happened the night his wife died. Listening to Vic recap the events leading up to her death might get Domenica to engage with Cope."

Fitzgibbon nodded as Ronan spoke. "Sorry, Jude, but I agree with Ronan. We can keep Rothschild shackled when he speaks with us if that would make you more comfortable with having Cope there. Plus, he'll have to get through me and Ronan to get to Cope. I promise you that."

Jude took a deep breath. His eyes were on Cope. "Okay. You're back on the team."

"Uh, I never left." Cope grinned at his husband. He got out of his seat and refilled his bowl with more chicken and dumplings. If he was going to help solve a forty-year-old mystery, he was going to need all the energy he could get.

Jude

Much to Jude's surprise, he'd gotten an excellent night's sleep. He assumed he would have been up listening to Cope breathe, but he had gone out like a light the second his head hit the pillow. With Wolf and Lizbet spending the night at Ronan's house, the house had been perfectly quiet. He missed not waking up to his daughter's giggles when he changed her diaper and Wolf's breakfast chatter. Cope had needed the rest. He looked much better this morning. Ten's magical chicken and dumplings must have done the trick.

After a quick bowl of cereal for breakfast, Jude and Cope hopped into Fitzgibbon's SUV for their trip to the Essex County Medical Examiner's office. "How were the kids last night?"

"Pissy and exhausted. I think the heat's gotten to all of us." Ronan shook his head. "Six straight days at over ninety degrees is just too much."

"Agreed. What did you end up doing with the kids?" Jude had been feeling a bit testy himself but had chalked it up to Vic Rothschild attacking Cope.

"We tied them up in the backyard." Ronan laughed. "Kidding. Just kidding. I made an ice cream run. Picked up cookies and cream and all the trimmings, hot fudge, caramel sauce, whipped cream, and rainbow sprinkles. Everyone was in a better mood after that, thank goodness, or they really would have ended up outside."

"According to the news this morning, the heat wave is supposed to break when thunderstorms roll through later today," Fitzgibbon said.

“That will be good for my yard too. With Salem being under water restrictions, it’s dry and brown. I’m half expecting a tumbleweed to blow through.” Jude had been tempted to sneak into the yard and water it after midnight but in the end realized a green lawn wasn’t worth depleting the water supply for those who had backyard gardens.

“I know my brain is still a little scrambled, but explain to me what we’re looking for at the coroner’s office. We have the autopsy report and the photographs taken during the postmortem, right?” Cope asked.

“Possibly some, but maybe not all,” Fitzgibbon said, eyeing Cope from the rearview mirror.

“Wait, what?” Cope asked.

“There was a lot of speculation at the time of Domenica’s death that coroner was in the Rothschilds’ pockets and that maybe the doctor had been paid off to make it look as if Domenica jumped to keep Vic from being arrested and possibly sent to prison,” Fitzgibbon said.

“Here’s where things get interesting,” Ronan jumped in. “Coroners gather all sorts of information they use along with the physical findings in order to tell the story of how someone died. They kept their own records of each case, and back in the eighties, before the law was changed, not every piece of evidence collected had to be presented in the coroner’s final autopsy.

“For example, if someone died from a gunshot wound to the chest, the ME wouldn’t necessarily add the pictures of the victim’s feet. I hated getting incomplete files when I was first assigned to homicide. Since there were no photos of Domenica’s back and chest included in the evidence we have, I’m hoping the rest of those photos are in a case file for us to find. Our goal today is to look at the full view of Domenica’s

autopsy to see if it brings us any closer to determining if this was a murder or suicide.”

Jude hoped there would be a smoking gun in the records but wasn't overly optimistic. The case was forty years old. No records were kept on computers back in the day. When they'd gone to get Domenica's case file out of Salem Police storage, it took them hours to find the right boxes. It would be a miracle if there was any trace of Domenica's file at the medical examiner's office.

Twenty minutes later, Fitzgibbon parked the SUV. “Keep your heads, guys,” he cautioned. “If the records are only partially there or are gone altogether, it's not the fault of the people here today. Let's not take our bad fortune out on them.”

“Hell of a pep talk, Cap.” Ronan rolled his eyes and opened the door to the building, holding it for the others.

The smell of industrial-grade cleaners hit Jude's nose the instant he entered the building. He supposed that odor was better than the smell of human decomposition, but not by much. Following the signs, he headed down the hallway until he reached the office of Dr. Christian Halstrom, the county coroner. He rapped on the door.

“Come in!” a loud voice called from inside the office.

Opening the door, Jude saw the doctor sitting at his desk. The man looked as if he were over seventy. His back was stooped, and Jude wouldn't be surprised to see him sitting on a cushion to boost himself up. His silver hair was scraped over the top of his scalp to hide his rapidly advancing baldness. Jude vowed to himself that if he started to lose his hair, he wouldn't resort to such desperate tactics to hold on to his lost youth. “I'm Detective Jude Byrne. I'm here with my cold case colleagues to see the Domenica Fibonacci file.”

“Ah, yes, I spoke with a Detective O’Mara yesterday. He was quite angry that I couldn’t lay my hands on a decades-old file. Ah, well, that’s the gift of youth, I suppose.” Dr. Halstrom sighed and pointed to a box sitting on a chair opposite his desk. “That’s the Fibonacci file. Feel free to go over it in the conference room across the hall. I gave it a once-over and couldn’t find any detail that would indicate if her manner of death was suicide or murder.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Jude grabbed the box and closed the office door behind him. He hoped there was a piece of evidence in the box that would give them something to accuse Vic Rothschild of. The man’s emotions were obviously out of control, and after spending a night in the county jailhouse, he could well imagine it wasn’t going to take much to push Rothschild over the edge to get him to confess.

Ronan opened the door to the conference room and flipped on the lights. “It’s so cold in here. Do you think the ME would let me move in here for a week?”

Jude snorted. “You realize the morgue fridge is just down the hall, right? I wouldn’t be caught dead in this building after dark.”

“I’m with Jude,” Cope said.

“Why the hell would I want to spend the night in the morgue when I’ve got a gorgeous man in my bed?” Fitzgibbon shook his head before turning his attention to the file. “Okay, Pandora, show us what’s in your box.”

Jude took the lid off and saw two file folders. One held the autopsy notes, and the other 8x10 color photographs. “Shit, that’s it. There are no biological samples and no other evidence here.”

“It was asking a lot for physical evidence to still be here forty years later.” Fitz shook his head. “If memory serves, the old building that housed city records and the

evidence freezer was flooded during the perfect storm back in October of 1991. A lot of evidence was lost in that disaster. It wouldn't surprise me at all if Domenica's biological samples were among the casualties." He reached for the file containing the autopsy and coroner's notes.

Ronan grabbed the photographs and started flipping through them. Cope stood behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Bingo!" He laid out three photographs of Domenica's back. "These aren't in the autopsy file we have. Unfortunately, I don't think they're going to help us."

Domenica's entire back was black and blue. There were large chunks of flesh missing, which Jude assumed could have been from the fall or from animal predation during the three days she spent in the water.

"Shit," Fitzgibbon muttered. "She was found floating on her back, which meant all the blood settled there. It's not possible to see if she had handprint bruises from a shove. Are there pictures of her chest?"

"There are two, but she's not bruised or chewed. I swear it's the only part of Domenica that wasn't marked in some way." Ronan shook his head. "This poor woman."

"There's more," Fitzgibbon said. "And it's worse. Much worse."

"What could be worse than being shoved off a cliff by your husband in the middle of a hurricane?" Jude found himself wishing he could take the question back. He suddenly didn't want to know what other horrors Domenica suffered at the hands of her husband.

Fitz shook his head sadly. "I've got the medical report from her time at the psychiatric hospital. Domenica was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder bipolar

type, which, in layman's terms, is schizophrenia combined with the highs and lows of manic depression. The big red flag here is the bipolar rage. Apparently, Domenica wasn't just a danger to herself but to others as well."

"Jesus," Cope muttered.

"I've been looking into the drugs Domenica was being given." Fitzgibbon held up his phone. "She was on Haloperidol and Risperidone, both of which are antipsychotics, and was on a high dose of Valium to keep her calm and pliable."

"That's awful. Poor Domenica." Jude's heart broke for the young woman. "Is that all, Fitz, or are there more horrors waiting for us?"

"There's more." Fitzgibbon took a deep breath. "Due to her violent outbursts, she was physically restrained in her hospital bed. The doc treating her recommended Vic Rothschild employ the use of restraints when she was released from the hospital. He also prescribed the same pharmacological meds to keep Domenica drugged to the gills."

"Do you think that's why you're having a hard time reaching Domenica, Cope? Could all those heavy-duty meds be affecting her ability to communicate?" Jude asked.

Cope nodded. "It's definitely possible."

"Why did Rothschild bring her home?" Ronan's voice rose as he spoke. "Why wouldn't he have just had her permanently committed?"

"He brought her home to kill her," Jude muttered. "What other explanation was there?"

Fitzgibbon shuffled the pages of the medical report back into the folder and placed it

in the box. “Let’s go ask Rothschild. Maybe this is the piece of evidence we need to get him to give up the real story of what happened that stormy night.”

If Jude had his way, Vic Rothschild wasn’t going to know what hit him. Between what the vile man had done to his own wife and to Cope, Jude was coming for him.

Rothschild wasn’t even remotely prepared to handle this storm.

Cope

Reading Domenica's full autopsy report had made Cope sick to his stomach. In order to speak with Rothschild, Cope needed to be familiar with everything that had been done to his wife leading up to her untimely death if he was going to face off with Vic Rothschild.

Fitzgibbon had contacted the jail and asked to have him transferred back to the Salem Police Station for questioning before his arraignment for his attack on Cope. The ride back to town had been mostly silent with the detectives processing the details of Domenica's death on their own.

"Remind me again why Domenica's psychiatric hospital records were never entered as part of her official autopsy." Cope hadn't really understood what happened with those reports.

"The medical examiner had requested Domenica's records for a number of reasons. The first being to measure the amount of drugs in her system against the dosages prescribed and also as a means of determining if her mental illness was a contributing factor in her death. Since the manner of death was ruled inconclusive, I'm guessing the ME didn't include her hospitalization records because they were a moot point." Fitzgibbon didn't sound at all happy with his conclusion. "I've got a lot of questions for Mr. Rothschild."

"Yeah, same," Jude agreed.

Fitzgibbon parked the SUV in the lot and turned to face Jude in the back seat. "I

know I don't need to say this to any of you, but we need to keep our composure in there. This could be the last chance we have to get Rothschild for the murder of Domenica. I don't want your emotions over what he did to her or to Cope to muddy those waters. Got it?"

"Got it," Jude muttered.

"You also need to decide if you want to press charges against him, Cope. Don't let what he tells us in this interview affect your views on what happened yesterday."

Cope nodded. "He'll be restrained, right?"

"That's what I requested, but I have a feeling his high-priced attorney will have a thing or two to say about that." Fitz climbed out of the driver's seat.

"Are you going to be okay in there?" Jude asked. "There's no shame in watching the interview from behind the one-way glass."

Cope had considered doing that very thing but in the end had decided he would be much more useful in the room with Rothschild. "I'll be okay. I need to be in that room for Domenica. The three of you will be doing everything you can to get him to admit to pushing her off that cliff. I'll be there to make sure Domenica's spirit doesn't get lost in the shuffle. My goal to get her to cross over hasn't changed. After all these years, Domenica deserves to rest in peace."

With a nod, Jude opened the door to the station and ushered Cope inside. They caught up to Ronan and Fitz, who were watching the interaction between Rothschild and his lawyer. Cope noticed Rothschild was dressed in a navy suit and was not handcuffed. He was about to bring that fact to Fitzgibbon's attention but knew the three detectives would be able to protect him if Rothschild tried to attack him again.

“We’re ready to do this,” Jude said.

“Why does that lawyer look familiar?” Cope asked. He had absolutely no experience with criminal defense attorneys and was sure he’d never met her before.

“That’s Saffron Butler from the Butler Did It commercials.” Ronan rolled his eyes. “Attorneys who advertise their services and their record on television are the lowest of the low.”

Cope recognized her now. Her commercials were broadcast during the evening news, usually after a story about a violent murder. “It’s a catchy slogan.”

Fitzgibbon rolled his green eyes and knocked on the door before entering the room. “I’m Captain Kevin Fitzgibbon from the Cold Case Unit. These are my detectives, Ronan O’Mara, Jude Byrne, and Copeland Forbes.”

Cope noticed Butler’s left eyebrow arch high, which wasn’t good for him.

Butler crossed her arms over her impeccably tailored dark grey jacket. “If Mr. Forbes is a detective, I’ll eat my briefcase.”

“Mr. Forbes is consulting on this case.” Fitzgibbon took the seat directly across from Rothschild.

“I see nepotism is alive and well. Do you always allow your detectives’ spouses to be involved in your casework, Captain?”

“It doesn’t matter that Cope has psychic gifts or that he’s Jude’s husband. We’re here to speak with your client about the death of his wife. Let’s stay on subject here, as Mr. Rothschild has a date with the arraignment judge in an hour. I wouldn’t want him to be late for court.”

“For the last time, I didn’t kill my wife!” Rothschild shouted, his words echoing around the room.

Fitzgibbon took a deep breath. “Some new evidence has come to light, Mr. Rothschild. I’d like to discuss it with you, but first, I need you to calm down. Domenica’s psychiatric hospital records were in her autopsy file, and I have questions about what’s in them. Secondly, I’d like you to tell me in your own words what happened that last night.”

Rothschild leaned in close to his attorney. They whispered for a few moments before he nodded.

“You’re on a short leash, Captain,” Butler said.

“Mr. Rothschild, whenever you’re ready.” Fitzgibbon’s complete attention was on Domenica’s widower.

Rothschild ducked his head and took a deep breath. When he looked up at Fitzgibbon, all his anger was gone. “I never wanted to have Domenica involuntarily committed. It wasn’t my choice. My wife was a free spirit. She was artistic and creative. There were so many nights I’d find her up in the widow’s walk, painting by the light of the full moon. We knew there was something that fueled her erratic mood swings and the depression that would keep her in bed for days at a time, but we were content not knowing what that thing was.”

“If it wasn’t your choice to send her to Danvers State Hospital, whose was it?” Ronan asked.

“My mother, Rebecca. In the early ’80s, she spent the cold winter months in the south of France. Our family has a house in Nice. Mother traveled around the US during the summer, visiting friends in New York City, on the Cape, and in Maine. We also have

a house in Kennebunkport near the Bush Compound. It was rare for her to be at the cliff house. She'd taken an instant dislike to Domenica because of her Italian peasant roots, but I think the dislike went deeper than that. She knew my wife wouldn't let her control me."

"Tale as old as time," Jude said. "Wife versus mother-in-law."

Rothschild nodded. "I'd made the mistake of mentioning one of Domenica's manic moments to her, and she cut her plans short in Maine to come to Rothschild Manor. I think she saw the opportunity to drive a wedge between my wife and me. That's exactly what she did. Mother talked me into committing my wife. When she was released from the hospital, my mother undermined Domenica at every turn. Two weeks after she came home, I noticed my wife was more tired than usual. She spent time in bed when she was depressed, but Dom had been in good spirits, despite my mother dogging her every move. I think my mother was drugging her."

"Wasn't Domenica on a heavily medicated regimen to begin with?" Jude asked.

"She was. Haloperidol and Valium. I kept the meds in a lockbox, and I had the only key. I checked Domenica's body for additional needle marks, and there were none that I could find." Rothschild sat up straighter in his seat. "My mother was on a never-ending rant that my wife was no good for me. That there were American heiresses that I could marry that would bring money into our family and a better breeding pedigree than Domenica's. I wasn't having any of it. I was in love with my wife. I wouldn't have divorced her for anything."

Jude flipped through his copy of the autopsy report. "Was Domenica on any other drugs besides the two you named?"

"Yes. She was on birth control pills and had been taking Tylenol for headaches. There were no other prescriptions."

Jude underlined something on the report and showed it to Fitzgibbon, who nodded. “What happened the night Domenica died?”

“We had dinner. Steak and potatoes, with a green salad. With the hurricane ramping up, Domenica went to bed early. She had a headache she blamed on the drop in air pressure because of the storm. My mother also went to bed early, around eight or so, I think. Soon after, the power went out. The house wasn’t equipped with generators, so I went to bed and read by candlelight. I checked in on Domenica, and she was sleeping soundly. We had separate bedrooms since my wife was often restless in the night.” Rothschild took a deep breath. “I woke up around midnight, but I don’t know why. It could have been a crack of thunder or something else. I got up to check on Domenica, and she was gone. I ran into the hallway and saw her on the landing. A flash of lightning illuminated her. She started to shout at me, telling me to stay away from her. She was unsteady on her feet, and I was afraid she’d fall down the stairs, so I went after her. I begged her to stop running from me. She ran outside into the storm. Rain was coming down in sheets. I couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of me. Thankfully, the lighting illuminated the backyard. Domenica was standing near the edge of the cliff. I ran to her and reached out to grab her and pull her back from the edge, but she wouldn’t take my hand.” Tears fell from Rothschild’s eyes. He took a moment to get himself back under control.

Cope was spellbound by the story Rothschild was weaving. He’d spoken about the night Domenica died in the podcast interview, but not in this much detail. As the man told his story, Cope read him and found he was telling the truth. The proof of that would lie in what happened next. He leaned closer to Jude to whisper. “He’s telling the truth. The emotion he’s feeling is real too.”

Jude nodded and leaned closer to Fitzgibbon, passing the message along to him.

“What happened next, Mr. Rothschild?” Fitz asked.

“I was trying to get Domenica to take my hand. I was begging and pleading with her. She kept shouting that I was poisoning her. That I was trying to kill her. I wasn’t. I would never. But she didn’t believe me. I promised that if she just came away from the cliff’s edge, I’d give her anything. I’d give her a divorce and all the money she wanted to go back to Italy. I’d give her the house if she stayed in the US. I was desperate and willing to do anything I could to save her life.” Rothschild wiped his tears. His attorney leaned close to him and whispered something. He vehemently shook his head. “No, Saffron. It’s time I tell the story. The real story.”

Butler threw her hands in the air as if to say, “It’s your funeral.”

“When I told Domenica I’d give her the house, I heard a scream from behind me. It was filled with rage and made my blood run cold. My mother knocked me to the ground and shoved Domenica off the cliff. I swear I heard her scream the whole way down. I knew there was nothing I could do to save my wife, but I could save my mother. When I called 911, I told the dispatcher that Domenica jumped. I made my mother hide in the passageway between the living room and the solarium until the police left the house. I know what I did was wrong, and I deserve to pay for lying to the cops for the last forty years, but I couldn’t lose my mother too.” Rothschild began to weep. He buried his head in his hands and sobbed. His attorney, who looked relieved, patted his back.

When Rothschild regained his composure, Fitzgibbon tapped the autopsy report. “There was Rohypnol in Domenica’s bloodstream when she died.”

“That can’t be right. She was never prescribed that drug. How did it get into her—” Rothschild gasped. “My mother was giving it to her.”

“Rohypnol was never legalized for use in the US, but it is approved in France, where you said your mother spent her winters,” Ronan said softly. “I’m guessing the medical examiner thought the medication was part of her drug regime. Drugs that

aren't FDA approved are used all the time."

"Cope, is he telling the truth?" Jude asked.

Cope nodded. "Yeah, he is. Rothschild had some kind of block up before that I couldn't get past with my gift. He had that bit of information about his mother locked down tighter than Fort Knox."

"I had to protect my mother. It was the last thing my father said to me before he died." Rothschild met Cope's gaze head-on. "I'm sorry for the way I acted the other day. I was afraid that you'd discover my secret, and I couldn't allow that to happen. I hope you can forgive me. I'm willing to accept whatever the judge rules in terms of punishment."

"I don't want to see you punished, Mr. Rothschild. I just wish you could have opened up to me instead."

"I knew if the cops pursued Domenica's death, they'd finally figure out what happened. There have been so many advances in DNA and other types of evidence. I was certain new evidence would reveal the mystery behind my wife's death."

"Why did you decide to tell the truth now?" Jude asked.

"My mother has been dead for ten years. Her sisters are dead too. I'm the only surviving Rothschild left. Cope said something to me about wanting Domenica to rest in peace. I agree. Tell me what I can do to make sure that happens."

Cope opened his mouth to answer when movement caught his attention. Standing behind Vic Rothschild was Domenica. "Your wife is here now. I can see Domenica. She's wearing a red cocktail dress." He also saw the white light appear behind her. A shaft of it hit Rothschild's left shoulder.

Vic smiled. “She wore that dress at the wedding reception my mother threw for us when we came home to Salem. It caused quite a stir. I think—” Vic gasped. “My shoulder is hot. Is Domenica touching me?”

Cope shook his head. “That’s the white light. Domenica, is there anything you’d like to say to Vic?”

“Thank you for setting me free.” Domenica’s words caused Ronan and Fitz to jump.

“I heard that. How is this possible?” Vic’s eyes widened. “I’ve never stopped loving you. Will I see you again?”

“Yes, mi amore.” With those words, Domenica turned and walked into the light.

“She’s gone.” Cope felt like crying himself. Jude had been right earlier when he said that new wife versus mother-in-law was a tale as old as time, only this time, it resulted in a forty-year murder mystery.

“Now that Mr. Forbes has finished his magic trick, we’re done here. I’ll see you at the arraignment.” The attorney stood and gathered her things.

“Miss Butler?” Cope called before the hard-nosed attorney walked out the door. “Did you hear Domenica’s voice?”

“No, Mr. Forbes, I heard your voice coming through the PA or something. You should be ashamed of yourself for tricking people the way you do.” With those words, Saffron Butler left the room.

A uniformed police officer came into the room and helped Vic Rothschild to his feet. With a nod, he walked toward the door. “Thank you, Cope. I’ll never forget what you did for me today.”

“It’s time for your soul to be at peace too, Vic. You’ve suffered under the burden of your secret for the last forty years. Set yourself free.”

With a nod, Rothschild followed the officer out of the room.

“How do you feel now that you have your first case under your belt?” Ronan asked with a grin.

“I’m one hundred percent sure I don’t want to do that again!” Cope shook his head while the others laughed.

Cope might not have the desire to solve crimes, but what he did want was to get back home to his babies, who needed him. From now on, Tennyson could be the cold case psychic.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Jude

After Vic Rothschild's confession, Jude had stood by Cope's side when he asked Cisco Jackson to drop the assault charges against him. Cisco had reluctantly agreed. He'd also informed Saffron Butler that SPD wouldn't bring charges against her client for lying to the police about the night Domenica was murdered.

Jude also stood by Ronan's side as he gave another press conference on the steps of City Hall. He'd explained what happened to Domenica and assured the public it had nothing to fear from Vic Rothschild.

After the case was wrapped up, they'd all gone back to Ronan's house to celebrate. Ronan had ordered pizza for everyone, and Jude had way too many pieces of pepperoni, but it wasn't every day Cope helped to solve a forty-year-old cold case.

Cope had been thrilled to tuck his kids into bed before falling exhausted into his own. Jude knew his husband was still suffering from a concussion and needed all the rest he could get. He'd watched a little television alone and cleaned up the kitchen before heading to bed around ten. Like Cope, he'd fallen asleep quickly.

A ringing cell phone snapped Jude out of his dreamless sleep. Reaching for his phone, he saw Cisco Jackson's name on the caller ID. "Cisco?"

"Jude, I hate to call this late, but we have a situation at the Webster house."

"Webster house?" What the hell was Cisco talking about? Jude rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked at the clock. It was half past two in the morning. It took him a

few seconds to remember they'd been investigating the murder of Jessi Webster before the Domenica Fibonacci case came to the forefront.

"Police were called to the Webster house half an hour ago. There's a domestic disturbance going on, but neither Aimee nor Tony will speak to anyone but you, Fitz, and Ronan. I've already called the others. They'll be ready to roll soon. There are several units on scene to back you up."

"Okay, I'm on it." Jude hung up the phone.

"What's that all about?" Cope asked sleepily.

"There's something going on at Tony Webster's house, and he's demanding to speak with us. Go back to sleep. I'll be home soon." Jude pressed a kiss to Cope's forehead before getting out of bed. He dressed as quickly and quietly as possible and left the house. Ronan and Fitzgibbon were waiting for him in the SUV.

"Hey, guys." Jude climbed into the back seat and fastened his belt. "Do we know anything more about what's going on?"

"Just that there's something up at the house. Tony Webster called 911 but wouldn't say why. Just that he wanted the cops to respond to his house and that he wanted to speak with the three of us. He and Aimee won't allow anyone else to enter the house."

"I don't like the sound of that," Jude muttered. "Sounds like a trap to me."

"I thought the same thing," Fitzgibbon agreed.

"What did Ten have to say about you leaving in the middle of the night?" Jude asked.

“He wants me to bring back donuts.” Ronan snickered. “He would have warned me if something was about to go down, but all he said was that he wanted a dozen chocolate glazed for breakfast. Who am I to argue?”

“Cope didn’t make a breakfast request but didn’t say anything about us being in danger either. Christ, it’s been a long time since we were up late and working at this hour.” Jude didn’t miss the nighttime stakeouts one bit and knew the others didn’t either.

A roadblock was set up down the road from the Webster house. From where Jude was sitting in the back seat, he could see the house was lit up like Christmas, while several Salem Police cruisers sat with their blue lights spinning out front.

A young officer shined his flashlight into the SUV. “Can’t come this way. Road’s closed down.”

“I’m Captain Kevin Fitzgibbon. These are Detectives O’Mara and Byrne. Chief Jackson asked us to come out and lend a hand.”

“Oh, yes, Captain Fitzgibbon, they’re waiting for you at the house.” The officer stepped back and waved them through.

“I want everyone in their vests before we go anywhere near the front door.” Fitzgibbon parked the SUV out of sight of the house. He popped the hatch and grabbed his vest. Jude and Ronan did the same.

“What’s our play here?” Ronan asked when he’d strapped on his Kevlar.

“Let’s find out why Tony Webster only wants to speak with us.” Fitzgibbon headed toward three officers who were standing near one of the cruisers with their eyes on the house.

“Captain Fitzgibbon, we’re glad you’re here,” the tallest officer said. “They won’t let any of us in.”

“Have you seen Tony and Aimee Webster?” Ronan asked.

“No. We’ve heard them both though. Neither will come to the door.”

“Cover us,” Fitzgibbon said, motioning Jude and Ronan to follow him.

The house looked so much different in the dark. More sinister. The trees cast ominous shadows on the manicured lawn. Jude wished he was back in bed with Cope rather than standing in the Websters’ front yard about to face whatever was going to happen next. Fitzgibbon rang the bell and stepped away from the stairs and front door.

Ronan’s attention was focused on the front windows, while Jude kept his eye on both of his partners.

“Captain Fitzgibbon?” Tony Webster shouted from the other side of the front door.

“Yeah, Tony, it’s me, Ronan, and Jude, like you asked. Let us help you.” Fitzgibbon had his gun out of the holster and in his hand. Ronan did the same.

“Come in, just the three of you!” Webster shouted.

“Christ, I’m too old for this shit.” Fitzgibbon turned the doorknob and used the barrel of his gun to push the door open. No one was there to greet him. “Tony? Aimee?” he called out.

“Kitchen!” Tony shouted back.

“Ronan, go in through the dining room. Jude, go in through the living room. I’ll take

the hallway.”

With a nod, Ronan stepped into the dining room. Jude did the same with the living room. Nothing looked disturbed or out of place. The television was on, and an old rerun of Friends was showing, with the sound muted. Jude edged around the leather sectional and moved toward the doorway leading into the kitchen. He knelt down and peeked around the corner. He could see Fitzgibbon and Ronan in position. He also saw Aimee Webster holding her husband at gunpoint. He was seated at the kitchen table, while his wife stood behind him with the gun aimed at his head.

“Aimee, I want to talk to you about what’s going on here, but I need you to put down the gun,” Fitzgibbon said gently.

“I’m not putting down the gun. If I do, then Tony will talk.” Aimee’s attention was on Fitzgibbon. “I see you, Jude! Get in the kitchen.” She swung her head in the other direction. “You too, Ronan! Mr. Television News Star!”

“Tony, are you hurt?” Fitzgibbon asked, his voice still calm.

“My head hurts from where she pistol-whipped me, but other than that, I’m fine. You have to get her away from me. She’s going to kill me like she killed Jessi.”

“Shut up! You shut the fuck up!” Aimee swung the gun at Tony’s head. It connected with a sickening thwack and sent him sprawling onto the kitchen floor.

“Aimee, let me help your husband,” Ronan said.

“Stay where you are! I saw your press conference earlier. You think you’re king shit because you solved that cold case, huh? Asshole blamed it on his mother. His dead fucking mother. It’s not like anyone can check with her to see if she actually killed the wife! It’s always women who get the raw deal in the end.”

“What raw deal did you get?” Jude asked. He was the furthest from Aimee. If he could keep her attention, Ronan and Fitz could move closer.

“What raw deal haven’t I got? Raped by my stepfather at thirteen. He beat my mother and threatened to kill her if I didn’t comply with his dirty needs. Then, when I went away to college, this fucker singles me out. Starts coming into my coffee shop and complimenting me. Asking if he could take me out. I saw the fucking ring on his finger. He kept promising me he’d divorce her, and I believed him. Time and time again, I believed him, and he played me for a fool.” Aimee kicked Tony’s prone body. Her husband didn’t move.

“Why didn’t you break up with him?” Jude asked. “You’re a beautiful young woman. I’m sure you would have found a new man sooner rather than later.”

“I loved him! Don’t you get it? Tony was it for me. He kept saying he was going to ask Jessi for a divorce, but he couldn’t because it was her birthday, or Christmas, or Fucking Groundhog Day! I had to take matters into my own hands. Women are always cleaning up after men! Useless fucker!” Jessi kicked Tony again.

“Aimee, please put the gun down, and we can talk about all the ways men have done us both wrong. I’ve got stories to tell you that would curl your hair.” Jude watched as Ronan edged closer and closer to the raving woman.

“What the hell would you know about that?” Aimee asked, sounding as if she were listening.

“If I had a nickel for every boyfriend I caught fucking another dude, I’d be a billionaire. Fuckers couldn’t keep it in their pants. I mean, look at me. I’m pretty damn handsome. Why the hell would you cheat on this?”

“Exactly!” Aimee said. “Tony’s been coming home late from work. I could smell

perfume on him and saw lipstick on his collar. He said it was tomato sauce, but do I look fucking stupid to you?”

“Hell, no,” Jude answered. “I don’t know what I’d do if I found lipstick on my husband’s collar.”

“He needs to die, Jude! There’s no other way. I can’t let someone else have him. I can’t let him take my baby away from me. All he had to do was keep his fucking mouth shut and his dick in his pants, and we would have lived happily ever after.”

“Keep his mouth shut about what?” Jude asked. Ronan was only a foot or so away from Aimee.

“You’re a smart man, Jude. You know about what!”

“You were the one who killed Jessi Webster,” Jude said gently.

“Stupid bitch! She kept telling me how much Tony loved her. How the fuck could he love her when he was fucking me? She didn’t believe me. Didn’t believe that Tony was capable of cheating on her. So, I showed her the videos. Tony loved to make videos of him fucking me. Do you think the bitch changed her tune after that?”

“She knew you’d won, right?” Jude asked.

“Wrong! Jessi said they’d go to counseling. That she wasn’t going to give Tony up for any reason. So I wrapped my hands around her throat and started to squeeze. Bitch clawed at my hands and kicked back at me, but I was younger and stronger. I left her on the kitchen floor. Right over there.” Aimee pointed with the gun. “Tony fell into my arms after that. He was finally mine!”

Ronan grabbed Aimee’s hand from behind, twisting it back until she let the gun drop.

Aimee screamed like a wild animal. She fought Ronan, but he eventually got her down on the floor and cuffed her from behind. “Fucking men! You always fuck us over!”

“Well, I’ve got good news for you, Aimee,” Ronan laughed. “You’ll only have to deal with women when you’re sent to prison.”

Fitzgibbon moved to Tony’s side while Aimee started ranting at Ronan.

Looking around the kitchen, Jude’s gaze landed on the high chair. “Aimee, where’s your baby?”

“Hope’s safe,” Aimee cried. “I would never hurt her.”

“I’ll go check.” Jude raced out of the kitchen and up the stairs. He poked his head into the master and saw no sign of the child. When he walked into the baby’s room, he found the little girl sound asleep in her crib. “Thank goodness you’re safe.” He stayed with the baby for several minutes, watching her sleep. When Fitz texted him the all clear, he left the baby sleeping and headed back downstairs.

Aimee had been led out of the house, and Tony was sitting at the table while EMTs tended to his head wounds. “Are you sure you don’t want us to transport you to Salem Mercy?” a young medic asked.

“I’m fine. Really, I am. Where’s my daughter?” Tony asked.

“She’s asleep in her crib.”

“Thank you,” Tony said. “Thank you all. I can’t believe Aimee killed Jessi. She let the police interrogate me again and again. They almost arrested me twice, and she would have kept her secret and sent me to jail.”

“How did you find out Aimee killed Jessi?” Ronan asked.

“I was looking for an old college yearbook in the attic last week and found Aimee’s diaries. I opened one and started reading. I couldn’t believe how hate-filled all of her entries were. Something told me to find the book that covered the time Jessi was killed, and sure enough, there was her confession written out in sparkly purple ink. You calling to interview us the other day caused a tidal wave of anger and paranoia in her. I was afraid of her behavior. I knew she had the gun, and I was starting to fear for my daughter’s safety. So when Aimee fell asleep tonight, I came down here and called 911. She must have followed me downstairs and was listening. She hit me with the gun and wouldn’t let the cops in the house. She yelled that she only wanted to speak with the three of you. Thank you all so much for handling the situation with no one else dying.”

“We’re glad to help,” Ronan said. “I’ve got just one question for you. Were you ever going to leave Jessi?”

Tony shook his head. “No way. I just wanted a little strange, know what I mean? Aimee was smoking hot and always horny. What man could have resisted her?”

“Me, for a start,” Jude said. “One last question. Were you cheating on Aimee?”

Tony shook his head. “I knew she’d have my balls for breakfast if I did.”

“Take care, Mr. Webster.” He headed toward the front door with Ronan and Fitzgibbon at his heels.

As much as he hated to admit it, Aimee was right. Women always got the raw end of the deal. But most of them didn’t kill to get what they thought they deserved. Now, the Websters’ daughter would grow up visiting her mother at state prison every weekend. Another woman given another raw deal.

As they headed for the SUV, Jude's mind turned to donuts. He could eat a dozen jellies by himself. He'd grab donut holes for the kids and a muffin for Cope so they could eat together as a family.

Jude had managed to help solve two cold cases within twelve hours. He hoped to goodness that record would never be broken.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:58 am*

Cope

One month later...

“I’m serious,” Carson said. “Serious as a heart attack.”

Cope sat in Bertha Craig’s reading room, listening to Carson’s grand plan for a podcast of their own. Tennyson was dubious over the idea, but Cole seemed to be completely on board. “What would people want to hear us talking about?”

“The sky is the limit!” Carson said, spreading his arms wide. “We could talk about our mediumistic talents, give readings, advice. Oh! Wouldn’t it be fun if we did an episode about bad experiences with psychics?”

“We’re smart guys with kids to put through college. Starting a podcast is better than the alternative,” Cole said.

“What alternative?” Cope asked, having a feeling he already knew the answer.

“OnlyFans!” The brothers answered together.

“I’m not shaking my ass on OnlyFans!” Ten’s decision sounded firm.

“So that means you’re on board with the podcast!” Carson clapped his hands together. “That leaves you, Cope.”

He knew when he was outvoted. “Okay, I’m in. What are we gonna call this thing? I

mean, Ghost After Dark was a pretty catchy title.” The popularity of the podcast had gotten a huge boost when the case was solved. Kit Savage had called and apologized for ambushing Cope with Vic Rothschild and offered an entire episode dedicated to how the detectives had solved the case. Ronan had jumped at the chance to do the podcast.

“How about Sexy Psychics?” Cole asked. “It’s sort of alliterative.”

Cope somehow managed to keep from rolling his eyes. “We don’t want to promote sex appeal. If we did, OnlyFans would be our platform.”

“Okay, so you come up with a name, then, Mr. Smarty Pants!” Cole shot back.

Cope thought over the idea. He nibbled his bottom lip while several suggestions presented themselves. “Wicked Good Psychics,” Cope said in his best New England accent.

Cole grimaced and shook his head.

“Desperately Seeking Psychics?” Cope asked.

Carson started to laugh. “No way! Is that the best you’ve got?”

Cope laughed along with him. There was one other suggestion he had, but if no one liked his earlier suggestions, there wasn’t a lot of hope they’d like this one either. “How about Cold Case Psychics?” Cope paused for a moment to see how the name would land. “Ten works actual cold cases all the time. We could talk about those and maybe some of the clients we helped find closure with long-dead family members, which, if you think about it, are also cold cases. What do you think?”

“Ronan calls me a cold case psychic all the time.” Ten grinned. “I don’t think I’d have to do a lot of convincing to get him to agree to the idea.”

Cope didn't think so either. He had a feeling that if Ronan were on board, Jude and Fitz would join them. "What do you think, Carson?"

Carson was quiet for a few seconds. "It's good. I think the name gives us room to spread our spiritual wings. We could have guest speakers in to talk about auras or how to read tarot cards. Interviews with other psychics."

"I agree," Cole said. "We wouldn't all have to be on the air every week, so that would make it easier to fit into our schedules. Are we all in?"

"I am," Carson said.

"Me too," Ten agreed.

"Me three," Cope said.

"It's unanimous. All for one and one for all!" Carson cheered.

Cope opened his gift, which told him the idea was going to be a success. Of course it was. The cold case psychics and their detectives were unstoppable.

THE END