



# Dead Mad (Cold Case Psychic #33)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** When an ugly argument erupts between Ronan, Jude, and Fitzgibbon, nearly bringing the men to blows, Tennyson suggests a lesson in teambuilding to get their strained relationship back on track. He books the warring detectives into a beautiful, but remote, campground in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. With no electricity or WIFI, what could possibly go wrong?

After stocking up on tents, sleeping bags, fishing gear, and enough snacks to feed a family of hungry raccoons for a month, the guys set off for the Bare Necessities campground. Trouble abounds from the start, when Jude cues up his carefully curated road trip playlist with a twangy classic from a country music legend. It's all downhill from there as the men face off against the elements, local wildlife, strange fellow campers, and each other.

Will Ronan, Jude, and Fitzgibbon find their groove and work together to survive the weekend or are they doomed to remain dead mad?

**Total Pages (Source):** 8

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Ronan

Eye of the Tiger

Ronan O'Mara was having the week from hell. He'd slammed his hand in the car door, and forgot his travel mug filled with coffee on the roof of the car, which resulted in a scratch on the Mustang's trunk. Thankfully he'd gotten to work safely, but just as he parked the car, the skies had opened up and drenched him. Even now, hours later, his shoes were squishy and his pants were still wet, which made him cranky.

It was for certain the week from hell. The problem was, it was only Tuesday.

"Ronan, what the actual fuck?" Fitzgibbon shouted, exploding out of his office so hard, that the door bounced off the wall and slammed shut behind him.

As quickly as he could, Ronan mentally reviewed everything he'd done since he walked into the office that morning, but couldn't come up with anything that would have sparked this kind of reaction from Fitz. "Could you be a little more vague?"

"Not funny, asshole!" Fitzgibbon barked. "Why the hell did you skip the McClellan interview?"

Relief flowed through Ronan's body. He was off the hook, at least for now. Fitz must have gotten the date wrong, as Ronan wasn't scheduled to speak with McClellan until next week.

David McClellan had long been a suspect in his wife's brutal 205 murder. The woman had been stabbed seven times in the chest and was left to die alone in her bed. All eyes had been on David as the killer. The couple were going through a long and contentious divorce, with David demanding that his wife not get a penny, even though he'd been the one caught cheating.

There was a ton of circumstantial evidence pointing to David as the killer, but no physical evidence to back it up. Over the last ten years, the widower hadn't hidden from public scrutiny. He'd been seen around town on dates with several different women. There were pictures of him posted at least once a week on Salem Talks, a community-centered Facebook page.

"It's not until next Monday, the twenty-eighth." Ronan grabbed his phone to back up his assertion.

"Wrong, asshole, it was today ." Fitzgibbon's hands were bunched into fists at his sides. "This was the one chance we had to nail this fucker and now it's gone. I just got off the phone with his attorney, who said they will not reschedule."

"Wait, no, that's not right." Ronan's brow furrowed as he tapped through his phone. He opened the calendar app and saw there was no meeting scheduled for the twenty-eighth, in fact there was nothing listed for the entire month of April. "Shit, it's not here."

Jude offered Ronan his phone. The interview was listed in black and white. "See, it was today."

Feeling angry and frustrated, Ronan lashed out. "Why didn't either of you remind me? We're supposed to be a team, right?"

"Do you want us to wipe your ass too?" Fitzgibbon shot back.

“It’s up to you to keep track of your appointments,” Jude added with a snarky smile.

“What the actual fuck, Jude? You’re supposed to be my friend and partner and you’re coming for me like I was the one who killed Marie McClellan?” Ronan felt as though this conversation had spun completely out of control. “We’re on the same side here guys. I feel like you both wanted me to fail so you could come down on me.”

“We’re in the business of catching killers and solving cold cases, Ronan.” Fitzgibbon growled. “There’s no room for failure. Or for feeling butt hurt. Thanks to your incompetence, we’ve lost out on the opportunity to solve this case. You’re going to be the one to call Marie McClellan’s family and explain to them that David is even further out of reach now.”

“Hold on just a damn minute.” Ronan felt like his head was about to explode. “Missing the interview with David McClellan isn’t the end of the world. All the asshole was going to do was lie to us anyway.”

“Yeah, but he might have said something we could have used against him,” Jude added. “How many times have we solved cases based on an inadvertent slip of the tongue.”

“You would know, seeing as though you slipped your tongue to half of Salem.” Ronan was done with this conversation and Jude’s bullshit.

“Low blow, asshole,” Jude said, from behind clenched teeth. “Who the fuck do you think you are throwing my past at me? We’re talking about your fuck ups, not mine.”

“Yeah, well, you’re fuck ups are legion.”

“Fuck you, Ronan!” Jude shoved a finger in Ronan’s face and kicked his chair out from under him, knocking the detective onto the floor.

Landing on his tailbone, Ronan fisted his hands and stared up at his best friend, wanting nothing more than to break his stupid nose. Shaking his head, Ronan stayed where he was on the floor. It was the safest place for him. Right now, all he was guilty of was hitting Jude with low blows. Actually hitting him with his fists might end their friendship and partnership forever.

“Calm the hell down, Jude. It’s not as if he’s lying.” Fitz set his hands on his hips.

“Oh, so now you’re coming for me?” Jude shouted. He pushed out of his seat and charged toward Fitzgibbon, who didn’t move an inch. He cocked back his arm, looking ready to throw a punch, when Tennyson ran into the conference room.

“What the hell is going on up here? We can hear you yelling from downstairs.” Ten shouted above the fray. “Cope and Cole are in the middle of readings and some of the customers in the shop are wondering if they should call the cops.”

“We are the cops.” Ronan deadpanned.

“Well start acting like it.” Ten set his hands on his hips as he surveyed the room. “Do one of you asshats want to explain to me what the hell you’re fighting about?” When no one answered, Ten turned to Ronan. “Why are you sitting on the floor? And why do Jude and Fitz look like they’re going to swing on each other?”

It was on the tip of Ronan’s tongue to tell his husband to mind his own business, but with the way things were going with Jude and Fitz, he needed all the friends he could get. “I fucked up and missed an interview with a possible killer and instead of reminding me about the appointment, Fitz came for me and Jude was the third man in.”

Ten turned to Jude and Fitz, who’d thankfully taken a few steps back from each other. “Why didn’t you remind Ronan about the interview?”

“Because it wasn’t on my calendar either. I only found out when McClellan’s attorney called to tell me we’d missed our one shot at speaking to his client.” Fitz had the good sense to look a little guilty.

“I should have seen this coming,” Ten began.

“No shit, Nostradamus ,” Ronan deadpanned, lifting himself off the floor.

“One more word out of you and you’re sleeping in the Mustang for the next week. What I was trying to say before your dumb ass interrupted me was that all of you have been on edge lately. You’ve been a pain in the ass for the last few days. According to Jace and Cope, so have the two of you.” Ten pointed back and forth between Fitz and Jude.

“These two are driving me up a fucking wall,” Fitz muttered.

“Ditto for the two of you!” Jude charged back.

“Double ditto,” Ronan said, sheepishly.

“There’s only one thing left to do,” Ten said with a sad shake of his head.

“Jesus, Ten,” Ronan moaned, “we’re not about to hug this out and sing Kumbaya.”

Ten rolled his eyes heavenward, as if he were hoping for divine intervention. “What the three of you need is to do some kind of team building exercise. You know, trust falls and other things that will help your communication skills and get to the root of the sticks up your asses.”

“I saw a movie last week where coworkers went on a camping retreat and all of them were horribly butchered by the machete-wielding office manager.” Ronan had loved

that movie so much that he'd watched it several more times over the last few days.

"Sounds good to me," Ten enthused. "You can leave on Friday and come home on Sunday. I'll go shopping for tents, snacks and machetes." Without another word, Ten headed back downstairs.

"What the hell just happened?" Jude asked.

"Looks like we're going camping," Fitz muttered. "Have any of you been before?"

"No," Ronan said, "unless sleeping in the backyard counts." Everly loved doing backyard campouts and sleeping outside.

"What about you," Fitz said, his eyes on Jude. "You must know all kinds of survival stuff from your time living on Navajo Nation."

"I was an angry outcast kid who stayed inside my grandfather's trailer and played video games." Jude's hard look softened. "I think I can probably light a fire with matches if you guys gather the wood." Jude sighed. "How hard can it be to survive together for two nights in the woods?"

With as angry as they'd all been with each other just now, Ronan was afraid of the answer.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Jude

### On the Road Again

Friday dawned bright and sunny. Unfortunately, Jude felt like a grumpy raincloud. He, Ronan, and Fitz might have agreed to give team building and camping a try, but the impending weekend trip was the last thing they'd agreed on since Tuesday.

As the week progressed, Cope had gone shopping with Ten and Jace for all the gear, tools, and food the detectives would need for their virgin camping adventure. Jude could only hope their first trip wouldn't end in disaster. He wasn't sure how many more rough days their partnership could survive.

"Okay," Cope said cheerily, from the front door. "You're all packed and ready to go. Fitz is parked out front and he and Ronan are loading the SUV."

Jude sighed. "Be right there." He'd been procrastinating over his bowl of now soggy Cheerios, which he dumped down the sink. As he washed his bowl, Jude's thoughts turned to how he was going to help strengthen the bonds between himself, Ronan, and Fitz. The idea of their relationship devolving further was out of the question.

"Hey, there he is," Cope greeted, when Jude walked into the kitchen. "You're looking pretty hot this morning." Cope wrapped his arms around his husband and gave him a hug.

"I'm scared." Usually Jude would soak in Cope's compliment, but his own ego was the last thing on his mind this morning. "What if I make things worse? What if I'm



the reason our friend group ends? Wolfie loves playing with Everly and Aurora. What if he never gets the chance again? Same with Lizbet and Ezzie.” Jude was on the verge of tears.

“Don’t think about worse case scenarios. I’ve been reliving all the good times we’ve had together over the years. Remember the watermelon eating contest?” Cope snorted.

Jude found his first smile of the day. “Yeah, that was a lot of fun. Ronan has mad skills.”

“Exactly. Pick funny stories to tell where the kids or the husbands are the butt of the joke, not each other.”

“I can do that,” Jude agreed. “But there’s going to be a moment when we have to reckon with what’s happened this week.”

“All you can do is admit what you did wrong and ask for help to make sure it doesn’t happen again.” Cope made it all sound so simple.

“I’m not real good at either of those things.” Jude’s heart felt like it was clamped in an icy fist. He knew he was partly responsible for what was happening with his partners, but wasn’t entirely sure his friends would forgive him for being such a dickhead.

“Don’t I know it!” Cope barked a quick laugh. “Listen to each other. Learn from each other. I have all the faith in the world in you, Jude.”

“Thanks.” Jude hugged Cope tightly before grabbing his rolling suitcase and heading out the door. Wolf and Lizbet were laughing at something Ronan was saying. “Okay, kids, I’m off!”

Wolf ran to Jude. “Have the bestest time camping, but watch out for bears.”

“Bears?” Jude asked. “Are we going somewhere with bears?”

“Bears live in the woods, dumbass,” Ronan said, without any hint of his usual smile.

Tennyson whacked his arm and whispered something to his husband.

Ronan shot Ten a dirty look before he turned to Jude. “Black bears live in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, but they’re usually more afraid of us than we are of them.” Ronan shot Ten a self-satisfied look.

Jude wasn’t so sure about bears being scared of him. He was pretty fucking afraid of getting his dumb, tasty ass snacked on by a hungry animal.

“You’ll be fine, Uncle Jude.” Everly tapped the side of her head, as if to say her gift had told her Jude wasn’t going to be crunch and munched.

“Okay, that’s everything. Time to get this show on the road.” Fitzgibbon sounded less than enthusiastic. He moved to hug Jace and Aurora before he climbed into the black SUV and started the engine.

Jude had watched as Jace and Tennyson each whispered into their husbands’ ears. He had a feeling they’d gotten the kind of pep talk Cope had delivered earlier.

“Da! Da!” Lizbet toddled to Jude and wrapped her little arms around his legs.

Jude scooped his daughter into his arms. “Take good care of Dad and Wolfie while I’m gone, okay?”

“Woofie!” Lizbet agreed. She giggled when Jude dropped loud, smacking kisses on

her head.

Jude handed her back to Cope and turned to Wolf.

“Everything’s gonna be okay, Dad,” Wolf said in a serious tone. “If you see a bear, all you gotta do is trip Uncle Ronan and Fitz and he’ll eat them, not you.”

“That’s a great plan, buddy.” Jude gave his son a hug. Opening the back door, Jude hopped into the SUV, he took the seat behind Ronan, so that he wouldn’t have to look at Fitzgibbon in the rearview mirror.

With one last wave, Fitzgibbon pulled away from the curb. The vehicle was dead silent. Jude had a surefire way to get the trip off on the right foot. He grabbed his phone and navigated to the music app. Seconds later, Willie Nelson’s twangy voice filled the silence with “On the Road Again.”

“What the actual fuck is that?” Ronan asked, covering his ears.

“Sounds like an animal who needs to be put out of his misery.” Fitz wore a sour look.

“Fuck you both!” Jude laughed, turning the music up louder. “This song is a classic!”

“Yeah, the kind of classic that should be sent to the glue factory like an old horse.” Fitzgibbon roared with laughter.

“You people suck. Just for that, I’m putting this song on repeat!” Jude wasn’t above doing that very thing, especially with the way Fitz was laughing.

“I swear to God, Jude,” Fitzgibbon began, sounding annoyed, until the song changed and the opening guitar chords sounded to Steppenwolf’s “Born to Be Wild.”

Ronan started playing air guitar and singing along with his usual off-key warble. Seconds later, Fitzgibbon joined in, drumming on the steering wheel. With a smile of his own, Jude joined in. This was one of his all-time favorite songs. It seemed to be popular with his friends as well.

Agreeing on road trip music was a small victory, but it was a start. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to get their relationship on the road to recovery, Jude thought, as the next song started to play, "Highway to Hell," by AC/DC. He hoped to hell that song wouldn't be a harbinger of things to come.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Fitzgibbon

### Highway to Hell

The group sing-along lasted for over an hour, until Jude's playlist ran out of songs. Fitz found himself wishing Jude had more Willie Nelson cued up so they wouldn't have to speak to each other. He had a ton of things to talk about with his friends, but at the moment, he didn't want to let them in on any of his problems. Fitz knew keeping things inside was what led to this situation in the first place, but couldn't find the strength in himself to confront it. Not yet, anyway.

Jace had done his best to get Fitz to understand that he had as much blame in this situation as Ronan and Jude, but he hadn't been in much of a mood to listen. Truth be told, one of the problems Fitz was keeping to himself had to do with Jace. He'd gone over the conversation he wanted to have with his husband in his head a hundred times, but when push came to shove, and it was time to open up, Fitz couldn't get the words to come out of his mouth.

Thankfully, they were almost to the campground, which meant Ronan would be calling out directions, telling Fitz which way to turn. It also meant that no one could address the elephant in the car. Fitz knew it would all come spilling out at some point, but he hoped that the conversation wouldn't come until they'd reached their destination and, at the very least, got their tents set up.

"Take this left." Ronan pointed to the next set of lights. "According to the GPS, this is our last peek at civilization for a while."

“What the hell does that mean?” Jude asked, sounding alarmed.

“This campground is almost off the grid. That’s why Ten picked it.” Ronan didn’t sound any too pleased at the idea.

“So that we’d have to talk to each other instead of being on our phones all the time.” Fitz shook his head. Under ordinary circumstances two days away with his best friends wouldn’t require WIFI, but now, all he could do was make sure their rift didn’t widen any further courtesy of his big mouth. “What’s the name of this place?”

“Bear Necessities,” Ronan said on a snort. “You know, like the song from Jungle Book .”

“Wolf loves that movie. He and Lizbet get up and dance during that scene, then they make Cope play it again so they can keep dancing. Sometimes Cope and I dance along with them,” Jude said, sounding wistful.

Fitzgibbon found himself smiling at Jude’s story. Aurora loved to sing and dance along to all of the Disney movies. When she was little, she’d insist Fitz sing along, which he wasn’t fond of doing. She’d shoot him a grumpy look until Fitz did as she demanded, Aurora would hug him and sing at the top of her voice. It was safe to say his little June bug wasn’t going to be the next American Idol.

The road got more desolate the further they drove. Gone were houses, farms, and other signs of life. Large growth trees bent over the road, their leaves and branches nearly changing day into night. “Shit, Ronan, are we almost there?” Fitz felt a shiver go through his entire body.

“Uh, three hundred more feet.” Ronan looked up from his phone and back down again.

“Guys, this feels like the kind of place where Jason Voorhees would live and find inventive ways to kill wayward teenagers. Maybe we should turn the car around and book rooms at that cute little bed and breakfast we saw back in North Conway.”

“We’re two miles off the main road, Jude. We’ll be fine,” Fitzgibbon said. Secretly, he agreed with Jude. In his early fifties, Fitz wasn’t built for sleeping on the cold, soggy ground. He’d do it in a heartbeat for Aurora if she asked, but his daughter hated dirt, mud, bugs, and serial killers. There’s no way she’d ask to come to a place like this.

“See, here we are,” Ronan said, when the wooden sign came into view.

“Bare Necessities,” Fitzgibbon read. “So, not like the movie. More like living with no comforts of home. I’m also guessing there are no amenities, like hot water and soap.”

“Ten packed a bar of soap for me, maybe this is why?” Ronan asked.

“Maybe,” Jude agreed, not sounding pleased with their situation.

“Here’s the office,” Ronan indicated a building up ahead. “I’ll run over there and get us checked in.” He hopped out of the SUV, leaving Fitz alone with Jude.

It was on the tip of Fitz’s tongue to ask Jude if he’d see the Sox game the night before, but instead stayed silent. He wasn’t sure if the two of them could talk about something as simple as baseball without getting into a disagreement.

“Okay, we’re all set,” Ronan said, as he got back into the SUV. “Our campsite number is 1245. The guy who checked me in gave me a map. I think I can read it and get us there.”

“Who the hell can’t read a map?” Jude asked.

“Uh, maybe those of us who grew up in the city and couldn’t afford to go anywhere. Check your privilege,” Ronan shot back.

“My privilege?” Jude half-shouted. “I grew up on a Native American reservation and had a white mother. Oh, yeah, I’ve got privilege pouring out of me in buckets.”

“Enough, you two.” Fitzgibbon sighed, pulling up to a crossroads. “Ronan, where the hell do I need to go?”

“Go straight,” Ronan said. “You’re gonna turn left when you see a sign for campsites from 1000 to 1050. Should be your fourth right.”

“You just said left! Which is it?” Fitz asked, feeling more and more like he should have stayed home and waited for the disagreement between them to blow over in its own good time.

“Give me the map,” Jude leaned over Ronan’s seat and snatched it from him. “Okay, take the second right up here. Bare Creek Road, it’s called.

“There’s the sign I told you about,” Ronan said, sounding pissy.

Fitz took the turn, anxious to get to the campsite so they could set up their tents and get the lay of the land. He read the wooden markers as he drove, finally locating their site. “Okay, here we go.” Fitz parked the SUV and hopped out.

Opening the hatch, he started pulling out the camping gear. Jude and Ronan came to help. After several minutes the SUV was unloaded. All that was left to do now was to set up the tents and gather wood for a campfire. “Let’s get to work setting up camp.” When neither Ronan nor Jude responded, Fitz turned around ready to give each of



them a piece of his mind. What he saw made him want to get back in the SUV and drive home.

Walking toward their campsite were three men, laughing and joking with each other. At first, the men reminded Fitz of himself and his friends, one was tall like him, another was blond like Ronan and the third was dark haired, like Jude, but that's where the similarities ended. All three men were buck naked. "What the actual fuck is going on here?"

"I'm not sure," Ronan said, with his mouth hanging open.

"Morning, fellas! Hell of a day, huh?" The tallest man asked.

"Sure is," Ronan returned. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but..."

Oh Jesus , Fitz thought to himself. Ronan was going to open his big mouth and make enemies out of the three jovial men. The good news was that none of them were carrying weapons, unless of course they were concealed.

"Which way is the orgy?" Ronan asked, his usual snarky grin was in place.

"Orgy?" the brunette asked, laughing. "We're coming back from yoga."

"They have naked yoga here?" Jude asked.

" Everything is naked here," the blonde laughed.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, when we get home, my husband is gonna die. Slowly. Painfully. Naked as the day he was born," Ronan muttered. "This place is a nudist colony?"

"What gave it away?" the tall man asked. "Anyway, we'll catch you later. Ultimate

Frisbee starts at two.” All three men waved and were on their way.

“I don’t even want to know what makes nekkid frisbee ultimate ,” Jude said, with a shiver.

Ronan burst out laughing. Within seconds, Fitz and Jude joined in.

Fitz could have done with a different kind of ice breaker, one that involved fully dressed fellow campers, but at least the three of them were laughing together again.

“This explains why Cope packed a huge bottle of...”

“Lube?” Ronan interrupted, sounding like his usual snarky self.

Jude snorted. “No, sunblock.”

“You think they all knew what this place was when they booked the reservation?” Fitz asked.

“Fuck, yes!” Ronan said.

“Absolutely,” Jude agreed.

“All that’s left to do now is plot our revenge.” Fitz waggled his eyebrows and burst out laughing.

Jude and Ronan joined in.

Sharing a funny moment together wasn’t much, but it was a start in the right direction. The three of them were at their best when they worked together to confront a common enemy. Jace, Ten, and Cope weren’t going to know what hit them.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

### Ronan Land of Confusion

Working quickly, the men unloaded the camping gear. Fitzgibbon directed where the three tents would go and Jude began to painstakingly unpack them. Ronan had read the directions four times and still didn't understand how the hell to set up his tent. Maybe they should have practiced a time or two before they left the house. He bet Everly would have this thing assembled in no time flat.

Watching Jude closely, Ronan saw the way the tent poles went together. He tried to do it on his own and only succeeded in pinching his finger. "Ow! Motherfucker!" A blood blister was already forming.

"You know, lack of patience is your biggest problem," Jude said conversationally.

"Oh, and you're the Mother Teresa of fucking patience?" Ronan shot back. If Jude wanted to do this now, Ronan was more than ready to rumble.

"Never said I was." Jude shrugged and went back to assembling his own tent.

Anger surged through Ronan's body, as adrenaline coursed hard through his veins. He wanted to hit something, no, some one. "You can't just fling out an accusation like that and then just drop the conversation like a hot rock."

"I can do whatever the hell I want." Jude said, before sticking out his tongue.

"Real mature, asshole!" Ronan knew he sounded like a child and hated himself a bit for not acting his age. Jude was right. His lack of patience was an anchor around his

neck, not just at work, but at home.

“You’re the asshole,” Fitzgibbon interjected. “It was you who fucked up the McClellan interview. I bet the scheduling program on the computer was acting up and you were so frustrated with it that you probably walked away like a child instead of asking for help like a grownup would do. Now, we’ve lost access to him and there are no more leads to go on.”

Ronan was about to shout back that he’d scheduled the interview with no trouble. Yes, he was a fidgety hardhead, but was a perfectionist when it came to his work. “I get that I’m impatient, okay? Ten reminds me of that flaw all the time. You both know my work ethic. Say what you will about me off the job. I know I scheduled that interview. I just forgot when it was because of the thing going on with Everly.”

Fitzgibbon looked as if he was ready to fire back at Ronan’s response, but stopped at the mention of Everly’s name. “What’s going on with her, is she sick?”

Ronan shook his head. He stood up and went to the cooler and grabbed a bottle of water, using the extra few seconds to get his head together. “Ten and I were called in for a parent/teacher conference last Friday. The meeting came out of the blue.”

“Why did they want to meet with you?” Jude asked, all earlier signs of his anger were gone.

“Apparently, she’s been struggling in class. Math, mostly, but she’s been having trouble with her reading comprehension as well. She’s been reading since she was four years old. The teacher said Everly’s seemed uninterested in school, with learning, group activities, and even during recess and lunch. Miss Jacobs wanted to know if there was trouble at home. Was there violence, abuse; physical or sexual.” Ronan felt his eyes begin to tear up.

“Jesus, Ronan,” Fitz said softly, sounding horrified.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jude asked.

“Because I was embarrassed and ashamed. I hadn’t noticed there was anything wrong with my daughter until the teacher mentioned Everly’s behavior in class. What kind of a father doesn’t see that his child is withdrawn and uninterested in the things that usually bring her joy?”

“We’re busy,” Jude began. “Life is crazy with work and getting the kids to school and making dinner and running errands. We worked late a few nights last week on the Desmond case, so you weren’t home as much as you usually are.”

“I get that. Ten didn’t notice anything wrong either. Not even with his gift. So that meeting blew us out of the water. We looked like idiots not knowing that Everly was struggling and then with the accusation of possible abuse-” Ronan stopped when his emotions threatened to overwhelm him. He took a few deep breaths, unwilling to cry bitter tears in front of his friends. “We’ve all worked cases where kids were the victims and have seen the devastation those situations bring to families. My head was spinning during the meeting. It was as if Miss Jacobs was talking about someone else’s kid. On the drive home, I kept thinking about all of the people who have access to Everly. Teachers. Aides. Librarians. Janitors. The two of you.”

Shock and anger registered in Fitzgibbon’s green eyes. Jude wore a look of disbelief. “You actually think Fitz or I hurt Everly?” Jude sounded devastated.

“For a second, I couldn’t help but wonder. Everyone was a suspect in my mind, even Tennyson. We had a huge fight over it. He was angry that I accused the two of you and your husbands of hurting Everly, but he really lost it when I accused him.”

“Christ Almighty, Ronan,” Jude said with a low whistle.

“That’s why Monday and Tuesday were so rough at work for me. Ten and I still weren’t on good terms. All I could think about was that I didn’t know what was going on with Everly and that she hadn’t shared what was going on with me. I thought she told me everything. We tried to talk to her about things on Friday night after Ezra went to bed. We figured if we let her stay up late and gave her a bowl of ice cream that maybe she’d open up.”

“Did she?” Fitz asked.

Ronan shook his head. “She said she didn’t want to talk about what was going on with her. We tried again on Saturday and on Sunday, but no dice.”

“Is that why you cancelled the sleepover with Aurora?” Fitz wore a worried look. “Because you were afraid of her being with Jace and me?”

“Yes. No. Partly.” Ronan knew he sounded like an idiot. “I didn’t want to take any chances. Ten read Everly and couldn’t see anything wrong with her, mentally or physically. I was at my wits end and didn’t want to put her in any situations that could possibly make her uncomfortable until we got to the bottom of the situation.”

“Did you?” Jude asked, sounding afraid of hearing Ronan’s answer.

“Yeah. It all came spilling out after dance class on Wednesday night. Turns out Everly hates her new dance class. The new teacher and some of the students who’d been mean to her. Ten and I have always encouraged her to dance and she felt like she’d be letting us down if she told us she wanted to quit. We told her that wasn’t the case and then let her in on the meeting with Miss Jacobs. She said that no one had been inappropriate with her.” Ronan sighed. “Part of me knew that was the case, but then the other part, the one that suspected you guys, felt fucking awful. For me to have accused you in my mind was something that I felt was unforgivable. Things were already in a bit of an uproar because of the McClellan case and all we were

doing was fighting and arguing with each other, so I kept this story to myself. The guilt's been eating me alive. Can you two ever forgive me?" Ronan felt sick to his stomach. If Jude and Fitz said no, he didn't know where their friendship would go from there.

"Of course I forgive you. If this happened to Aurora instead of Everly, I would have felt the same way you did. There's something in us as girl dads that's completely illogical. We have to protect our girls at all costs from any and all dangers," Fitz said. "I'm sorry Everly was going through such a hard time, but I'm more sorry that you didn't come to me and let me know what was happening.

Jude nodded. "Same here. I would have lost my mind if there was a chance someone hurt Lizbet or Wolfie. I forgive you too." He offered a small grin. "Since we're all talking again like rational men, I've got something of my own to confess."

As angry as Ronan had been over the last week or so, he'd noticed something was up with Jude. It would be nice to finally get to the bottom of his issue. "Shoot, let's hear it."

"It's about the McClennan interview," Jude began.

"Fuck me blue, I've already apologized for missing the interview." Ronan took a breath to hold back the anger threatening to surge through him again. "I'm sure it was my fault the appointment wasn't entered into the calendar at work."

"Actually, it wasn't your fault," Jude said in a voice that was barely audible. "It was mine. I messed something up in the online calendar and when I tried to fix it I thought all of the appointments had been saved, but I guess I was wrong." Jude wore a sheepish look. "Can you guys forgive me for that?"

"Water under the bridge," Fitzgibbon assured Jude, who turned to Ronan.

“I’m not sure I can forgive you yet.” Frowning, Ronan walked toward Jude’s tent. One by one, he released the poles from their grommets and the tent slowly deflated before his eyes. “ Now you’re forgiven.”



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Jude

Fishin' in the Dark

An hour later, all three tents were erected. Jude had been magnanimous enough to help Ronan build his, even though he'd been a dickhead deconstructing Jude's tent. They'd gathered wood for a campfire, put their food and snacks in a second cooler with ice, and had a quiet lunch at the site's picnic table.

"Why don't we go fishing?" Jude suggested. "There's nothing else to do here and I'm not in the mood for Ultimate Naked Frisbee.

"Sounds good to me," Fitz said, gathering his lunch trash. "Jace bought all the gear; poles, waders, bobbers, and I think there are worms too."

"Have you ever fished before?" Jude asked. Fitz didn't seem like the kind of guy who went fishing to relax. In all the years he'd known the man, he'd never gone once.

"Not a day in my life. How about you?" Fitz asked.

"Yeah, Running Eagle taught me how. You know the whole, teach a man to fish and he eats for life, thing?" Jude shrugged and popped open the SUV's hatch. He started grabbing the gear they would need. "Hey, look, there are waders for all of us."

"What the hell are waders?" Ronan asked.

"They're neoprene overalls with boots at the end. Supposed to keep you dry when

you wade into a river.” Jude couldn’t imagine the clothing would keep them warm. It was April in New Hampshire. The rivers were bound to be extra cold with snow melt running off the mountains. He wasn’t about to mention that to Ronan or Fitz. He wanted to see the looks on their faces when they walked into thirty-eight degree water.

“Good old Jace thought of everything,” Ronan said. “I’m not touching slimy worms, someone’s going to have to bait my hook.”

“I’ll do it,” Jude offered. “So long as you don’t destroy my tent again.”

“Scout’s honor.” Ronan wagged his eyebrows.

Jude had a feeling he was going to wake up the next morning with the tent collapsed on top of him. Ronan was just that kind of asshole, but Jude had been working on his revenge. He was going to dump the melted ice water from the cooler into a pitcher and pour it over Ronan’s tent in the middle of the night. The water would seep in through the fabric where Ronan’s body or sleeping bag was touching it. He’d wake up soaked. Of course Jude would only put that plan into motion if Ronan pushed him to do it. Ronan was sometimes his own worst enemy. “I’ve got the campground map here.” Jude pulled the folded paper out of his back pocket. River’s about a quarter of a mile that way.” He pointed north.

“Okay, Avengers, let’s suit up.” Fitzgibbon passed out waders to Ronan and Jude.

“Uh, stupid question, do we take our pants off before we put them on?” Ronan asked.

“Duh,” Jude tossed back.

“I’ll put mine on in my tent.” Ronan grabbed his gear and headed off.

“It’s a nude campground, doofus. No one cares if your ass is out in the breeze.” Jude rolled his eyes.

“It’s not my ass I’m worried about.” Grumbling, Ronan climbed into his tent and zipped himself inside.

As Jude and Fitz watched, Ronan’s tent started to rock side to side. It looked like he was in there wrestling with someone. “I need baby oil or something to get these fuckers on.”

Jude snorted and started to laugh. “Just be patient!” Jude knew Ronan would take his advice. He slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

“You’re not supposed to wear them naked, are you?” Fitz asked, wearing a shit eating grin.

“Nope!” Jude shimmied out of his shoes and pulled the waders on over his pants, next, he slipped his arms through the shoulder straps. Seconds later, he was clicking the buckle of the chest harness. “See, piece of cake.”

With a shake of his head, Fitzgibbon followed suit.

“Yeooooooooow!” Ronan howled from the tent. An unintelligible string swearing followed, but Jude thought he heard “douche canoe sandwich” and something about a rancid “fuck knuckle.”

Fitz and Jude turned to each other. “They’re stuck to his package, aren’t they?”

Jude nodded, laughing so hard, he’d bent over double. After a few seconds, he managed to get a hold of himself. “You need some help in there, buddy?”

“Fucking things are stuck to my schlong! Can one of you give me a hand?” Ronan sounded pitiful.

Jude couldn't help himself. He gave Ronan a round of applause and burst out laughing. “I'll go grab our naked neighbors. I'm sure they can help you out!”

“Assholes!” Ronan called back. The tent started shaking again. Seconds later, there was a ripping sound like Ronan had torn a bandage off a cut. “My balls!” he howled, sounding as if he were in serious pain. Ronan wailed in obvious pain.

“Sounds like someone got an unintended nut wax.” Jude burst out laughing so hard, that his cheeks and stomach hurt.

Ronan, looking pale, emerged in his underwear, holding the waders over his arm.

“How's your package?” Jude asked.

“Still attached, thank fuck,” Ronan said, managing a weak smile. “If I can't get it up, I'm coming for you assholes.”

“Doesn't sound like you'll be coming at all!” Jude said, barely holding back a case of the giggles. He supposed Ronan had gotten his cum -upance in spades. Dumping ice water on his tent was off the table for now, or at least until Ronan did something else spectacularly stupid.

“How the fuck did you get them on?” Ronan asked, looking exhausted and ten years older than he had before his now-hairless stones were a casualty of the waders.

“One leg at a time.” Jude snorted.

“Put your pants back on, then step into the waders, asshat.” Fitz rolled his eyes.

“You dirty bastards.” Ronan shook his head and went back into his tent.

Ten minutes later, after a few wrong turns, courtesy of Jude, they arrived at the river. He figured the others wouldn’t let him forget getting lost, but so far, no one said a word. Ronan walked bowlegged like a cowboy from the old west, but was no longer complaining about his aching cojones, and Fitzgibbon had seemed caught up in his own head. Jude had a feeling whatever Fitz was chewing on was the thing pushing his temper into overdrive.

Digging into their tackle box, Jude brought out a container that said, “Live Bait.” Fitz opened the lid and Jude pulled out a thick, juicy nightcrawler.

“Ew, I can’t even look at that.” Ronan gagged.

“Why, does it remind you of your dick after it lost the battle with your waders?” Jude asked on a snicker, before adding the bait to Ronan’s hook.

“Too soon, asshole,” Ronan grumbled. He took the fishing pole Jude offered, holding it out in front of him as if it were afraid it was going to bite.

Jude put worms on his and Fitz’s hooks and he stepped up to the side of the river, leaving plenty of space between himself and the others. Large boulders lay in the water with colorful wildflowers blooming around them. The sun shone brightly, with a few dark clouds moving over the nearby mountain peaks. “Okay, this is really simple. Take a look at the reel, see how there’s a metal arc lying at the top of it. The piece of metal is called a bail. Is it on the left or the right side?”

“The right,” Fitz and Ronan said in unison.

“Yup, when it’s in that position, no line can unspool. If you flip the bail to the left, then you can cast the line and reel it in when you get a bite. Watch closely.” Jude

flipped the bail mechanism, held the rod so the bait was behind him, and cast the rod forward. The line unspooled and the hook plopped into the water with a small splash. The bobber floated on the surface of the water. “Now you try.”

Fitzgibbon stepped up first and casted perfectly, just the way Jude had shown him. “Okay, Ronan, you’re up.”

Ronan, with his tongue poking out of the left side of his mouth, obviously deep in concentration, moved the hook behind him and cast his arm forward. Unfortunately, instead of the hook sailing toward the water, it snagged on an overhanging branch. “Fuck me with a chainsaw!”

“Nice move, Ex-lax!” Fitzgibbon hooted, before he yelped. “What the hell is that, something’s tugging on my line.”

“That something is a hungry fish. Start reeling it in.” Jude couldn’t help feeling a little envious of Fitz, especially when the rainbow trout broke the surface. It was a good sized fish and would be delicious grilled up over the campfire.

“I’m doing it! I’m doing it!” Fitz shouted with glee, as the fish danced out of the water and onto the rocky edge of the river. It flopped around like, well, like a fish out of water. “What do I do now?”

“Pick it up by the gills and I’ll pull out the hook. It’s a beauty, Fitz,” Jude said in his best Crocodile Hunter accent. He grabbed his phone and started to record Fitz’s catch of the day.

Fitz set the rod on the ground and tried to corner the fish. When he moved left, the fish flopped right.

Jude snickered. “You gotta grab him, Fitz. It’s just a rainbow trout, not a great white

shark. It's not gonna bite your hand off."

"I'll help." Ronan offered, now that his hook was no longer stuck on a branch. He hurried over to the shore and ran after the fish.

Jude kept his phone pointed at the two grown men, who were splashing around in the water like kids. "Better hurry before the fish pulls the rod back into the water with it." He laughed as Ronan and Fitz stepped up their game. Finally, after a bit of wrangling, Fitz grabbed the fish. He held it up for Jude to remove the hook.

"Great job, Fitz. Hold it up for a picture." Jude took a few steps back and prepared to snap shots of Fitz, who wore a triumphant look. He snapped one picture before the fish wriggled and slipped out of Fitz's grasp. It hit shore and flopped toward the water. Ronan and Fitz gave chase, both men splashing into the water again.

"Got him!" Ronan shouted, wrapping his hands around the fish, which squirted out from between his hands. Giving chase, Ronan bumped into Fitz from behind, sending both men into the frigid water.

"Help!" Ronan squealed. "I'm going down!" He was lying face down, staring into the current, which was battering his face and filling his waders.

"I've got you." Fitz grabbed Ronan by the back of the waders and yanked him back to his feet.

"What the fuck?" Ronan shouted, spinning away from Fitz.

"I save your life and that's how you thank me?" Fitz folded his arms over his broad chest.

"No, there's something pricking me!" Ronan yelped again and started to dance

around like he had ants in his pants.

Jude ran to him and unclipped the chest strap. While Ronan flailed around, Jude started tugging the waders down his chest, abs and ass. Just as he pulled them past Ronan's package, a wriggling fish shot out. It hit the river with a splash and was gone.

"What the fuck?" Ronan asked, staring up at the sky, as if he thought God would actually answer.

"Talk about the catch of the day!" Fitz hooted as pointed his phone at Ronan, who's waders were down around his ankles, with his soaked grey sweatpants molded to his body. "You're bleeding." Fitz pointed to an area on Ronan's left thigh, close to his family jewels.

"Holy fuck!" Ronan shucked down his pants to see a line of puncture marks, two of which were bleeding. "That thing took a bite out of me! It was trying to eat my dick!"

"No, it wasn't," Jude sighed. "The fish just got you with his anal spines."

"Stop making shit up, Jude. Just give it to me straight, am I going to die from this fish bite? Do I need some kind of fish rabies vaccine?" Ronan took half a step forward, and tripped over his waders, managing to catch his balance at the last second before he fell back into the river.

Jude snickered. "I'm not making this up. Brown trout have an upper dorsal fin and a lower anal fin, which is close to the tail. Both fins have sharp spines in them to help protect against predators. Bears and foxes might not be too keen on putting a sharp prick in their mouths."

"You're not gonna die, pal." Fitzgibbon snorted, which quickly turned into laughter.



“Your prick almost got pricked!”

“Hilarious,” Ronan muttered. “Can we go back to the tents now? I’m soaked and need something to eat, then a nap.”

“Sure thing, Fish Bait!” Jude slapped Ronan on the shoulder and started to pack up their gear.

They might not have caught fresh fish for dinner, but in Jude’s mind laughing together and having fun was worth far more than grilled trout in lemon butter.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Fitzgibbon

Dust in the Wind

Walking back to the campsite, Fitzgibbon felt lighter than he had since the knock-down drag-out fight on Tuesday. It felt like he had his friends back again. He hadn't realized until that moment how lonely he'd been without them. Now that things were back on more solid footing, he felt like he could finally tell Ronan and Jude what was going on with him and Jace.

"I see one of you is starting to get into the spirit of things!" a familiar voice laughed from behind them.

Fitz turned to see the campers from earlier in the day. All three were naked as jaybirds and pointing at Ronan, who was wearing a sodden pair of boxer briefs, which left nothing to the imagination. He carried the rest of his clothes and his waders.

"I fell in the river chasing a fish," Ronan said with a grin.

"Well, I hope you caught him seeing as though your campsite is in a bit of a mess. Didn't anyone teach you not to leave food out? This is bear country, boys. You're lucky something else beat them to the punch. The general store's got sammiches and hot soup. Catch ya later!" The man saluted Ronan and walked back to his waiting friends.

Taking off at a dead run, Fitz booked it toward their campsite. Tall, dark, and naked

wasn't wrong, their campsite looked like a tornado torn through it. The trash can was knocked over with its contents strewn about. The food cooler lay on its side. All that was left in it was quickly melting ice. A mama racoon sat back on her hindlegs munching on a raw hotdog, while her three little ones were chowing down on barbecue potato chips. The animals looked almost human eating with their delicate little fingers like a toddler with Cheerios.

"That's my meat he's got in his mouth!" Ronan moaned when he caught up with Fitz.

"I'm not sure you want him to give it back," Fitzgibbon said.

"What the hell do we do?" Ronan asked.

"Shoo, asshole!" Jude called from behind them.

"Us or the raccoons?" Fitzgibbon asked with a grin.

"Them." Jude pointed as the small family of racoons ambled off. The mother had another hotdog clamped in her teeth. She turned around, as if to say, "Gotcha, suckers!"

"Since I'm the only one who's still dry, I'll run over to the store and grab dinner," Jude offered.

"Double portions," Ronan said. "After all this, I feel like I could eat a horse."

"Same," Fitz agreed. "But, I'll have turkey." He tossed the SUV keys to Jude and headed for his tent. Thankfully, the racoons hadn't figured out how to unzip the flaps. Climbing inside, he shut the entrance and changed out of his wet clothes, grabbing a fresh pair of jeans and a New England Patriots hoodie, which smelled like Jace's favorite aftershave. He'd been wearing it last night when they'd had another

discussion about their little situation.

Laying back on his sleeping bag and pillow, Fitz stared up at the top of the tent. It was made from dark blue nylon, but the top was transparent. Above him, he could see dark clouds rolling in. He didn't remember there being anything on the news about thunderstorms. He supposed the weather was different up in the mountains than it was back in Salem.

Despite the unsolved issue with Jace, he missed his husband. Friday was pizza night. They'd order from Greek Life, mushroom and pepper for Jace and pepperoni with bacon for himself and Aurora. After dinner, they'd settle on the sofa in their favorite spots, Fitz in the middle with his husband on his left and his daughter on the right, wrapped in her favorite Sleeping Beauty blanket. Aurora always picked the movie, almost always a Disney film, and put up a bit of a fuss when the movie ended and it was time for her bath.

Everything in their lives was perfect just the way it was. He and Jace had worked long and hard to get to where they were now, not just at their jobs, but with each other. Their relationship hadn't always been rock solid and Fitzgibbon was afraid Jace's stance on this particular issue could possibly be the finish of them as a couple.

"Fitz, Ronan, I'm back!" Jude shouted.

Startling himself out from his head, Fitz unzipped the tent to see Jude unpacking a mountain of food. "What's all this?"

"Turkey subs and bowls of chili. There are potato chips for the sandwiches and corn bread for the chili. I also grabbed whoopie pies for dessert. "Dig in, guys. I don't like the looks of that sky."

"Same," Ronan agreed, grabbing a sandwich and bag of sour cream and onion chips.

He took a huge bite of his sub and turned to Fitzgibbon. “Okay, Cap, spill it. There’s been something wrong with you for a while now. I noticed a while ago, but we weren’t exactly in a good spot to talk about anything.”

“I’ve noticed it too. Let us help,” Jude urged before slurping up a mouthful of chili.

“Like you both helped me into the river this afternoon?” Fitz asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No,” Ronan chuckled, “our advice will be much worse than that.”

“God awful,” Jude agreed cheerfully. “Now talk.” He pointed his pickle spear at Fitz before eating half of it in one bite.

Fitzgibbon sighed. These men were the best friends he’d ever had in his life, even if the last week or so had been rocky between them. “I’m afraid of what you’ll think of me when I tell you what’s going on.”

“We’re your friends, Fitzy. Jude and I are on your side no matter what.” Ronan snorted. “Unless you need advice on growing a patch of cauliflower. If that’s the case, you’re on your own.”

“Jace wants to have a baby,” Fitz said. When there was no outward reaction from Jude and Ronan, he continued, “he wants to have a biological child like you did with Everly and Ezra.”

“And you’d rather adopt” Ronan asked.

Fitz shook his head. Fuck, his friends were really going to hate him now.

“You’d like to be the bio father?” Jude asked, looking confused.

“I don’t want another child. I’m happy with Greeley and Aurora. Our life at home is perfect with our daughter. Jace is finally working fewer hours. We’ve got a schedule for Aurora that works for her. We do sleepovers and go on vacations.” Fitz sighed. “I’m over fifty. I don’t have the same energy for an infant that I had six years ago when we adopted Aurora.” Fitz offered a tight smile. “Okay, rip into me. I deserve it.”

“No one’s gonna rip into you, Fitz,” Ronan said gently. “As Ten always says, it takes two yeses and one no to have a baby. I know he’d like a third, but I feel the same way you do. Things are great now. Ezra is sleeping through the night and will start pre-school in a few weeks so we can get him more socialization with kids his own age. Everly’s got her interests in gardening, playing soccer and spending time with Aurora, Wolf, and Brooke. Adding a baby into the mix would unbalance all of those things, not to mention the fact that we’d be outnumbered. At least now, there’s one kid for every adult.”

Fitz nodded along with Ronan. He had no idea Ten wanted a third child. He felt better knowing Ronan understood where he was coming from. “What about you, Jude?”

“I agree with Ronan. You both have to agree it’s a go or the answer is no. If you go ahead and have this baby against your better judgement, it will make life harder and sooner or later you’ll end up resenting Jace and possibly the baby. That’s not the right environment to bring a child into. I’ll also point out that when you adopted Aurora, you were the one doing the heavy lifting. Jace was putting in sixteen hour days at the Tremont Street Mission. No offense, but I always wondered if he was trying to avoid coming home to a crying baby and a worn out husband.”

“No offense taken.” Jude was right. Jace hadn’t known how to deal with Aurora. The baby was suffering from opioid withdrawal, courtesy of her late mother. It was hell helping her detox. There were nights she wouldn’t sleep a wink and would just scream and cry. “If we had another baby, I wouldn’t be able to be home with him or

her the way I was with Aurora. Our hours with the Salem Police are flexible, but not flexible enough for me to be an active captain and a caregiver to a newborn.”

“What reason did Jace give for wanting another baby?” Ronan asked. “Is he planning on stepping back further from his role in the shelter?”

“He hasn’t mentioned working less, although, truth be told, he’s not working the kind of hours he did when Aurora came home. When I asked what was driving this, he just said that he’d been miserable as an only child and didn’t want the same fate for Aurora.” Fitz had also been an only child and that thought never crossed his mind. Did that make him a terrible father?

“I might agree with him if it weren’t for Everly and Wolf,” Ronan said. “The three of them are friends, but they’re also growing up like siblings in this big extended family. Have either of you asked Aurora what she thinks? If you bring another child into the family, she’ll be the one most affected by that. I remember how excited Everly was when Ezra was born, which lasted all of one day having him at home. She struggled being a big sister and it was hard to watch her navigate changes in her life that she never asked for. She was angry at Ten and me for bringing her brother home. It took months to get her back on track and a ton of pep talks from Jude. Remember?”

Fitz hadn’t known Jude had been helping Everly. He’d known his niece was struggling, but had no idea Jude had been involved with helping to right the ship.

“Yeah, those were some hard conversations,” Jude agreed. “To be honest, what happened with Everly and Ezra worried me when Lizbet came home. You guys had months to prepare Everly for her little brother, Cope and I had only a matter of days, and I was in the hospital after having knee surgery and then being attacked by a serial killer.”

Fitz would never forget that day as long as he lived. He and Salem Police Chief Cisco

Jackson had been manning the security booth in the hospital when Jude offered himself up as bait to the killer, who'd nearly added Jude to his tally. Cope had been the one who'd taken Lizbet home from the hospital while Jude continued to recuperate.

"Thankfully, Wolf stepped in to be a helper with me not being at home. We had a long talk about how his little sister needed him to protect her and he quickly jumped on board. There was almost no sibling rivalry between them. I hate to say this, but I think Aurora would respond to a sibling the same way Everly did." Jude wore a worried look.

"You're right," Fitz agreed. "Aurora would struggle." He set his head in his hands. It was great that his friends understood where he was coming from and were on his side, but that didn't help him solve the problem. "What do I do? Jace doesn't know I'm not on board with this plan."

"Why don't you take Lizbet or Ezra for the weekend?" Ronan sounded almost diabolical. "Don't let Aurora go anywhere for a sleepover, but you get out of the house for a while to go food shopping or something. Let Jace see what it would be like as a father of two."

"Wow," Fitz said. Ronan's idea had never occurred to him. "How do I tell Jace I don't want another baby?"

"Just like that," Jude said. "You owe it to him to be completely honest. Tell him all the reasons why you don't think this move is the right one for your family and go from there."

"What if he wants to divorce me because we're not on the same wavelength?"

"Let's not think in worst case scenarios," Jude said. "Get through the conversation



and then you can figure out how to move forward together. Don't forget too that Jace was raised by nannies, tutors and what not. He doesn't have a lot of hands-on childcare experience. Would you want this child raised by strangers like he was?

Another great point , Fitz thought. "Okay, I'll talk to him when we get home. I'll just have to go with the flow even if the worst happens." As Fitz spoke, thunder rolled through the valley. The wind picked up and it started to pour.

The men scrambled to save what little was left of their dinner from getting wet. Each of them ran for the SUV, which thankfully Jude had left unlocked. All three of them were soaked to the bone. The wind howled around them, rocking the car. Ronan's tent lifted off the ground and rolled away like a tumbleweed. Seconds later, it was lifted into the air and quickly flew out of sight.

"Christ, this is the end, isn't it?" Fitz asked.

"Come on Fitz," Ronan said. "It's just a thunderstorm, not Armageddon."

"I meant the end of the camping trip, not the end of us, dumbass." Fitz laughed. "Although if God decided now was your time to go, I wouldn't put up much of a fight to keep you."

"Gee thanks," Ronan muttered. "That tent had my sleeping bag inside. What the hell do we do now? Go to that little B&B? No one will ever know we didn't sleep here."

"They might if we don't find Ronan's lost tent." Jude snorted.

"I'll call the inn," Fitzgibbon said, reaching for his phone. "If they have rooms, we'll pack up and then spend the night in a dry, warm place with WIFI, agreed?"

"Agreed!" Jude and Ronan said together.

In Fitz's mind, it didn't matter where they slept. They'd done what they came on this trip to do and that was to get their friendship and professional partnership out of the ditch. Now that they'd done the hard work, they deserved a treat. A hot meal. A warm bed. Dry clothes.

Fitzgibbon's friends were his friends again. Yes, there were issues waiting for him back home, but in this moment, life was perfect.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Ronan

### It's Raining Men

Instead of staying at the B&B, which would have cost them several hundred dollars each for their own rooms, Ronan suggested packing everything up and heading home. Jude and Fitz agreed with the plan, wanting to sleep in their own beds next to their husbands.

Grabbing the sleeping bags and taking down the tents took about fifteen minutes. Packing the soggy material and the coolers into the back of the SUV took a little longer. Lastly, they'd gone on a drive through the rest of the campground looking for Ronan's missing tent. They'd found it several roads away, fetched up against a large travel trailer, looking no worse for its journey through time and space. Once it was stowed with the rest of the gear, Fitz drove them to the public bathhouse. He was able to pull right up to the curb and park. Hot showers were only a few steps away.

Thankfully, they'd each left their overnight bags in the car, so there were dry clothes for them to change into after their showers when they were warm, and more importantly, dry.

It was a little after seven when they hit the road home. Jude had cued up his playlist, a different one than he used on the drive to the campground. This one coincidentally started with "It's Raining Men." Everyone sang at the top of their voices with Ronan making a video of the sing-along.

As the next song started, "Home Sweet Home," by Motley Crue, Ronan turned to

face Jude, who was sitting behind Fitz in the back seat. “Fitz and I both shared what’s been bothering us lately, but you didn’t say a word about what’s going with you and Cope.”

“I don’t have any problems. My life is perfect.” Jude grinned at Ronan and sang along with Vince Neil.

“Bullshit,” Fitz said, eyeing Jude in the rearview mirror. “You’ve been just as pissy as the rest of us this week.”

Jude sighed and tapped his phone, turning off the music. “There is something wrong, only I’m not sure I want to tell you.”

“I thought we agreed we weren’t angry at each other anymore when we were in the showers.” Ronan had accidentally suggested the truce, while fanning a white towel near his sore nuts, trying to dry them without having to touch them. Fitz saw it as a waving white flag and the armistice started there.

“We did agree. What’s going on has nothing to do with what we were arguing about and isn’t about work.” Jude was silent for a few seconds. “I don’t have the energy to deal with the two of you laughing at me.”

“If the thing on your mind doesn’t have to do with our dumb asses or with work, then it has to do with Cope and the kids. Neither of you laughed when I told you about not wanting to have another baby. I promise we won’t laugh,” Fitz said, elbowing Ronan.

“I swear too,” Ronan agreed, praying he wouldn’t break his word. Jude was a naturally funny guy, but when he was upset, he used humor to help get his point across. Ronan hoped Jude would give it to them straight.

“Okay, it’s about Cope. We’re not fighting or anything like that, but we’re also not

getting it on like we used to either.” Jude sounded unsure of himself as he spoke.

“Ten and I aren’t having the kind of sex we did before the kids came either. Back then it used to be every day, sometimes two or three times a day. Now, we’re lucky if we get lucky once a week. We’re both so busy with work and the kids that when we finally drop into bed, all we want to do is sleep.” Things had been better now that Ezra’s night terrors were over, but Ronan wasn’t getting as much action as he would have liked. He absolutely understood where Jude was coming from.

“I hear you, Ronan. It’s not that we’re having less sex than before. We’re having none.”

Ronan wasn’t sure what to say. The absolute last thing he wanted to do was make Jude more upset than he already was. No sex was definitely a problem and he wasn’t sure how to help Jude reignite the spark.

“Are the two of you fighting and one of you isn’t interested at the moment?” Fitz asked, taking the heat off Ronan.

“We’re not fighting. Everything is perfect, just like I said. The kids are great, Wolf’s doing well in school and is gearing up for playing spring soccer. Cope’s been busy at work, but it’s not like Halloween month when he’s working twelve to fourteen hour days.”

“Are either one of you hurt, you know, down there?” Ronan asked. “After what happened to me today with the waders sticking to my balls and then almost getting my dick bitten off by a ravenous rainbow trout, sex is the last thing on my mind.”

“Huh,” Jude said quietly. “I hadn’t thought about that. I’m fine in that department, but I don’t know if Cope is.”

“That could be the root of the problem. The only way you’re going to know for sure is to talk about it honestly,” Fitz suggested.

“You’re right. I know you are, but I don’t know how to start the conversation. I know I’m hurt and embarrassed. Maybe he is too and if he is, I don’t want to make him feel worse.” Jude sounded absolutely miserable.

“We can take the kids if you two want to go away for a weekend,” Ronan suggested. He knew Everly and Ezra would be excited to have Lizbet and Wolf stay with them for a few days. Hell, you could take him to Bare Necessities!”

Jude burst out laughing. “I’ll talk to Cope when we get back. Thank you for listening to me and not being dickheads.”

“You know,” Fitz began, “we’re only human. We all have bad days, though usually not all at the same time. I’m sorry I was such a dick about the McClellan interview, Ronan.”

“Same here,” Jude agreed. “I’m also sorry I didn’t tell you about my snafu with the calendar program.”

“We’ve been talking about getting a new system to track our schedules, maybe this is the push we need to implement that plan.” Fitz eyed Jude in the rearview mirror.

“I’ve got an idea on how we can get McClellan to reconsider sitting down with us,” Jude said. “There’s a note in the file about Marie possibly having a lover, a guy by the name of Martin Frain. Why don’t we call the husband back on Monday and apologize for missing the meeting and let him know Frain gave us some information that puts the bullseye firmly on him and we want McClellan to corroborate the new evidence, but that we understand if he doesn’t want to help clear his own name.”

“That’s diabolical. I love it!” Ronan grinned. “I can sell the hell out of that story.”

“I’m sure you can,” Jude agreed. “What are you sorry for?”

“Me? Nothing! I’m a perfect little angel!” Ronan snickered.

“More like a perfect little troublemaker.” Jude rolled his eyes.

“Seriously, though, I’m sorry about being suspicious of you two after the parent/teacher meeting with Miss Jacobs.” He’d never had better friends in his life than Jude and Fitz. The fact that he suspected either of them of hurting Everly for even one second broke his heart.

Fitz set a hand on Ronan’s shoulder. “I would have felt the same way if it was Aurora, Ronan. I don’t blame you for that. Not one bit.”

“Same here,” Jude agreed. “I just wish you could have come to me and told me what was going on.”

“I appreciate you guys being so supportive, but now that we’ve got the Kumbaya portion of the program out of the way, how are we going to get back at our husbands for sending us to a nudist colony to settle our differences? Ronan asked. He had a few ideas of his own, but was curious to hear what his friends had come up with.

“I’ve got the perfect idea,” Jude said before laying out his plan.

Ronan was on board the second Jude started describing what he wanted to do. When he finally managed to stop laughing, he called Ten to let him know they were on their way back because of the weather and would arrive within the next half hour.

According to Ten, the kids were upstairs asleep and Ten, Cope, and Jace were

watching a movie together. The setup was almost too perfect.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am*

Jude

You Can Leave Your Hat On

With it being a little past ten, the neighborhood was quiet. There were no dog walkers on the street and all of the kids were safely in bed. At least Jude hoped to hell they were.

In another stroke of incredible luck, there was an open parking space in front of Ten and Ronan's house. Fitzgibbon parked the SUV. "Are you guys sure about this plan?"

Ronan snorted. "Yup!"

Jude nodded in agreement. There was no doubt it was going to work. What was in doubt was their ability to pull it off. "It has to be all for one and one for all, got it? Ronan?"

"I'm in!" Ronan snickered.

"Fitz?"

"I'm in too. I just don't want anyone to get hurt. You know, lose an eye or something." Fitz snorted, laughing at his own joke.

"Calm down, there Fitzy. We've had enough accidents for one day." Jude reached into the backseat of the SUV and grabbed the rain ponchos Ten and Jace had bought them for the trip. He handed them out to the guys. After a bit of wrangling, everyone

had them on. Grabbing the bag from the campground's general store, Jude took out the three cowboy hats he'd bought. Jude's was black, Ronan's white, and Fitz's was dark brown. Each hat had an elastic chin strap, so they wouldn't blow off in the wind.

Jude had grabbed the hats as a joke to bring back to their husbands, but now they were an integral part of the plan. Taking one last look down the street to make sure the coast was clear, Jude motioned the guys out of the SUV.

Moving as quickly as they could, they climbed the steps, stopping in front of the front door. "Ronan, you unlock the door. I'll start the music."

"Got it." Ronan moved to the front of the group and stuck his key in the front door.

"I still think this is crazy," Fitz muttered.

Ronan unlocked the door and pulled out the key, setting it inside the mailbox so his hands were free. "Okay, Jude, now!"

Jude tapped his phone to pull up the song he was looking for. "Blast off!" Jude hit the button and Joe Cocker's "You Can Leave Your Hat On" started to play.

Ronan burst through the door, followed by Jude and Fitzgibbon. The living room was empty. "Honey, we're home!"

"What the hell is that music?" Ten asked walking into the living room. Jace and Cope were right behind him.

"Sweet baby cheeses!" Cope gasped when he got a look at the husbands, who stood in a row wearing only dark green rain slickers and their shoes.

With a rip, the men tore the ponchos off. They were totally naked beneath, but for the cowboy hats covering their junk. Each hat read: Let's Get Naked!

Ronan, Jude, and Fitz swung their asses to the beat of the music, while their husbands squealed and applauded. They were so loud that Jude was afraid they'd wake the kids. The last thing he needed was a bunch of little eyes watching their revenge play out

When the song ended, Jude and the others bowed. "Well, what do you think?"

"I'm speechless." Cope snorted. "We thought for sure you all would have been on your way back home the second you found out the campground was a nudist colony."

"Why? We all love being butt-ass naked. You'll never guess what we did?" Ronan asked, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Ultimate Frisbee?" Ten asked on a giggle.

"No, we each got memberships!" Ronan enthused.

"We're going back next weekend. All of our new friends can't wait to meet you. Kaye agreed to watch the kids." Fitzgibbon snorted.

"Just be forewarned that some of the guys walking around letting it all hang out aren't necessarily the kind of guys you want to see naked, but it's all in good fun, right, Cope?" Jude grinned at his gobsmacked husband.

"Uh..." Cope's mouth hung open. For once, Jude's husband was speechless.

Tiny giggles from the stairs caught Jude's attention.

"What's going on?" Wolf asked in a loud whisper.

"Naked booty shaking." Everly gagged. Wolf and Aurora joined in.

“I’ll never shake my naked booty,” Aurora said, sounding as appalled as a six year old was capable of.

“Me either!” Everly agreed.

“I will!” Wolf crowed. “In fact, I’ll do it right now!”

“NO!” Jude shouted, before he burst out laughing.

Ten swept past the nearly naked detectives and hurried the kids back up the stairs. “Show’s over. Everyone back to bed.”

Jace motioned Fitz and Ronan into the kitchen. When they were gone, Cope sauntered over to Jude. “Hey, cowboy.” He pressed a kiss to Jude’s lips. “Can I interest you in a ride?”

Jude’s heart pounded in his chest. It had been a long time since Cope had looked at him like he was on the menu. “You bet your sweet ass!”

“Bye, Ten, gotta see a man about a horse!” With a giggle, Cope grabbed Jude’s hand and practically pulled him out the front door.

Jude let his husband drag him down the stairs and across the street. Based on the look in Cope’s eyes, they weren’t gonna get much further than the sofa, which didn’t bother Jude in the slightest.

Neither he nor Cope had talked to each other about their sex drought as the days stretched into weeks. Now wasn’t the time to get into the reasons, but first thing in the morning, Jude would get to the bottom of things.

No, make that after breakfast, or possibly after lunch...

THE END