



Dead Run (Cold Case Psychic #35)

Author: *Pandora Pine*

Category: Fantasy

Description: When Ronan, Jude, and Fitzgibbon agree to participate in the Salem Witches Dead Run for charity, each brag about how they'll run circles around the others to win the race, but with the detectives sprinting past forty, they'll be lucky to cross the finish line in one piece. Throw in glitter color bombs, aching muscles, and a booger-eating six year old bent on revenge, what could possibly go wrong?

Caught up in preparations for the run, buying witches costumes and making colored powder to throw at the runners, Everly and Wonder Wolf talk Aurora into joining in the fun with the promise of a new bike.

With new two-wheelers hanging in the balance and the finish line in sight, who will win? The kids? The detectives? Or will everyone learn the most important lesson of all; there's a champion in each and every one of us.

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June...

For the first time in a long time, Ronan O'Mara couldn't make up his mind.

His life view was more black and white, rather than the many shades of grey his husband, Tennyson, preferred.

Unfortunately, this was a decision Ronan was going to have to make on his own.

Thankfully, neither black nor white nor grey factored into the equation.

Pink or purple?

Purple or pink?

"Daddy?" Everly sighed, rolling her eyes as if Ronan were a greater disappointment than the last Marvel movie. "I thought you picked the green skirt like an hour ago." She crossed her arms over her chest. Everly had picked a pink skirt five minutes after walking into the store.

Ronan snickered. He appreciated his daughter's sense of exaggeration, which she, of course, got from him. "I thought it was a little too Wicked Witch of the West."

Father and daughter stood in front of a dressing mirror at Black Cats, Bats, and Broomsticks, Salem's costume shop, run by witches, for witches.

The Salem Witches Dead Run was a week away.

The fun run fundraiser was to benefit Everly, Aurora, and Wolf's Class of 2037.

The year made Ronan feel older than dirt.

Everly looked as if she were considering the matter.

Her blue eyes, identical to Ronan's own, moved back and forth between the pink, purple, and green tutus her father had been admiring.

"You're right. The green definitely gives Elphie vibes.

I think a lot of people are gonna dress like her for the Witches Dead Run.

I just hope they don't all try to sing "Defying Gravity," like they did at the movie theater sing-along.

"The six-year-old cringed, as if she'd just eaten a lemon.

"That was seriously awful," Ronan agreed.

"You were the worst singer of them all!" Everly threw her hands in the air.

Ronan's eyes widened in mock horror. He knew damn well he sang in the key of rabid badger. Hell, that was half the fun. Wasn't it a father's job to embarrass his kids at every turn? Ronan slapped a dramatic hand against his chest. "How very dare you! I have the voice of an angel!"

"Yeah, Lucifer!" Jude called from one row over.

Ronan burst out laughing. Jude had a point. "Have you picked a costume yet?"

“I sure have! I’m Sooooooper Jude!” Jude’s voice boomed through the store. He bounced over to Ronan dressed in a bright red tutu with a matching red cape. “I’m gonna have Tennyson sew a giant ‘J’ on the back.”

“Me too!” Wolf called, as he ran toward Everly. “I’m Wonder Wolf!” The little boy howled in his outfit that perfectly matched his father. “I want a ‘W’ on my cape.”

Ronan knew Ten would be overjoyed to help Jude and Wolfie with their fun run costumes. He held up the pink and purple tutus for Jude to see. “Which one?”

“Everly’s wearing pink, so you can be all matchy-matchy together, like me and Wolf.” Jude and Wolf high-fived each other.

Ronan shimmied into the pink skirt and admired himself in the mirror. “What do you think, Little Miss? Do you want to twin with me?” The reason he hadn’t picked pink in the first place was because he was afraid Everly wouldn’t want him to wear the same color.

“Hold on!” Everly dashed away from Ronan.

“I knew it,” Ronan muttered loud enough for Jude to hear him. “I’m an embarrassment to my daughter.” He was about to pull off the tutu when Everly ran back toward him. In her hands were two neon pink wigs.

“Try this on.” Everly handed him the larger of the two, before trying on her own. The wigs were long and curly. Everly’s reached the center of her back.

Ronan’s heart soared. He tried on the wig and burst out laughing at the effect. “Holy shit, I look amazeballs!”

“Right!” Everly agreed. “We’re a perfect team now!”

“Team Pretty in Pink.” Ronan ran his hands through the soft synthetic hair.

“You’re gonna need some tape or wig glue to keep that on during the race,” Jude said. “We don’t want it flying off and blinding other runners.”

“Or maybe I do!” Ronan wagged his eyebrows, sounding diabolical. “If I’m gonna win this race, I’ll need to employ booby traps like Data in The Goonies .”

“Ronan, for the tenth time, the fun run isn’t a race . That’s why they put the word ‘fun’ in the title. It’s supposed to be a fun way to raise money for the school.”

“Winning is fun!” Ronan proclaimed. He was willing to die on this hill, which was a distinct possibility, considering the fact that the only recent thing Ronan had run, was out of Cheetos.

Ever since Jude ended up in the hospital after tearing a ligament playing basketball, and was nearly the victim of a serial killer, he and Jude had let their fitness regimens slide.

“Daddy, I told you a million times, I’m not running!

” a familiar voice rose over the din of the shop.

“I’ll wear a costume and help Dad hand out the water, but that’s it!

I refuse to get all sweaty and smell like a goat.

” Aurora declared, coming to stand at Everly’s side.

She was dressed in a witchy-princess gown, which made her look like a hybrid of Rapunzel and the Sanderson sisters.

“Ohhhh,” Everly said, reaching out to touch Aurora’s outfit. “I love it! You look great!”

“I know!” Aurora grinned at her friend. She grabbed Fitzgibbon’s phone out of his hand and started taking pictures of herself and Everly. Both girls giggled as Wolf stood behind them and held up bunny ears.

“Woofie and I are gonna do the fun run. You should too,” Everly said, sounding casual.

Ronan nearly burst out laughing when he saw his daughter wink at Fitzgibbon. Obviously Everly and his boss had struck a deal to help convince Aurora to take part in the Witches Dead Run.

“Imagine the cool pictures we’ll take at the finish line with our medals.” Everly spoke with wonder in her voice.

Aurora seemed unmoved at the mention of medals.

“Daddy said if I beat him, he’s gonna buy me a two-wheeler!” Everly chirped sweetly.

Blackmail! Ronan had done no such thing.

Everly had been after him to get her a real bike for two months, after her cousin, Brooke, got one for her birthday.

He and Tennyson had discussed it several times.

Their final decision had been that they’d get one for Everly when Wolf and Aurora got one too.

It was the only fair way to do it. The other two kids would be heartbroken to be left out, but to be honest, Ronan hadn't been in much of a hurry to talk to Fitz and Jude about the matter.

If Everly could ride a two-wheeler, that would be another step toward his daughter's independence from him.

As much as the other kids wouldn't be able to bear not having a bike, Ronan couldn't bear the thought of his daughter not needing him anymore.

"Really?" Aurora's eyes widened. "Daddy, if I run the race can I get a bike too?"

"Me three!" Wolf said, grabbing Jude's legs and looking up at him with a happy face.

"Uh, Ronan, a word, if you don't mind." Fitzgibbon's tone left no room for dissent.

Ronan was going to die. Fitz was scared to death that Aurora would hurt herself on a two-wheeler, but he suspected the reluctance on Fitz's part was the same as on his part. Neither man wanted their little girls to grow up too fast. "Before you hit me, let me explain."

Fitz didn't look like he was in the mood for explanations. "If my daughter gets so much as a scratch during this fun run, I'm coming for you!"

As Ronan muttered a quick Hail Mary, Fitz lunged toward him, wrapping his arms around Ronan and holding him tight. What the, what?

"Aurora has given me every excuse in the book not to run the race and you gave her one reason to do it." Fitz set a dazed Ronan back a step. "I could kiss you."

Jude snorted from behind them. "We all need to be in agreement when it comes to

Operation Two-Wheeler. Not just the three of us, but Cope, Ten, and Jace too.”

“I’ll talk to Ten tonight, although it might already be too late.

” Ronan pointed toward the kids who were debating what color bikes to get.

He knew in his heart of hearts that Everly deserved this rite of passage, just like he’d gotten when he was six years old.

He hadn’t known it at the time, but Erin had worked overtime for three months to be able to afford to get Ronan a bike for his sixth birthday.

Whatever the cost, it would be worth it to see the look on Everly’s face and to hear her triumphant squeals of lighter when she mastered the bike without training wheels.

As for the moment, Ronan would take the win buying matching outfits for himself and Everly.

The debate on growing up too quickly could wait for another day.

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Jude was going to die. How would Cope eulogize his husband, tragically taken far too soon? Hero was the first word that came to mind. Jude was a hero not just to his family, but to the men and women of the Salem Police Department and the entire city of Salem.

Selfless was the second word he hoped Cope would use to describe him. Jude gave his all to his city, the police department, his friends, and most importantly, to his family. Unless there was only one glazed donut left and then it was every man for himself.

“Get a move on, Jude, for fuck’s sake!” Ronan loud whispered, which was to say that his tone was only a decibel or three lower than his usual voice. He jogged backward, in place, waiting for Jude to catch up.

“Give me a break, asshole,” Jude gasped for air.

“It’s hotter than Satan’s taint out here.

Any second now, I’m going to melt into a puddle of goo like the Wicked Witch when Dorothy threw a bucket of water on her.

” What Jude would give for a bratty, gingham-clad girl to douse him with ice cold water right now.

He stopped running when he reached Ronan, who kept jogging in place.

“Where the hell is Fitzzy?” Ronan asked, picking the pace up and rounding the corner

toward Fitzgibbon's house.

"You probably tripped him in your bid to win our run around the block." When they were out in the field, chasing down killers, Jude loved Ronan's tenacity.

His stick-to-itiveness. His all-out zeal to solve cold cases and bring grieving families a measure of justice.

Now, however, Jude wanted to smack his best friend. Hard. Twice.

"See, there he is." Ronan pointed toward Fitz's stoop, where he sat with Aurora, Everly, and Wolf. All three kids were dressed and ready to go.

"Geez, Dad, what took you so long?" Everly asked with a wicked grin.

"Yeah, you and Daddy look like you jumped in the fountain near the park." Wolf wore an envious look.

"Seems like you took the shortcut, Fitzy," Jude deadpanned.

He rested his hands on his knees in a bid to catch his breath.

He wasn't made for Salem's soupy humidity.

People laughed when he said Arizona had dry heat, but it was true.

Back home, Jude could have run twice the distance, in half the time, without so much as breaking a sweat, never mind being soaked to his skin like he was now.

"Aurora called me to say the kids were ready to run. I couldn't leave them out here waiting for us alone." Fitz offered a so-there grin.

“If everyone’s done complaining. Can we go now?” Everly asked. Not waiting for an answer she took off down the block. “Let’s run, witches!” Wolf and Aurora were right behind her.

Jude had thought it was cute when Everly suggested that slogan for their team, but now, he had a better one: Running’s a witch. “Look at them go,” Jude panted as he, Ronan and Fitz jogged behind them. “I wish I had Wolf’s energy for an hour. I could rule the world.”

“Nah, I’d take Everly’s knees. They’re so bouncy and don’t crack when she stands up, or tell her when it’s about to rain. “ Ronan swiped his left hand against his sweaty forehead before wiping it on the back of his running shorts. “What about you, Fitz?”

“I’ll let Aurora keep all her pieces so long as we can get her through this run without her melting down for being hot, sweaty, tired, or hungry.

” Fitz paused, his eyes on Ronan. “Wait a second, that’s a perfect description of you two chuckleheads.

” Fitz burst out laughing before jogging ahead of his partners.

“Can you believe that son of a bitch?” Jude asked.

“We’re out here dying and he’s cracking jokes at our expense.

” To be honest, Jude was jealous of the shape Fitz was in.

While he and Ronan stopped working out after Jude’s near miss at the hands of Salem’s own killer angel, Fitzgibbon had kept himself in shape.

He ran nearly every day and lifted weights twice a week.

“He’s just showing off,” Ronan muttered.

“Come on, Daddy!” Everly shouted from halfway up the block. “I know you’re old, like Uncle Jude! Move your buns!”

Jude gasped with outrage. He wasn’t old. Well, not compared against Julius Caesar or George Washington. He had a feeling good old George wouldn’t be outside sweating his ass off in the June heat. Asshole was probably yucking it up in heaven with Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana.

“Come on, we need to catch up to them.” Ronan took off toward the kids, who’d started running again.

Jude sped up behind him. Salem had been hosting the Witches Dead Run for the last twenty years.

It was always held the weekend after school ended, as a way to send the kids off on their summer adventures.

This was the first year he’d thought to run it, and that was because the money went into the coffers of Wolf’s Class of 2037 for things like field trips, prom, and—gulp—graduation.

Each year, he always donated generously to the cops on the force who walked around the office looking for donations for their kids, but he’d never thought to participate.

Jude figured he was doing his duty to his community by helping put killers behind bars.

Now, he felt like there was so much more he could do to help Salem thrive.

“ Finally , Dad,” Wolf grumped when Jude caught up with him. It wasn’t like his son to have anything less than his usual sunny disposition.

“What’s up with that attitude, Wonder Wolf?” His son was only six, Jude hoped he wasn’t developing a case of the tweens, like kids on the shows they watched together.

“Dad, we’re in last place,” Wolf said, pointing to where the others were rounding the corner onto Prospect Street. “We gotta pick up the pace if we’re going to win. Losing sucks.”

Jude wasn’t sure which issue to address first. Wolf’s attitude on winning or losing.

Taking a deep breath, so he wouldn’t pass out and crack his skull open on the sidewalk, Jude jumped in feet first. “First of all, this isn’t a race.

It doesn’t matter if we come in first or last.” Everyone who finished got the same participation medal, which Jude thought was also awarded to the kids who started, but didn’t finish the two kilometers, or one mile, of the course.

“What matters is that we’re raising money and helping out our city. ”

“Dad,” Wolf began, sounding older than his six years, “I know it’s not a race, but I want to kick Everly’s booty.”

Jude couldn’t help barking a quick laugh. “Why?”

“Because, Everly is the best at everything. She wins every spelling bee. And math quizzes. And reading contests. I just want to beat her at one thing.”

Taking a moment to think over what his son had said, Jude remembered back to his own childhood.

Nearly all of the kids on Navajo Nation looked down on him because he was only half native and because he'd spent his early years in Albuquerque, off-reservation.

Feeling like a second-class citizen pushed him to excel in everything he did.

Unfortunately, it also pushed him to get his ass out of town the second he turned eighteen.

"I used to feel that way too. That I just wanted to win at something, when all I'd ever done was lose. "

"Of course you won, Dad. You're the best at everything too. Making pancakes. Drawing pictures with me. Building LEGO kits. Reading to Lizzy B."

It never crossed Jude's mind that being the best at the things Wolf named meant anything.

Just like now, with the fun run, Jude was enjoying time with his son.

Maybe this change of attitude could help Wolf.

"You're the best at setting the table, singing the goodnight song, keeping your sister safe and helping me wash the car.

Not being the best at school activities isn't the end of the world. You win all the time, buddy."

Wolf was silent for a few seconds.

Jude noticed they were starting to catch up with the others, who were only half a block or so ahead of them. He couldn't help but think that with a burst of speed, he

and Wolf could beat everyone back to Fitzgibbon's house.

"You're right Dad," Wolf agreed easily, "but wouldn't it be great to kick their butts?"

"You know what, Wonder Wolf? It would." Jude knew that winning wasn't everything, but it sure would be fun to see the look on Ronan's face when he ran past him.

"Yay! We're gonna kick sass and take names! Wolf howled and took off running.

Damn straight . Jude put on a burst of speed. He felt like he was getting his second wind. It felt good to put his feet to the pavement and move again. It had been two years since his near-death experience, it was time for him to break free from the things holding him back.

What better way to put his new mindset into practice than by streaking past Fitz and Ronan to the finish line?

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Two days later, Ronan sat at the kitchen table ready to do his part in the color run assembly line.

Earlier that morning, he'd added the two leaves to the kitchen table, extending it nearly into the living room, and taped down newspaper to protect the surface.

Next, he'd spread out bowls of cornstarch and brightly colored icing dye, while Ten measured and cut parchment paper for the mixture to dry on.

They'd also grabbed popsicle sticks to stir the mixture and large zippy bags to put the dried mixture to crush into the colored powder that would be thrown at runners.

"I think that's everything," Ten said, taking a seat at the table. "We're going to have so much fun throwing color."

"You mean instead of running through it?" Ronan asked.

"Hey, you were the one who volunteered to run. I could have done it, but you wanted to go head to head with Jude and Fitz."

"Don't say it like that. We all spent the morning trying to make the kids understand that the fun run isn't a race and that it doesn't matter who wins or loses." What Ronan wasn't going to say out loud was that every word he'd just uttered was pure, unadulterated bullshit.

"Bullshit!" Ten half-shouted. "You are the most competitive man I've ever known, with Jude and Fitz coming in a close second and third. You want to win more than

anything.”

“That’s not true.” It was totally true. He pulled Tennyson into his arms and kissed him, hoping his magical lips would distract his husband from their conversation.

“Stop kissing! Everyone’s here!” Everly shouted from the living room.

Jude and Fitz’s families were coming over to help make the color powder for the fun run. When Everly opened the door, chaos ensued with hugs and shoulder slaps, as if they hadn’t all seen each other two hours before.

“Come into the kitchen,” Ronan called. “We’ve got everything set up. The kids are going to mix the colors. Jude and Cope are going to spread the paste on the parchment paper to dry. Fitz and Jace are gonna break up the dried color paste into powder. Questions? Concerns? Round of applause?”

“Let’s get to it!” Everly grabbed a bowl of cornstarch and the pink food dye.

Ronan, who had been briefly disappointed no one clapped for him, watched as each of the kids expertly stirred the mixture to even out the color. “How did you guys learn to do this?”

“YouTube, Uncle Ronan,” Aurora said, as she tugged on her latex gloves, something Ronan thought all the kids should be wearing, the adults too. By the end of the afternoon, they were all gonna look like rainbows threw up on them.

“It never crossed my mind to look at videos.” The kids had a real handle on technology, Ronan was lucky if he could set the time on the microwave after a power outage.

“That’s because you’re old ,” Aurora said with authority only a six year old could

possess.

Wolf and Everly burst out laughing.

“Well, I guess that means we’re gonna have broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussel sprouts for dinner. I’m too old to call out for pizza.” Ronan limped around the kitchen.

The table erupted into laughter. “It’s okay, Uncle Ronan, my Daddy isn’t as old as you. He can call for pizza, right Super Dad?”

“You got it, Wonder Wolf.” Jude mussed his son’s hair.

“I’m done!” Everly held up her bowl with bright pink cornstarch paste.

Jude took her bowl and handed Everly another one. This time around she chose yellow food dye.

“Is everyone all set with their costumes?” Ten asked. “I’ve got Jude and Wolf’s capes with their letters sewed on.”

“We’re gonna look so cool, Dad!” Wolf held up a bright green hand to high five with Jude. Both father and son looked like Bruce Banner ready to go full Hulk.

“Did you get our shirts from the school this morning, Uncle Ten?” Aurora asked.

“I did!” Ten agreed. “While all of you fabulous athletes were running, Cope and I picked up the shirts.”

“I can’t believe they’re bright white!” Fitz shook his head. “What idiot thought white shirts were a good idea for a color run?”

“That’s the point, for the white shirt to be covered by color,” Everly said. “I want my shirt to have every color in the rainbow.”

“Me too!” Wolf added, dripping orange food dye onto his left hand.

Aurora wore an undecided look.

“I’m still not sure how this is going to go,” Fitz said, softly to Ronan, who switched out Aurora’s purple paste for a new bowl of cornstarch.

“What do you mean?” Ronan asked, pulling Fitz away from the table.

“We almost had a meltdown this morning when our run ended. Aurora was all sweaty and she’d already had her shower for the day.”

“What did you do?” Ronan asked. He knew Aurora had her own schedule and how important it was to keep to it.

“I washed her off with the garden hose. Made a game of it.” Fitz shook his head. “It worked today, but I sure as hell can’t hose her off in January.”

“Let’s take it one day at a time. I’m a summer child. I don’t want to think of winter until after Halloween.” To be honest, Ronan never wanted to think about winter. With winter came snow and him outside in the cold, shovel in hand.

“Well, the race is in two days and I don’t know how Aurora is going to deal with the colored powder being thrown at her.” As Fitzgibbon spoke, Jude held up the swim masks and goggles he’d gotten at Walmart.

Jude pulled on a snorkel mask. “How do I look?” he asked. Jude’s voice sounded squeaky thanks to the mask pinching his nostrils shut.

“Like a giant dork!” Everly giggled.

“Why are you wearing the mask, Dad?” Wolf asked, looking perplexed.

“They’re for the fun run.” Jude handed a pair to Ronan and Fitz, who struggled with the straps to get them on. “So the color doesn’t get in our eyes. As Jude spoke, Cope threw a handful of pink powder at him, most of which stuck to his hair, shirt, and face. “Okay, who’s the wise guy?”

“You caught me pink-handed!” Cope laughed, holding up his colored hands.

“I wanna try that!” Everly said. Wolf was quick to agree. Jude handed each of them smaller pairs of goggles.

Aurora was the only one not scrambling to get face protection.

“These are for you, honey. Do you want to try them on?” Ronan asked.

“Maybe later.” Aurora went back to mixing her red color paste.

“I’ve got an idea,” Ronan whispered to Fitz. “What if we cut a hole at the top of a dry cleaning bag for Aurora? That way people can throw color, but it won’t get on her shirt.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jude said. “The only problem is that the plastic bag could make her get hot and sweaty faster than if she didn’t wear it.”

“Fuck,” Fitz muttered.

“Ready! Aim! Fire!” Everly shouted and threw a handful of pink powder at Wolf, who roared with laughter. Quickly reloading, she hit Ten and Ronan next.

Ronan didn't care if his hair and the kitchen floor were pink.

His daughter was laughing and having fun.

He turned to Aurora who was struggling to put on her goggles.

Ronan quietly stepped over to her and helped put them on.

He knelt in front of her and whispered into Aurora's ear.

The little girl's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

She ran to the counter where Jace was scooping colored powder into plastic drinking cups.

He handed one to Aurora, who dug her hand into the powder and threw it at Jace.

"Gotcha, Dad!" She shouted and ran toward Jude, who stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Don't you dare!" Jude laughed, pretending to run away.

Aurora threw a handful of color at Jude and hit him square in the back. "I got you!"

Fitz squealed when Aurora hit him too. Ronan couldn't remember his friend looking so happy.

Meanwhile, Everly and Wolf were having their own color fight. Both kids were covered in pink and bright blue like Sleeping Beauty's ruined ball gown.

"I wanna try," Aurora said to Everly, still looking a bit uneasy.

“You’re so brave,” Everly said and then dusted Aurora’s shoulder with pink powder just like Tinkerbell would have done.

“That’s it?” Aurora asked.

Ronan wasn’t sure if she was asking about how little powder Everly used or if the light sprinkle was all that happened when the color hit her. Either way, she laughed when Wolf hit her with blue powder.

“We’re gonna need to call that steam cleaning company next week.” Ten laughed.

“Yup!” The kitchen was an absolute disaster but Ronan couldn’t care less.

All of the kids were having a great time and they’d found a way to get Aurora involved without her having a meltdown. Prep for the color run couldn’t get any better. Or could it?

Ronan knew the one thing that would turn the assembly line into a party. Ten would probably kill him, but what a way to go.

Operation Glitter was a go!

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It was the night before the race and volunteers and competitors had all gathered to celebrate and eat together. Jude was starving and thankfully he'd come to the right place. He, Cope and Wolf walked into the food tent situated in the middle of the elementary school's parking lot.

"Now that's amore!" Jude said as he and Cope got into the pasta line.

It was an Italian food wet dream with spaghetti and meatballs, ravioli, manicotti, lasagna, gnocchi, and cold pasta salad.

Not to mention the sauces; pomodoro, alfredo, arrabbiata, and vodka, plus pasta of every shape and size to pour it on.

Last was the chicken parm and hot buttered garlic bread. He had no idea where to start.

Just like with the Boston Marathon, Salem hosted a pasta dinner the night before the race.

The purpose of the meal was for the runners to load up on carbohydrates, which would give them extra energy when they ran the next day.

The runners were also able to pick up their bib numbers. Jude would grab theirs after they ate.

Jace had donated money for the food, while other parents had volunteered to cook, serve, and clean up the meal.

“I want alllll the pasta,” Wolf said, holding his arms wide. “After our run today, I could eat a whole elephant.”

“How about we start with the lasagna and some bread?” Cope asked, serving himself and Wolf.

“With meatballs!” Wolf sang out as he hurried to the table Ronan and Everly were sitting at.

“This is absolutely amazing,” Jude said, filling his plate with gnocchi and drowning them in arrabbiata sauce.

“What is? The amount of hot red pepper flakes in the sauce?” Cope shook his head. “Maybe you should sleep on the front steps so that you don’t set the sheets on fire with your farts.”

“Real grown up.” Jude rolled his eyes, but Cope had a point.

The older he got, the more sensitive his stomach was to spicy food.

His butt was gonna burn for days after eating the sauce.

He could only hope the pepper’s wrath didn’t hit him in the middle of the race.

He’d take a couple of those stop-you-up tablets before bed, just in case.

“I was talking about the way Salem came together for this event. It’s humbling when you think that strangers are doing something amazing for our son’s future. ”

Cope groaned. “Yeah, well, these are the same idiot assholes who fought against us in school committee meetings because they didn’t want their taxes to go up in order to

pay for free school lunch for every kid in Salem.”

“Let it go for one night, babe. Tonight we feast, for tomorrow, I run my ass off.” Jude snickered. He followed behind Cope to the table Ronan had saved for everyone.

“Can someone please tell me why you’re all acting like you’re running the Boston marathon tomorrow?” Cope asked, taking a seat at the table. “The race is 2K, which is one mile. You could each walk it in about twenty minutes.”

“I know you worship me like an Olympian god, but I hate to break it to you, I’m a little out of shape.” Jude pressed a kiss to Cope’s cheek.

“Can someone find out what’s in the arrabbiata sauce, it’s making my husband hallucinate.” Cope rolled his eyes and spiraled spaghetti onto his fork. “Olympian god, my ass.”

“The race is designed to be short so that the kids can participate,” Jace said.

“Which I think is a great idea to get kids into the idea of exercise for fun and it’s a good intro to philanthropy.

” Jace angled his chin toward Aurora. “One day, she’s going to be running the largest nonprofit in Massachusetts.

Today gets my daughter one step closer to understanding what I do for a living.

It’s easy to explain what you guys do.” Jace pointed to Ronan, Fitz, and Jude. “It’s not the same for me.”

Aurora, her chin covered in tomato sauce and oblivious to the weighty conversation about her future, laughed at something Wolf said.

Jude couldn't help but wonder if Aurora would want to follow in Jace's footsteps.

What if she wanted to be a detective like Fitz?

He hadn't really given a lot of thought to what Wolf and Lizbet wanted to be when they grew up.

Whatever his kids wanted to do, Jude would be behind them one hundred percent.

He would never be disappointed if they decided against law enforcement, but he wondered if the same could be said for Jace if Aurora decided to design naughty lingerie instead of helping to feed and clothe the needy.

"Hey, Everly!" a group of three girls waved from across the tent. Each of them were holding a fun run bib. "Hi, Aurora!"

The girls waved back. "There's a lot of kids in our class here tonight," Everly said, looking around the room. "I think they're all gonna run tomorrow."

"Oh no, here comes Kenny P." Wolf ducked down behind Jude.

"The boy that barfed all over the kids sitting in front of him and got the math test cancelled?" Jace asked.

Jude nodded. "Yup, that's the one and only Kenny P. If projectile vomiting were an Olympic sport he'd have half a dozen gold medals."

"Christ, I hope that little puke fountain hasn't eaten yet." Ronan snorted.

"Hi, Everly," Kenny sneered, his fuzzy, yellow teeth on full display.

“Hi, Kenny.” Everly offered a sweet smile in return.

“You’re gonna get your booty kicked tomorrow!” Kenny laughed.

“Says who?” Everly asked, her face brightened as she spoke, as if she’d just gotten a valuable piece of information from her gift.

“Says me. I could run backward and I’d still beat you!” Kenny beamed. “I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back.”

Everly’s smile grew bigger. “Great! That will leave you with one free hand to pick your nose, Booger Boy.”

Jude let out a little snort. His shoulders shook as he tried to hold his laugh back. He made the mistake of looking at Ronan, who appeared to be trying just as hard to keep quiet. It wasn’t working.

“Oh, there you are Kenny,” a man approached the table. “I thought we’d lost you.”

“We couldn’t get that lucky!” Ronan whispered, on a wheeze that turned into a cough.

“How are you, Peter?” Fitz asked, shooting Ronan and Jude a warning look. “Looking forward to the color run tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid I’ve got other plans.” Peter wore a triumphant look as if to say his plans were far superior to a charity event for his son’s class. “I’m on the fast track to becoming a partner at Mahoney & Keller.”

“Oh, so you’ll be out chasing ambulances during the race?” Jude asked. “You people have got a gimmick for everything. Struck in the eye with colored powder during a

charity fun run? You deserve compensation! Call the offices of Dickhead & Asshole!”

Peter’s eyes darkened. “While you’re running your ass ragged, I’ll be playing eighteen holes with the senior partners in the medical malpractice department.”

Jude had the perfect comeback for this dumb shit, but held his tongue when Fitz kicked him under the table.

“We have people set up all over the course to shoot video and still pics. I’m sure someone will grab a shot of Kenny digging for nose gold,” Fitz said.

“Great,” Peter said, sounding as if it was anything but. “Send them to my wife, Peggy.” Peter turned to his son, famed projectile vomiter and booger connoisseur, Kenny P. “Say goodbye to your little friend.”

“Bye, Everly.” Kenny flared his nostrils, making him look like the little piggy who went to market. He strode away with his father, while Peggy followed with her nose in the air.

“What a horrible family.” Jude said, when they’d left the food tent.

“With a Dad like that, no wonder Kenny P. eats his boogers.” Everly shook her head and grabbed her fork. “Daddy, I know we had a long talk about the race being for fun and blah, blah, blah, but I need you to help me beat Kenny P. tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” Ronan snickered. “How about I trip him, so you can cross the finish line first?”

“Or I could push him into a ditch, if you think that would help?” Jude asked. What he’d give to put that little booger snot— pun intended— in his place.

“Thanks, Uncle Jude, but I gotta beat Booger Boy fair and square.”

“We’re all gonna beat him,” Aurora said, sounding sure of herself. “Right, Woofie?”

“Right! Wonder Wolf to the rescue!”

“We’ll discuss strategy later tonight.” Ronan winked at Everly. “Between all of us, I’m sure we can come up with a plan to sink Kenny P’s battleship.”

“Teamwork makes the scheme work, right guys?” Jude asked.

Jude knew as a grown ass man it was his job to rise above elementary school taunting and name callings, but that little snot had gotten under Jude’s skin. Everly was going to cross the finish line ahead of Kenny P. if Jude had to carry her.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

The morning of the fun run, Ronan stood in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee.

He knew he should have been drinking water and eating a protein bar like Everly was.

Ten had already fed Ezra and was upstairs getting him dressed.

Kaye was going to be on the race sidelines with the kids to help throw color at the runners, although, truth be told, Ronan had a feeling Ezzie and Lizbet were going to end up throwing color at each other. He couldn't wait to see the pictures.

Ronan also couldn't wait to see Everly make Kenny P. eat his words along with his boogers.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" Everly asked, from her seat at the kitchen table.

Smiling at his daughter, Ronan sat across from her. "I was thinking about Kenny P. and how he talked to you last night."

Everly sighed. "He's like that with everyone, except his friends. He wants to be better than everyone else."

"Right," Ronan agreed, "just like his father."

"I'm glad I'm just like you, Daddy." Everly finished her glass of juice and sat it down with a thud.

“I had so many mean things I could have said to Kenny P. last night and I don’t know how, but I swallowed them.

Part of me wanted to let the little turd have it, but the other part, the part that’s like you, wanted to make you proud of me. ”

“I’ll always be proud of you. Even if you had said all the mean things in your head last night, because it would have meant you were standing up for yourself.

” Ronan, for his part, had kept his big mouth shut as well.

He had several good comebacks for that kid and his asshole father, but reined them in so he wouldn’t embarrass his family.

Kenny P. seemed like the kind of little snot to hold a grudge.

His father, even more so, and with the resources of a powerful law firm behind him.

“Dad always tells me I have to pick my battles, just like he does with you when you’re being a dumbass.” Everly giggled. “So I picked my battle and stayed quiet.”

“You and me both.” Ronan grinned at his daughter.

“What we need to do now is come up with a plan to help you beat Kenny P.” All of Ronan’s ideas would get him arrested and thrown off the force.

Like covering the kid in honey and sticking him on an ant hill, or tripping him just shy of the finish line.

He hoped to hell Everly had a better, child appropriate, idea.

“I’m just gonna run my race, Daddy,” Everly said simply, sounding much older than six.

“I spent a lot of time last night thinking of ways I could trick or hurt Kenny P., but those ideas upset me. I didn’t like how those thoughts made me feel.

Nana Erin came to see me last night and we had a long chat about why I wanted to run in the first place. ”

Ronan felt his heart pinch in his chest. Erin should be here in the flesh giving her granddaughter advice and baking cookies and going shopping.

He knew Everly being able to speak to his mother’s spirit was so much better than what other kids went through when they lost parents or grandparents, but still, it would never be fair that Erin had to watch Everly and Ezra grow up from the other side.

“Why do you want to run today?” Ronan had never asked his daughter why. He’d just accepted she’d wanted to be a part of the fundraiser and threw his hat into the ring so they could run together.

Everly wore a thoughtful look. “Lots of reasons. I want to run to see if I can do it, because I’m not sure if I can.”

It had never crossed Ronan’s mind that Everly couldn’t run and complete the 2K.

“I’m definitely sure you can.” When she crossed the finish line and was awarded her medal, Everly would get such a huge boost to her self-confidence.

His daughter always seemed so self-assured, so comfortable in her own skin.

It was hard to think about Everly struggling with confidence.

“Thanks, Daddy.” Everly ran around the table to Ronan and gave him a hug. “I also want to do the race to have fun with Aurora and Woofie. She’s worried about not being able to finish and about getting sweaty, but I told her that doing hard things makes her brave.”

If Ronan had a nickel for every time he or Ten had said that exact thing to Everly, they could buy their own island in the Caribbean. “Speaking of Aurora...”

“Uh, oh! Gotta go!” Everly tried to pull away from Ronan, but he wouldn’t let her break loose.

“Not so fast!” Ronan tried to sound menacing, but ended up laughing at himself. Everly knew damn well he wasn’t angry at her.

Everly sighed and stopped trying to squirm away from Ronan. “You want to talk about my little white lie to Aurora about getting a two-wheeler.”

“Yes, I do,” Ronan agreed easily. “On the one hand, I’m proud of you for doing everything you could to motivate Aurora into joining in all the fun. I think she would have regretted not running after you and Wolf finished.”

Everly beamed at her father. “I love helping Aurora.”

“I know you do.” Ronan’s favorite thing about his daughter was her empathy. “However, as proud as I am, you wrote a check your little ass can’t cash.”

“What does that mean?”

“You told Aurora I was gonna buy you a bike, which made Wolf ask Jude for one,

and the same with Aurora asking Fitz. Their dads might not be ready or able to get bikes now. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Everly shook her head. "I didn't until I read you, Daddy. You guys had a plan to get us all bikes together so that no one felt left out. I'm proud of you, that's a good idea." She patted his shoulder.

"As it turned out, Fitz was so happy Aurora wanted to participate in the fun run that he's willing to jump on the bandwagon and get her a two-wheeler. Same with Jude, who was just waiting until you and Aurora were ready to handle bigger bikes."

"What about you? Are you a band dragon?" Everly asked.

Ronan could see the worry in Everly's eyes. She obviously wasn't reading him at the moment or she would have seen a new bike in her future. "Yeah, I'm a band dragon too, but..."

"Uh, oh," Everly muttered. "I shouldn't have promised something I couldn't deliver, right?"

"Right," Ronan agreed. "The information you get from your gift isn't always yours to give away. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Everly shook her head.

"If I tell you I'm gonna get Dad a new car for his birthday, that's a secret between us, right?" Ronan wished he could get Ten a bitchin' Corvette, but the closest he'd be able to come was a toy car from the store.

"Right."

“So, if you go to Dad and tell him I’m gonna get him a Mercedes for his birthday, that’s not your secret to tell. Do you see what I’m saying?”

Everly nodded.

“Make it a BMW and you’ve got a deal!” Ten laughed as he walked into the kitchen. “It’s time to put on your costume. Give me a shout if you need help.”

“Okay, Dad.” Everly sprinted out of the room.

“Were you talking about the bike situation?” Ten asked, pressing a kiss to Ronan’s lips.

“Yeah, but I don’t know if I’m explaining it right. I told Everly that not everything her gift tells her is something she should share.”

“I definitely need to work with her on that. Figuring out what to keep to myself and what to reveal wasn’t an easy lesson to learn.”

“I agree, but we need to teach Everly that she can’t promise things that are above her pay grade.”

Ten snickered. “We’ll work on it together. What’s your plan for the race today? I know you’re both upset about Kenny P.”

“Everly told me she had a chat with my mom last night and decided that she just wanted to go out there today and have fun with me and her friends. To be honest, it’s what I should have urged her to do in the first place.

I hate bullies and the idea of someone trying to hurt our daughter, even if it’s a first grade classmate, makes my blood boil.

As a father, it's my job to turn down the temperature, but instead, I feel like I only turned it up. ”

“You did just fine, Ronan. The most important things we can teach our kids is how to handle themselves in this scary, ugly world we live in. This is just another lesson in Everly's ongoing education. The thing to focus on here is that it upset her to think about striking back at that rotten kid.”

“You're right.” Ronan knew this was a big takeaway for their daughter. “I just wish there weren't assholes in the world bent on hurting people.”

“Come on, Ronan, it's the assholes and their karma who make life interesting.” Ten grinned at Ronan. “That and glitter.”

Ronan barked a laugh. “I can't wait to pass your color station. I want to shimmer like Snow White's diamond mine!”

“We'll be stationed by the bank, which is near the end of the course.”

“People are gonna lose their shit when they start to sparkle like Twilight vampires!” Ronan still couldn't believe Ten had been onboard with his crazy idea to add glitter to the color powder.

Thanks to several trips to local craft stores, everyone who participated in the Salem Witches Fun Run was going to shine bright like a million diamonds.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

Jude stood with the other runners going through pre-race stretches. His glutes were a little tight, but that wouldn't keep him from the start line. As far as he was concerned nothing would stop him from running alongside his son, nieces, and best friends.

“You realize these kids are going to smoke our asses, right?” Ronan asked.

He was leaning from side to side following along with Greg Prentiss, the elementary school's gym teacher, as he stressed how important warming up was before the race.

Ronan looked like a million bucks in his pink tutu and curly wig.

It was on the tip of Jude's tongue to tell Ronan the only thing getting smoked would be their victory cigars, but he knew his annoying best friend was right on the money.

Wolf had been running non-stop for the last two hours and still had tons of energy to spare.

Not only was Wolf going to kick his ass, but everyone else's as well.

"Oh, yeah. The kids will be across the finish line before any of us even find our stride."

“Speak for yourselves.” Fitzgibbon crowed.

He was dressed in a pair of black running shorts and a purple tutu, which highlighted his ass, along with a Salem Witches Dead Run tee that was stretched to bursting across his broad chest. On his head was a witch's hat headband sitting at a jaunty

angle.

Fitz looked like a million bucks. Maybe fifty was the new thirty.

“I’m kicking everyone’s ass today. Especially yours.

” He pointed a finger back and forth between Jude and Ronan.

Jude rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, before the ass kicking starts, can you help me with my cape?” Jude held it out to Ronan.

Thankfully, Ten had added Velcro to the strings of the red Super Jude cape so that he wouldn’t accidentally suffocate himself, or strangle if someone grabbed the cape from behind and pulled tight.

“Tilt your chin back.” Ronan fastened the cape. “Ten must have gotten the idea for the Velcro from that tear-away toga he loves to wear when we roleplay as Maximus Erectus and Titus Assicus!”

“EW! TMI!” Jude batted Ronan’s hands away. “I’ll never unsee that.”

“You think Ten could make something like that for Jace and me?” Fitzgibbon waggled his eyebrows.

Jude barked a quick laugh. This was hardly the time or place for a discussion about well hung gladiators and their costumes, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Cope would enjoy a break from their norm.

“Racers, line up!” Prentiss called. He waved his arms back and forth. “Goggles on! Everyone keep in mind that we’ve got little runners among us this morning. Watch your step and your language.”

All eyes turned to Jude, who rolled his eyes.

His language wasn't that colorful, although there was enough money in Wolf's swear jar to buy all of the neighborhood kids two new bikes, but that was beside the point.

He put on his goggles and bent low to help Wolf, who somehow managed to have his turned inside out.

"Okay everyone, time for a startling line selfie!" Fitz knelt on the ground and gathered everyone around him. "Say Salem Witches Dead Run!"

The kids shouted, while Fitz took several snaps of the group. Jude couldn't help thinking the picture would be great for Christmas cards.

"Runners take your mark!" Prentiss shouted. "Get set! GO!"

Jude watched the crowd in front of him start off. Wolf was standing at his side, jumping up and down. Christ, if Jude had been bouncing around like that, he'd need a nap.

"Let's go!" Wolf howled at the sky and took off running. Aurora and Everly were right behind him.

"Guess the kids aren't going to stay with us." Ronan snorted.

"We're gonna have to stay with them!" Fitz took off running. He was the tallest man around, which Jude knew would give him a clearer view of where the kids were.

With a high five, Jude and Ronan took off together. Jude knew the key to getting through the run was to keep a steady pace. He was about to tell Ronan that very thing when he was hit with bright blue color powder. He might have been wearing goggles,

but his mouth was wide open.

“Gotcha!” Cisco Jackson shouted triumphantly. Other members of the Salem Police Department were handing out water, which Jude grabbed to wash out his mouth.

“You look like you went down on Smurfette!” Ronan laughed.

“More like Papa Smurf!” Jude grinned.

Colored powder flew at them from all angles. The back of Ronan’s shirt was purple, while his front was green. Jude was covered in yellow, making him look like Big Bird. “Uh, oh, trouble ahead.” Jude could see Fitzgibbon kneeling off to the side of the road. The kids were with him.

When Jude reached them, he could see Everly and Aurora laughing their little asses off. “What’s so funny? Is everyone okay?”

“Woofie got hit by the Greensboro twins.” Fitz moved to the side to reveal half of Wolf’s head was orange, while the other half was pink. His mouth was a gaudy mix of the two.

“They love me!” Wolf said with a large grin. “I just wish their aim was better.” Wolf took a mouthful of water, gargled, and spat it out. “Wonder Wolf is ready to go, go, go!” Without waiting for the others, Wolf took off. Both girls were behind him, with Ronan in hot pursuit.

“Looks like the Greensboro twins love you too, Fitzzy!” Jude pointed at Fitzgibbon’s legs, one was pink, the other orange.

“Wolf’s right, their aim is for shit, plus the girls are only three feet tall, so that helped.

” Fitzgibbon chuckled. “Let’s get back at it.

I don’t want Aurora getting too far ahead of me.

She’s done well so far with Everly by her side reminding her how much fun it is to get hit with a rainbow of colors, but I’m not sure how much longer that mood will last.”

Jude ran alongside Fitz, periodically hearing Wonder Wolf’s howl. He assumed the call went up every time he got hit with color. “Have you and Jace told Aurora about adopting a baby?”

Fitz shook his head. “Not yet. We want to wait until Jace is home full time. We’ll let her get used to that change in her life and then we’ll talk about becoming a big sister. I’m worried how she’ll take it.”

To be honest, Jude was worried too. Aurora had been an only child for six years and had two fathers who doted on her every need. “Cope and Wolf brought Lizbet home when I was still in the hospital.”

“I remember,” Fitz said.

“I told him he needed to be his little sister’s protector, since I couldn’t go home with them.

He took to it like a duck to water. Don’t get me wrong, there were times when he was jealous of all the attention Lizbet got, but on the whole, he responded well to having a task.

Maybe Aurora would be the same way, you know, let her know there’s no job more important than being a big sister. ”

Fitz grinned, just as neon pink color flew their way thanks to a group of Aurora's first grade classmates. "Got you, Captain Fitz!"

Jude howled, imitating Wolf and stood still while the kids let him have it.

"I like that idea about playing up how important it is being a big sister," Fitz said, once they were on their way again. "Aurora likes to feel needed."

"We all do, Fitz!" Jude clapped his friend on the shoulder. His hand came away purple. "Now, what I need is to kick Ronan's ass. You in?"

"Yup! Let's get him!"

The last marker indicated there was half a mile left in the run. Cope, Ten, Kaye, and the littlest kids were just up ahead. He wanted Lizbet to be proud of her father. Hell, if he was able to beat Ronan, maybe Cope would reward him by blowing the rainbow.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

Ronan grinned as he ran past the half mile mark.

He was feeling good so far. Before he and Ten had met, Ronan used to run five miles a day in South Boston, along the harbor to Castle Island and back.

It had been part of his rehab recovery. When he was in Florida at the facility that helped him turn his life around, he'd started running on the beach like Rocky and Apollo Creed.

Back in those days, he could have sprinted the mile and would have crossed the finish line in eight minutes.

Now, being woefully out of shape, he was breathing heavy and not just because of the colored powder flying at him and into his lungs.

Ronan looked like he'd taken a bath inside a rainbow.

The other reason for his slower pace was the kids.

He could see Everly's bright pink wig up ahead.

With Wolf howling every time he got hit with color, Ronan was able to keep easy track of the three first graders.

As for Fitz and Jude, Ronan heard them talking about adoption and he'd run ahead to give them privacy.

Ronan knew it was a big step to bring another child into an established family.

Everly hadn't taken too well to Ezra when he first came home.

It had taken time and a lot of patience for Everly to feel comfortable with the tiny, crying intruder.

Maybe her struggles with becoming a big sister would help Aurora on her own journey.

Up ahead, he could see Ten and Cope who were cheering the runners and hitting them with glitter color. The runners sparkled as they ran on from the color station. He knew Aurora and Everly were going to lose their minds when they got hit with the shimmering powder.

An abbreviated howl went up from Wolf. Ronan had a feeling the little boy realized he'd just been bedazzled. Cope and Wolf were laughing together as Aurora and Everly twirled while Ten sprinkled them in fairy dust.

"My turn!" Ronan took Everly's place showering in the glitter and pink powder it had been mixed with. "How are people reacting to the glitter?"

"Most are thrilled," Ten said. He sparkled from head to toe. "I've heard a lot of people complain about how glitter is the herpes of the craft world."

"What the hell does that even mean?" Ronan asked. Could you get an STI from craft supplies?

Ten snickered. "It means once you get it, you're stuck with it for life. My guess is that we'll still be finding glitter in our house when Everly graduates from high school."

“I hope so, Dad! Every day should be filled with glitter!” Everly held her arms in the sunlight, watching them sparkle.

“Boom!” Ezra cried, throwing powder at Everly’s feet.

“Boo!” Lizbet echoed, doing the same to Aurora.

“Oh, my goodness? Is that my little girl?” Jude asked, scooping Lizbet up. The little girl was covered from head to toe in color. “You look like a crayon box come to life.”

“Me, cray, cray!” Lizbet proclaimed, self-identifying as a crayon. She set her hands on Jude’s chest, leaving her colorful, sparkling handprints behind.

“Go get Uncle Fitz!” Jude urged, setting his daughter down. Lizbet ran to the bucket of pink glittering powder, grabbed two handfuls and ran toward Fitzgibbon.

“Itz!” Lizbet squealed, throwing her powder against Fitzgibbon’s legs.

“You got me!” Fitz’s legs sparkled like he was a member of the Rockettes.

“Wun!” Ezra shouted, pointing toward the other runners. “Dada, wun!”

“Okay, gang, the finish line is in sight. Are you all ready to go?” Ronan asked.

“Wonder Wolf!” The little boy howled and started running. The girls were at his side.

“My hero!” Ten gushed. “I’ve got a reward for you at home!” He waggled his eyebrows.

Ronan snorted. “I hope it’s pain cream. I already ache from head to toe.”

“Come on, Gramps!” Jude tugged Ronan’s arm. “You doing okay?”

“All good,” Ronan agreed, knowing Jude was asking about more than the race. He’d been struggling the last few weeks with a case he’d been assigned. Three of the original witnesses had died or moved and the rest didn’t want to relive the trauma of Stephen Maxwell’s 1989 murder.

“Are you sure that’s your final answer?” Jude asked, nudging his friend.

Ronan sighed. “I’m frustrated as fuck,” Ronan whispered, not wanting to offend any of the little ears running near he and Jude. “This case isn’t stuck in neutral, it’s in reverse.”

“What’s Ten got to say about it?”

“I haven’t shown it to him yet.” Ronan had known this question was coming, he also knew Jude was going to ask him why the hell not.

“Hmm,” Jude muttered. “You don’t always want Ten sweeping in to save the day.”

“Right,” Ronan agreed, happy that Jude understood where he was coming from. “I became a cop so that I could solve crimes. Use my skills and my gut to get to the truth and arrest the guilty parties. There’s not a lot of police work in Ten telling me that the butler did it.”

“Sure there is,” Jude disagreed, as he ducked low when a group of high school girls threw neon green powder at him and Ronan. “Ten might point you in the right direction, but you still have to follow that tip with evidence, just like you would from any other witness or bystander.”

Ronan thought about what Jude was saying. “I live for those eureka moments, when suddenly all of the evidence makes sense.”

“We all do,” Jude agreed, “but from time to time, we need help from our colleagues,

who happen to be friends.”

“You’re right. I’ll show you what I’ve got on the Maxwell case when we’re back in the office. We’ll see if two minds are better than one.” Ronan had more to say on the matter when he noticed Everly’s bright pink wig, bent over something on the ground. “Looks like trouble.”

When Ronan reached the kids, he saw that Everly and Wolf were trying to help Kenny P.

back to his feet. The boy’s left knee was bleeding.

“First aid coming through.” Ronan reached into his fanny pack and pulled out some rolled gauze.

Jude handed him a bottle of water, which Ronan used to wash away the one color no one wanted to see on the race course.

“Am I gonna die?” Kenny P. asked, with snot running from his nose toward his lip.

“Nope! In a minute, you’ll be good as new.” Ronan wrapped the gauze around Kenny’s leg, praying that the kid wasn’t about to snack on the snot.

Jude bent lower and wiped Kenny’s nose. “Okay, champ, back on your feet.” He gently helped the kid stand. He didn’t seem any worse for wear.

“You can run with us, Kenny P.,” Everly said.

Kenny looked for a minute like he was going to refuse, but instead smiled and ran alongside Everly, Aurora, and Wolf.

Ronan grimaced at the boy who seemed to be swerving closer to Everly. “I swear if

he does anything to trip Everly at the end-”

Jude slapped a hand over Ronan’s mouth. “Let’s not go there, okay? You did a good deed. I think that kid is going to do one back. Let’s get behind them, just in case.” Jude and Ronan jogged after the kids.

“Hey, there you are!” Fitz said, coming up alongside Ronan. “Everything okay?”

“The kids stopped to help Kenny P. after he fell and skinned his knee.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t pushed?” Jude asked. “The kid seems to have more haters than cauliflower.”

“Maybe this lesson in kindness from our kids will help him turn a new page.” Ronan very much doubted it, but for the moment everything was coming up roses. “There’s the finish line!” Ronan pointed ahead. He watched in wonder as all four of the kids crossed the line hand in hand.

“Make sure you slather Everly in hand sanitizer. She was holding the hand with Kenny P’s booger finger.” Jude grimaced.

“Let’s follow in the kids footsteps.” Fitz held out a hand to Ronan, which he took before holding his out to Jude. All three men crossed the finish line in perfect sync.

“I did it!” Aurora said, looking stunned. “I ran the whole race!” She wore an awed look, which morphed into an ear to ear smile when one of the race organizers looped a medal ribbon over her head.

“We all did it!” Everly shouted. She wrapped her arms around Aurora and the girls jumped up and down together. Wolf and Kenny P. joined in. All of their medals bounced up and down on their chests.

“That’s what today is all about,” Ronan said, pointing to his daughter celebrating with her friends. As he watched, more kids from the class of 2037 swarmed them. “This little victory is going to do the kids so much good.”

“Agreed,” Fitzgibbon said, wiping tears from his face. “I was afraid Aurora wouldn’t be able to reach the finish line and that’s my fault. She’s spent her entire life fighting, overcoming obstacles, thriving, and winning. There’s nothing Aurora can’t do.”

“Same goes for Wonder Wolf and my Lizzy B,” Jude agreed.

“Ditto for Everly and Ezzie.” Ronan pulled his phone from his pocket and started filming as the kids continued to celebrate together.

The only time they broke apart was to cheer others across the finish line and to help struggling runners do the same.

Everly, Wolf, and Aurora had earned their two-wheelers, and then some.

Thanks to donations, volunteers, and participants, this day was a win for the City of Salem.

People showed up to make the future brighter for the soon to be second grade class.

The medal was just eye candy, the real prize was the kids realizing there was a champion inside each and every one of them.

THE END