



# Dead Sick (Cold Case Psychic #31)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** What's worse than being stuck in bed with the flu? Being quarantined with your two best friends.

When Ronan O'Mara wakes up stuffy and coughing, his family wants nothing to do with him. Upon hearing the other cold case detectives are sick too, Tennyson suggests the three men bunk together, so no one else gets sick.

Over the course of the day, the detectives steal snacks, fight over soup, and share secrets. Will Ronan, Jude, and Fitzgibbon survive being dead sick? Or each other?

**Total Pages (Source):** 7

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Ronan

Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here

“Achoo!” Ronan O’Mara sneezed into the crook of his elbow. His nose tingled and the back of his throat was scratchy. The symptoms had come on after lunch the day before. Ronan hoped he was just worn out, but he was really beginning to feel like he was coming down with a cold. January colds were the absolute worst. He should have stayed in Florida where the temps were in the mid-seventies today, instead of Massachusetts where the mercury had dipped below zero.

“Ew! Bless you,” Everly said, easing off the sofa. She grabbed the box of tissues on the coffee table and handed them to her father.

“Thanks.” He grabbed a tissue just in time for the next sneeze.

“Ronan! Are you sick?” Ten asked as he rushed into the living room.

“No. I’m fine. Just an allergy. Probably from shoveling snow yesterday.” His nose tickled and before he could stop it, he sneezed again.

Everly backed away from Ronan. “Daddy, can I go to Woofie’s house? I don’t want to stay here with Dad and his goo.”

“My goo?” Ronan asked. He tried to laugh at his daughter, but started coughing instead. It was a deep rumble, which instantly made Ronan worry. He usually got a runny nose when he finished shoveling snow, but he’d never had a cough, and this

was definitely a cough and a chunky one at that.

“You’re all drippy and icky.” Everly shook her head and ran toward the kitchen.

Ronan ordinarily would have chased after her and tickled her, but he didn’t have the energy to get up, never mind run. He nodded miserably. There was no doubt about it. Ronan was sick.

“Hey, Cope,” Ten said, with his phone on speaker. “Everly wants to know if she can come over to play with Wolf?”

A loud hacking sound came through the phone followed by two quick sneezes. “That’s not really the best idea today. Jude’s coming down with something and I don’t want to expose Everly to his creeping crud.”

“Crud?” an outraged-sounding Jude shouted. “It’s all his fault!”

“My fault?” Ronan shouted, his voice breaking. “What the hell did I do?” He sank his head into his hands. Yelling hurt.

“You’re the one who gave me the plague!” Jude moaned before he started coughing again.

“Are you feeling sick too?” Ten asked.

“No, I’m okay, so far. Same for Wolf and Lizbet,” Cope sounded relieved.

“That’s good. I’ll call Fitz and see how things are over there.”

“Hold on, Fitz is calling me. I’ll put you on three-way,” Cope said. “Which button do I press?”

“First time we have a three-way and I feel like I got run over by a dump truck. Figures,” Ronan grumped.

“Hey, Cope!” Fitz said, and sneezed. “Can you watch Aurora? I feel like shit and Jace won’t be home for a few hours.”

“No can do,” Cope said. “Jude’s sick too.”

“Same with Ronan,” Ten said.

“Good! It’s Ronan’s fault anyway,” Fitz muttered.

Too exhausted to fight, Ronan gasped. If his so-called friends wanted to blame him, they could, but he remembered Fitz sneezing first. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

“I’ve got an idea,” Ten said, taking a step back from Ronan, who was coughing again. “Why don’t we come stay at Cope’s house while Fitz, Jude, and Ronan stay here?”

“Sold!” Cope said. “I’ll disinfect everything Jude touched. Tonight we’ll call out for Thai food and we’ll watch a family movie.”

“What about me?” Ronan asked, sounding absolutely miserable. “Who’s gonna make me soup and rub Vicks on my chest?” As much as he hated to admit it, Ronan knew he sounded absolutely pitiful.

“We’ll order you some soup and have it delivered by a man in a hazmat suit.” Ten snorted. He tried and failed to cover it with a cough. “As for the Vicks, I’m sure Jude can do it for you.”

Ronan's mouth fell open. "What?" He could hear Jude bellow through the phone, sounding equally indignant.

"Look," Cope said. "It's been a crazy new year already. Why don't the three of you sack out at Ronan's. You can watch movies and help each other through this. I think we can all agree that the last thing any of us wants is for the kids to get sick, right?"

"Right," Jude muttered.

"Yeah," Ronan agreed.

"You're all big boys," Ten said, sounding dubious. "Take care of each other and we'll see where things stand in the morning."

Jude muttered something almost unintelligible, but sounded a lot like "Get fucked."

"Think of it as a slumber party for adults. You'll have yummy food, snacks, movies, and the company of your best friends." Ten smiled brightly.

Ronan grimaced. "Adult slumber parties involve naked revelry and lots of lube."

"To each their own!" Cope chirped. "I'll pack a bottle in Jude's bag."

Jude roared, sounding a lot like a caged lion in the zoo.

"I'll send him over in half an hour with snacks." Cope sounded hopeful. "Text me in a bit to put in your request for medicines and we'll drop off what you need."

"Along with more snacks," Ten added. "It will be fun. You'll see." If Ten's smile was anymore forced, he was going to end up cracking teeth.

“Yeah, I’ll see all right.” Crossing his arms over his chest, Ronan pouted.

“With three cold case detectives under one roof, what could possibly go wrong?” Cope asked.

Only everything. Groaning, Ronan sank his head into his hands. It was going to be a long night.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Jude

FML...

Jude was going to die, and it would be all Ronan's fault. He, Ronan, and Fitz had spent the entire day on Friday in their office above West Side Magick reading case files and trying to decide which would be the next unsolved murder to investigate. All the while, Ronan had been sniveling and sneezing with no regard for his or Fitz's safety.

Saturdays were Jude's favorite day of the week. He and Wolf got up early to have breakfast together at Dunkin's. Jude loved the glazed donuts, while Wolf went for the chocolate crullers, or crawlers, as Wolfie called them. After they'd eaten, Jude would grab a chocolate chip muffin for Cope and a few munchkins for his own munchkin, Lizbet.

After breakfast, father and son would have a snowball fight and talk about their week after the match was won. It never failed to surprise Jude how much Wolf's advice helped him in his life, especially when dealing with people who aggravated him. At the moment, Ronan was at the top of the list. It was all his fault that Jude and Wolf had to cancel their long-standing breakfast ritual.

"Okay," Cope said, coming down the stairs with Jude's large rolling suitcase. "You're all packed and ready to go!"

"You said it was only for one night! It looks like you've got enough packed in there for a month!" Jude had a bad feeling about this. The idea of being away from his

family, even from across the street, was hard to take. He couldn't remember the last time he and Cope hadn't slept in the same bed.

"I put your pillow and favorite blanket in there. That's why the suitcase looks so full." Cope patted Jude's shoulder, before wiping his now contaminated hand on his flannel sleep pants.

"Bye, Daddy!" Wolf said from the couch. His eyes didn't leave the television screen.

"Da! Da!" Lizbet shouted before turning back to the movie she and Wolf were watching.

"Okay, out you go." Cope opened the front door, but stood back from it.

"No one loves me." Jude's usual plays for sympathy were all in good fun. This was an actual cry for help.

"Don't you think you're being just a touch dramatic?" Cope asked, biting his bottom lip.

"No, I don't. You and Ten are going to have a marvelous time with your wine and Thai food and snacks. Meanwhile, I'll be stuck with Ronan who snores like a freight train and Fitz, who...who?" There had to be something annoying about Fitzgibbon. "He's too damn happy. See!" Jude pointed down the street where Fitz and Aurora were skipping and singing. "Seriously, you want me to spend the weekend with Gene Frickin' Kelly?"

Cope laughed. "It's going to be fine. I promise. Think of it this way. You'll all be able to get some rest without the kids jumping on you or talking too loudly or having a tantrum over something. We'll make sure to send over food and other comfort items."



“Okay, I’m going.” Jude picked up his suitcase and headed out the door, meeting Fitz and Aurora on the sidewalk.

“Bye, sickos!” Aurora said with a quick wave before dashing up the steps and into the house with her suitcase.

“Did your daughter just call us sickos?” Jude asked, then sneezed.

“I tried to explain it to her, but...” Fitz shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s get to Ronan’s and find out what’s what.” Grabbing the handle of his suitcase, Fitz looked both ways and crossed the street.

Jude followed behind him. Maybe Cope was right, and this was for the best. Ronan and Fitz couldn’t be that annoying for twenty-four hours straight, could they?

“Hey, guys!” Ten said. He stood at the foot of his stoop. “You ready for the sleepover?” His voice was so cheerful that Jude wanted to throw up.

“Yeah.” Jude coughed into his elbow as Everly came out the front door dragging her suitcase behind her. In her free arm was a stuffed unicorn with a purple mane.

“You look terrible, Uncle Jude.” Everly smiled up at him.

“Gee, thanks.” Jude tried not to take Everly’s words to heart, but it didn’t work. First he was kicked out of his house, not kissed goodbye, practically ignored by his kids, and insulted by his favorite nieces. So far the sleepover was going swimmingly.

“You’re gonna be okay. I promise.” Everly patted Jude’s arm and taking Ezra’s hand, hurried to catch up with Ten. “Dad’s got barf buckets for everyone. In different colors!”

“Barf buckets?” Jude asked, feeling his stomach lurch. He turned to Fitzgibbon who looked equally as nauseated.

“If you need anything, we’re just a phone call away.” Ten hurried across the street. A huge cheer went up when Wolf opened the door to greet Everly.

“You see that?” Jude muttered miserably. Wolf was happy to see his friend, but barely said goodbye to his father. If this kept up, Jude would be bawling by lunchtime. He wasn’t built for being sick.

“Let’s get into the house. I’m dying out here.” Fitzgibbon hoofed it up the stairs with his suitcase and his pillow tucked under one arm.

With he and Fitz tugging suitcases around it looked like they’d both been kicked out of their houses by angry husbands. If Jude weren’t so sick, this situation would be hilarious. “We’re here,” Jude said, closing the door behind him.

“Come in and make yourselves comfortable.” Ronan gestured to the recliner and the other end of the sectional. “I think there’s room for all of us. Jude, you can sleep in Ezra’s bed and Fitz, you can sleep in Everly’s. Ten changed the sheets to something less girly, but you’re still stuck with unicorns and princesses.”

Nodding Fitz left his suitcase by the stairs and took the recliner. He leaned back and brought up the leg rest. “That’s better. Jude, since you’re up, can you make me a cup of tea?”

“Me too,” Ronan added. “Peppermint.”

It’s too bad there wasn’t any hemlock or belladonna around. He’d make his friends a cup of tea no one would forget. “Do I look like your personal butler?”

“A little around the eyes.” Ronan laughed, with Fitz joining in until they both started to cough.

“How do you like them apples?” Jude muttered to himself and headed into the kitchen. Thankfully the kettle was hot. Ten must have turned it on before he left with Everly. He quickly made three cups and brought them into the living room.

“What, no snacks?” Ronan asked.

Jude shot him an angry look. It wasn’t going to take much more of Ronan’s bullshit before he lost his temper.

Thankfully, Ronan’s phone rang, which distracted him from asking any more stupid questions about snacks, although, come to think of it, Jude was feeling a bit snackish.

Jude opened his suitcase to pull out his pillow. A piece of paper fluttered down to the floor. Wolf had drawn their family in the backyard. Everyone was smiling and the sun was shining. “Feel better, Daddy!” was written in Cope’s handwriting. Wolf had signed his name in pencil and there was a squiggle from Lizbet in purple crayon. The note from his family gave him the strength to carry on. “The kids made this.” He handed the note to Ronan.

“That’s so cute.” Ronan coughed on the drawing before handing it back to Jude.

“Ew.” Jude set the now germy drawing on the coffee table and picked up his tea. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all. Ronan and Fitz were his best friends, like Cope pointed out. They worked some of the most grueling cold cases together and always had each other’s backs. Surely they could get through twenty-four hours quarantining together.

“Ten wants to know what meds we want,” Ronan droned, his nose dripping. He

reached for a tissue and pulled the last one from the box. “We need more tissues for a start.”

“Nyquil. The good stuff. I don’t want that wimpy daytime shit!” Fitz called out.

“Same,” Jude said. “But I want my own bottle, not one that Ronan slurped out of.”

“Just for that, I’m slurping out of every bottle that comes into this house.” Ronan shot Jude a so-there look.

“Get some cough drops too. The kind with the yodelers blowing big horns. I don’t want to listen to Ronan and Jude hacking all night,” Fitz said and started coughing.

“Says the man who’s hacking.” Jude rolled his eyes. “Send popsicles too. The little rocket pops with red, white and blue flavors.”

“I want grape pops,” Fitz said.

“Cherry for me,” Ronan added. “And ginger ale!”

“Okay guys,” Ten said. “We’ll swing by with your supplies and lunch from the Thai place. There’s plenty of food in the house in the meantime. You’re not in danger of starving.”

“Bye, Ten,” Ronan said and hung up the phone. “Well, we’re on our own for now. I’m starving, who’s gonna make me a sandwich.”

“Not it!” Jude and Fitz said at the same time.

Ronan sighed and got off the sofa. “Just for that, I’m not going to tell you where I hide the good candy!”

“You mean the stuff you keep in the RD cookie jar in the pantry?” Jude asked. He’d known about Ronan’s secret hiding spot for years and had a feeling Everly did too.

Taking another sip from his tea, Jude laid back on his pillow and reached for the remote. He pulled up Jurassic Park and sighed happily. Maybe this would work out. Cope was right, it was only one overnight with Fitz and Ronan. It wasn’t like they hadn’t slept together before. On vacations and various stakeouts.

How hard could this be?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Ronan

Curses, Foiled Yet Again

In Ronan's relatively short time on this earth, he'd never once thought about killing another human being. Sure, he'd had the odd thought from time to time wishing explosive diarrhea on people who'd wronged him or an hour of aggressive hiccups on the cashier at Macy's who'd told him he was too old to wear turquoise, but aside from that, he'd never once considered hurting another person.

Until today.

Tennyson had been true to his word, dropping off the various meds and comfort items the three detectives requested, and had even included some little extras like Ronan's peanut butter cups. Sour Patch Kids for Jude and food magazines for Fitz. The sweet and sour soup from the Thai place was just what the doctor ordered, along with plenty of crunchy spring rolls and crab Rangoon.

"What the hell is this?" Ronan asked in his froggy-sounding voice. He'd just come out of the bathroom after lunch to see Jude and Fitz sitting at the kitchen table chowing down on his beloved peanut butter cups. Everyone in the O'Mara-Grimm household knew it was hands-off with the Reese's, but apparently Jude hadn't gotten the memo.

You think you know a person.

"What the hell is what ?" Jude asked, around a mouthful of candy. Scattered around

him were four empty wrappers, licked clean.

“You’re eating my peanut butter cups!” Ronan had never been more outraged in his life. Not even when Lance McTwinkleToes told him turquoise was for young gays.

“Ohhh, those are my favorite,” Fitzgibbon said, grabbing another snack. He sat in Everly’s usual seat and ate the cup in one bite. “Mmmm, heaven.”

Ronan sputtered. “Those are mine.”

“What’s yours?” Fitzgibbon asked, reaching for a second treat.

Ronan couldn’t be sure, but thought he saw a gleam in Cap’s eyes. In all the years he’d known Fitz, the man had never done anything to warrant Ronan’s suspicion of him, but when peanut butter cups were involved anything was possible.

Maybe his fever was messing with his brain. Or Fitzgibbon was messing with his emotional support candy. “The Reese’s. Ten got those for me.”

“Too bad. So sad.” Fitzgibbon popped an unwrapped peanut butter cup into his mouth.

Ronan grabbed the bag, noticing there were only a few left. What the actual hell? Stomping out of the room, he shoved the remaining wrapped treats between the couch cushions. There was no way Jude and Fitz would find them there. Not with Ronan sitting on the couch. He’d hide them later, when Jude and Fitz weren’t in the kitchen. They’d go right into the empty bag of frozen broccoli Ronan kept for such emergencies. Let his asshole friends try to find his chocolate in there.

“Why didn’t Ten send us teriyaki chicken skewers? I’ll die without them!” Jude shouted from the kitchen.

The sound of his friend's voice felt like nails on a chalkboard. Much more of this and Ronan was going to have to suffocate Jude with his own pillow, which Ronan couldn't help noticing had a crisp clean case on it. Ronan's, on the other hand, had snot marks from the night before. Why hadn't Ten changed his pillowcase? "This is how it ends," Ronan said pitifully, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

"Ronan, you're not going to starve to death because we ate your candy." Fitz made an annoyed face.

Fresh anger lit in Ronan's gut over the thought of his lost treats. Setting that unforgivable act aside for a second, he shook his head. "Ten didn't change my germy pillowcase. Cope did for Jude, but I have to sleep on my own crusty snot."

Fitzgibbon coughed, gagging twice before he got himself under control. "For the love of God, can we not talk about crusty snot?" Fitzgibbon gagged again. "Where does Ten keep the clean sheets?"

"Linen closet in the hallway upstairs." Ronan would have pointed, but he was too tired to lift his arm.

"I'll grab one for you, your highness." Snorting, Fitzgibbon gagged again and left the room.

Served him right, getting a mouthful of his own mucus for laughing at Ronan. Out of nowhere, Ronan sneezed.

"Christ, your goo landed on my arm!" Jude wailed, sounding like a toddler badly in need of a nap. He ran to the sink and turned on the faucet.

"I thought we were brothers," Ronan muttered.



“Sure we are, when we’re barbecuing steaks in the backyard. Not when you slime my arm with your screaming yellow zonkers!” Jude laughed.

His boogs weren’t yellow. At least he didn’t think they were. “Where the hell is Fitz with my clean pillowcase?”

Jude’s eyes narrowed. “I haven’t heard him hacking in a few minutes. Do you think he choked to death on his own phlegm?” Jude sounded worried.

Ronan gasped. “Oh, my God, did he?” He got to his feet and headed toward the stairs. Ronan made it halfway up before he stopped to cough and catch his breath. He sat down hard on one of the risers. Fuck, what if Fitz was dead? He’d become the head of the cold case unit, for starters. Captain Ronan O’Mara. His name would be up in lights. He’d give press conferences and interviews to hard hitting journalists, who’d want to know his secret for carrying on seamlessly in a crisis. “We’re all going to miss Kevin Fitzgibbon,” he’d say, making the reporters cry. He’d then flash his million-watt smile, before launching into a brief, but heartfelt soliloquy on the man, the myth, the legend, that was Fitzy.

“What the fuck are you doing sitting here, staring off into space like a dumbass while Fitz is dead upstairs?”

Ronan’s vision faded as Jude sneered at him. “I got dizzy,” Ronan said, on the fly. Surely Jude wouldn’t want him to risk falling down the stairs. But with Fitz dead, Ronan falling down the stairs would make Jude captain of the cold case unit. That dirty son of a goat. Ronan opened his mouth to tell him as much, when Jude shoved past him and climbed the rest of the stairs.

“Fuck a duck,” Jude muttered.

“No! Fitz!” Ronan tried to shout, but his voice cracked. He scrambled up the stairs,

knowing he was going to find Fitzgibbon's body sprawled out on the hall floor. How the hell did one draw a chalk outline on Berber carpet anyway? Ronan would figure that out later, right now he needed to determine how he was going to handle Fitzzy's death. He'd take back all the bad things he'd ever said or thought about Kevin before if he could just see his stupid face one more time.

When Ronan reached the top of the stairs, there was nobody waiting for him. Come to think of it, there was no Jude either. Poking his head into Everly's room, he found his captain, sound asleep, his mouth hanging open, clutching one of his daughter's favorite unicorns, his long legs hanging off the bed, dangling above the floor.

Leaving Fitz to sleep the sleep of angels, he looked into Ezra's room and found Jude curled into a ball like a kitten. His snores were the most bizarre and annoying thing Ronan had ever heard. Breathing in, Jude reminded Ronan of whistling birds, breathing out, he sounded like a freight train.

"Fuck me with a chainsaw," he muttered, heading back down the stairs. Settling himself on the sofa, Ronan rested his face on his pillow and instantly realized he'd forgotten to get a clean pillowcase, when his cheek brushed against fossilized snot.

Curses, fucking foiled again.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Jude

### Soup and Other Calamities

The bad news was that Ten and Cope were having Thai leftovers for dinner, meaning there would be no hot, fresh meal delivered. The good news was that the O'Mara-Grimm pantry was stocked with plenty of soup. There was chicken noodle, chicken and stars, tomato, and Jude's favorite chicken soup that came in a packet, not in a can. When he was home, he doctored the soup with cayenne pepper and a spice mix Emeril Lagasse hawked. The last step was to add a beaten egg, which cooked instantly when it was added to the boiling broth.

Poking through the spice cabinet, Jude didn't see any Emeril seasoning and the cayenne had turned brown with age and was glued to the bottom of the container. The only way to get it out was with a jackhammer. Even if he did, there was no way to know if the old seasoning would poison him. He bet Ronan would like that if he kibbied out and died right there on the kitchen floor.

"What are you doing?" Ronan asked, as he shuffled into the kitchen.

"I'm gonna make soup for dinner." Jude coughed into his elbow. It was almost time for his next shot of Nyquil. He'd hold out for a little longer so that he didn't fall asleep into his bowl of chicken noodle and drown tragically. At least he hoped Cope would think it was tragic. Ronan would probably throw a party.

"Oh good. I'll have some too. The one in the packet." Ronan looked as if he were expecting Jude to do all the cooking.

“That’s what I was making. For myself. As in, I’m not sharing,” Jude shot back. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he really felt like shit. He loved to tease Ronan, but being this sick made him feel mean.

Ronan sighed. “That’s fine, I’ll just make my own packet. We’ve got plenty of pots.”

“You can’t.” Jude crossed his arms over his chest.

“What do you mean I can’t? This is my kitchen. I can do whatever the fuck I want!” Ronan coughed, his face turning red. He doubled over and hacked a bit more. It took a minute for him to catch his breath.

Taking pity on his friend, and soup rival, Jude helped Ronan to the table and pulled out a chair for him to sit on. Ronan wore a pitiful look. His face was wet with tears that had leaked out when he was coughing. His eyes were rimmed with dark circles and his nose was running. In a few more seconds it would dribble onto his lips. Grabbing a napkin, Jude wiped Ronan’s snotty nose. “There’s only one packet of soup left. We can share it if you like,” Jude offered, holding it up.

“I don’t want to share. It’s mine. This is my house and that’s my soup.” Ronan grabbed the packet and tried to pull it out of Jude’s hand. Only Jude wasn’t letting go.

“What the hell is wrong with you? I had it first. It’s mine !” Jude yanked his arm back, pulling Ronan forward, the two men bumped heads. “Ouch! Asshole!”

“Who are you calling an asshole?” Ronan used his left hand to push Jude’s face away from his own. “Mine!”

Jude couldn’t help but think Ronan sounded like the seagulls in Finding Nemo , but now wasn’t the time to mention it. Pulling harder, Jude felt Ronan’s grip slacken. He heard a ripping sound followed by the tinkling of dried noodles hitting and bouncing

off the floor. Each man held an empty half of the packet. “Fuck me!”

“Yeah, fuck you! This is all your fault.” Ronan coughed again. He backed away from Jude and skidded on the noodles and flavoring mix. Pinwheeling his arms backward, he managed to catch himself before he fell to the floor.

“Bravo, dickheads!” Fitzgibbon said from the kitchen door. His iPhone was pointing at the warring best friends. “Now there’s no soup for any of us.”

Jude stared down at the ruined remains littering the floor. He was too tired and hungry to grab a broom to sweep it up. “If I were home, Cope would cook for me. He’s probably having the time of his life with Ten and the kids. Making crafts, heating up leftovers, and singing along to Frozen .” Jude wanted to go home. He felt like crying, but wouldn’t. He straightened up and took a seat at the table.

“It’s time to call in the big gun.” Picking up his phone, Ronan tapped the screen. Seconds later, the sounds of a ringing phone filled the kitchen.

“How are you feeling, Ronan?” Kaye asked, when she answered the phone.

“Terrible. Every bone in my body hurts and I’ve got the worst headache of my entire life.” He sneered at Jude.

“Did you take aspirin?” Kaye sounded as if she were trying hard not to laugh at Ronan’s predicament.

“I don’t think aspirin will help. My headache is sitting at the table with me and just wrecked my last packet of soup. Now we’re all gonna starve to death.”

Jude turned to look at Ronan. Unless he missed his guess, his best friend’s eyes had gone misty. Shit, Jude never would have argued for the soup so hard if he’d know

losing it would make Ronan this upset. He wasn't a total monster.

Kaye laughed, but tried to cover it with a cough.

"Cripes, if you're not on my side, I'll die for sure. Could you come over and make us some soup?" Ronan sounded absolutely pitiful.

"I'll be right over," Kaye said, sounding resigned to her fate.

"Bye." Ronan hung up the phone and dabbed at his eyes with a tissue. "She's coming over."

"We heard," Fitz said, taking a seat at the table.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang, followed by Kaye's cheerful, but muffled voice. "I'm here! Where are my sick boys?"

"Kitchen!" Jude answered, before sneezing three times into his elbow. "Fuck a duck."

"Language!" Kaye said, walking into the room. She'd shed her winter coat, but wore a white Tyvek suit with a mask over her mouth and nose. On her hands were latex gloves. If Jude didn't know better, he'd think Kaye was here to bump them off.

"Are you here to help us or rob us?" Jude asked. Why the hell was Kaye dressed like Walter White?

"Now Jude, why would I want to rob you?" Kaye shook her head. "With Jace at work and Fitz here, it would have made much more sense to head to their house first."

"Gee, thanks?" Fitz muttered.

“I’m dressed like this so I don’t catch your plague. I’ve got to watch your kids this week and the last thing we need is for my little angels to get sick too.”

Jude couldn’t help but want to be one of Kaye’s little angels.

“This suit was left over after Truman painted my bedroom. I figured this was the perfect time to wear it. I’ll slip it off on your stoop and will leave it on the living room floor. Genius, right?”

“Genius,” Ronan agreed, sounding as if he thought the idea was anything but.

Kaye clapped her hands together and surveyed the room. “What the hell happened in here?” She skirted the table, her eyes on the destroyed packet of soup.

“We, uh, had an accident,” Ronan said, sounding as if he’d lost his best friend.

“Care to be more specific?” Kaye grabbed the dustpan and broom. She started sweeping up the scattered noodles.

“Ronan wanted the soup but it was mine. We had a tug of war and we both lost.” Jude sank his head into his hands. If this were a story someone told him, he’d be laughing his ass off. Right now, Jude felt doomed. And nauseous.

“Two grown men fought over soup?” Kaye asked, sounding as if she thought Jude was pulling her leg.

“I’ve got the video to prove it.” Fitzgibbon held up his phone.

Kaye’s phone dinged with the incoming video. She clicked the button and Jude and Ronan’s angry voices filled the kitchen. “You’re best friends. Friends don’t act like this, boys.”

Jude felt lower than an earthworm with a tax bill. “Please don’t be mad, Kaye, we’re just sick.”

“Our husbands abandoned us and our kids don’t care if we live or die,” Ronan wailed. “You’re our only hope.”

“I should send you both to bed with no supper.” Kaye crossed her arms over her chest.

“We could share chicken and stars, right?” Jude asked, getting up from the table to wrap his arms around Kaye.

“The only stars you’re getting is if I smack you in the head. Now sit down.” Kaye moved back from Jude and pointed to the table.

“I’d like to remind the room that I didn’t have a mother growing up. No one ever made me chicken and stars.” Jude’s bottom lip trembled. He tried to take a deep breath, but started to cough instead.

Kaye’s hand fluttered to her heart. “Would anyone else like chicken and stars?”

Ronan and Kevin’s hands went up.

Sighing, Kaye went to the pantry and came back with three cans of soup. Jude watched as she opened and then dumped them into a pan, along with the requisite amount of water. When the stove was turned on, she grabbed bowls from the cupboard and spoons from the drawer. “Why didn’t you call me earlier, I would have made you a pot of homemade chicken soup.”

“Ten said he’d have food sent over, but they decided not to get takeout for dinner,” Jude said.



“Which meant we were on our own,” Kevin added.

“And feral.” Ronan offered a smile.

“I can see that.” Kaye went to the refrigerator and pulled open the doors. She held up a pack of deli cheese. “Do you want grilled cheese sandwiches to go along with the soup?”

Each of the detectives nodded. Jude’s gaze drifted around the table. His friends looked like they could sleep for a month and still wake up tired. Jude was bone-weary, as if he’d spent the day doing some kind of heavy labor, when in fact all he’d done was walk across the street and plop on Ronan’s sofa. “I’m glad we did this,” he said.

“Did what?” Ronan asked. “Have a tug of war over soup?”

Jude shook his head. “I’m glad we’re quarantining together. I don’t want the kids to catch this and feel as miserable as we do.” Lizbet had caught a cold just after Halloween and it broke Jude’s heart to hear his little girl coughing and to watch her sitting listlessly on the sofa watching her favorite movie without her laughing or trying to sing along. He’d take being sick every time if it meant sparing his kids.

“Agreed,” Fitz said and coughed into his elbow.

“Soup’s on,” Kaye said. She brought the steaming bowls to the table along with the sandwiches, which were cut in half.

“What, no kitty corner?” Ronan asked. “My mom always cut my sandwiches diagonally.”

Kaye fisted her hands on her hips. “Ronan, I swear to God-”

Ronan's snort and giggle stopped Kaye's impending tantrum in its tracks. "I'm kidding, Mother Grimm. This all looks wonderful. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Do you all want a chicken tortilla soup for tomorrow with corn and black beans?"

"No way!" Fitzgibbon said. "Do not , under any condition, give these two beans. They'll kill us all. After I made chili for Sunday dinner two weeks ago, our office smelled like rotten burritos for three days. Jude blasts off like a trombone, but Ronan's king of the silent, but deadly."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ronan said, mildly. "Do you, Jude?"

"Nope. Not a clue." Jude wagged his eyebrows. "Tortilla soup would be great, Kaye. Thank you."

"I'll make my famous chocolate chip cookies. A batch for you boys and one for the kids. Is there anything else you need?" Kaye asked, eyeing the door.

"I could use a hug," Ronan said, shooting Kaye a pitiful look.

"I'll hug you from behind." Kaye stood behind Ronan and set her hands on his shoulders. She patted him three times and did the same for Jude and Fitz. "I'm off, boys. Try to get some rest and above all else, be kind to each other. You're still best friends and partners even if you're all sick as dogs." Kaye grinned at the detectives and headed for the door. Jude heard it open and then close behind her.

"Good call, Ronan," Jude said. "We needed Kaye's help more than I wanted to admit."

"It really makes you see how important our husbands are to us, huh?" Ronan asked.

“They deserve so much better than the us dumbasses.” Jude’s voice cracked. A lone tear trickled down his face.

“I won’t survive if Ten leaves me.” Ronan wailed, burying his head in his hands.

Fitz snickered. His phone was pointed at the sobbing detectives. “Thanks, guys. I’ll just send this to your husbands.”

“Send what?” Ronan asked, picking his head up.

“The video of you two crying.” Fitz turned the phone around and played the video.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Jude reached for Fitz’s phone, but missed.

“I would dare!” Fitz grinned. “One wrong word out of either of your mouths and I send the video. One argument about what to watch on television and I send the video. If either of you wake me up, I send the video. Got it?”

“Blackmail,” Ronan and Jude said in sync.

“Blackmail is such an ugly word. Why don’t we call it a behavior deterrent?” Without waiting for an answer, Fitz dug into his soup with gusto. He alternated between bites of his crispy grilled cheese and a spoonful of chicken noodle soup.

Jude exchanged a knowing look with Ronan. Fitzgibbon had just declared war and Jude would be damned if he went down without a fight.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Ronan

### Running Fevers and Sharing Secrets

After dinner, Ronan summoned up the energy to put their bowls and spoons into the dishwasher along with the soup pot and the frying pan Kaye used to make the sandwiches. He went to the freezer and grabbed a popsicle for everyone.

“Here you go,” Ronan handed Fitz his frozen treat and did the same with Jude, before settling himself in on the sofa. He wrapped up in his favorite blanket and peeled open the paper package. It hurt to swallow, but the melted sugar water soothed his throat.

“You need to turn up the heat,” Jude said, barely lifting his head from the pillow he was resting on. “I’m freezing my gorgeous ass off.”

Ronan was about to say that Jude’s ass could use a little freezing off, but thankfully, Fitz interrupted him.

“No,” Fitzgibbon said. “It’s stifling in here. We need to open a window or put on the air conditioner. Maybe fill the tub with ice.”

Getting up from the sofa, Ronan went to the bathroom and grabbed the thermometer and a bottle of Tylenol. He brought it back to Jude and rolled the tip over his forehead. “One hundred two point one. You’ve got a fever.” He repeated the procedure with Fitz. “One hundred one point four. You’ve got a fever too.”

“Let me guess, you’re just right.” Fitz sneered.

Rolling the tip over his own forehead, he held it there until it beeped. “One hundred one on the nose. Congrats, we’re all running a temperature.” Ronan handed out Tylenol to his friends and took two himself.

“Now what?” Jude asked, burrowing deeper into his blanket.

“We could watch a movie?” Ronan suggested. They’d already watched Jurassic Park and Jaws . “What about Star Wars ?” Even sick, Ronan could appreciate Harrison Ford in those tight, dark pants Han Solo was famous for wearing.

Fitzgibbon sniffled. “I miss Aurora and Jace. It’s story time. We’ve been reading these chapter books about a little girl named Ramona and her sister Beezus. I don’t want to miss tonight’s chapter.” He blew his nose and honked like a goose.

“Everly mentioned those books. I remember reading the ones about a mouse riding a motorcycle when I was a kid.” Ronan had loved story time with his mother. It was the reason he wanted to start that tradition with Everly and Ezra. He wished Erin was here now to read him a story and rub Vicks on his chest.

“I miss Wolfie and LizzyB.” Jude sniffled. “They didn’t even call to see if I was still alive.”

Ordinarily, Ronan would think Jude was just being dramatic, but since he hadn’t gotten a call from Everly or Ezra, he felt the same way about his family.

“Aurora called me a sicko!” Fitzgibbon howled. “She couldn’t get away from me fast enough. My daughter didn’t tell me to feel better or that I should take a nap. My husband hasn’t even texted me.”

Ronan could say the same. He hadn’t heard from Tennyson since he’d called to make sure their lunch order was correct. It was possible Ten didn’t even know that Kaye

had been their savior, making them soup and sandwiches. “Come on, guys. We’re just upset because we don’t feel well. Our husbands and kids love us.”

“I never thought I’d be a good father,” Fitzgibbon said before blowing his nose. “When I adopted Greeley, I had no idea what the hell to do. Just when I’d gotten the hang of it, Aurora came along and I felt like I’d been dropped into the deep end of the pool with no life jacket.”

“Ten read hundreds of parenting books when we were expecting Everly,” Ronan said, feeling guilty. “When he finished reading one book, Ten would leave it on my nightstand, so that I could read them too. After the fifth stacked book, I stuck them under the bed. I was so busy with work that I didn’t have time to read before bed. All I wanted was to get a little action and go to sleep. What kind of an asshole acts like that? When we were expecting Ezra, Ten didn’t read any more books. I assumed he didn’t want to see first-hand what a jerk I was the second time around.”

“I didn’t even want to be a father. Hell, I wasn’t even sure I was going to ever be a husband.” Jude sighed. “I don’t know what would have happened between me and Cope if Wolf’s parents hadn’t died. We might not even be together. I knew Cope wanted to get married and have a family. I just assumed he’d get sick of my bullshit and would leave me one day.”

“Christ, what a bunch of sad sacks we are.” Fitzgibbon sulked in his chair.

“Maybe we should grab the bull by the horns and call them?” Ronan asked. He hated the thought of the kids going to bed without saying goodnight. There were very few nights since Everly was born that Ronan hadn’t been around to tuck his daughter into bed. He picked up his phone and called Ten, putting the call on speaker phone.

When the call was answered, Ronan could hear laughter and loud music. “Hey, Ronan!” Ten sounded very cheery.

Ronan looked to Jude and Fitz and saw both men were as upset as Ronan felt. “Are you having a party?” The background noise reminded him of Spellbound on Ladies Night.

“Jace just brought pizza and a portable disco ball. We’re having a dance party!” “Staying Alive” started to blast in the background.

“This is my favorite song!” Everly gushed. “I love the Free Bees!”

Not even Everly adorably mispronouncing the Bee Gees name could make him smile. He pulled himself off the sofa and went to the living room window, which offered a perfect view of Jude’s house. Sure enough, he could see sparkling lights coming from Jude’s window. He could see the kids dancing.

“How do you like them apples?” Fitz asked with a sniffle. “I don’t suppose my darling husband brought pizza for us?”

“Uh, sorry Fitz!” Ten said. “Kaye told me she’d come over to make you soup, so we figured you guys didn’t need any food.”

“Daddy! Watch me shake my booty!” Wolf shouted.

Jude’s face crumpled. He looked like he was about to burst into tears. Ronan felt the same way. Being sick sucked donkey balls, but being sick while the people you loved most partied hardy, well, that was another level of hell. Jude slunk back to his spot on the sofa and blew his nose before he laid back down.

“Are you guys okay? Do you need anything?” Ten asked, sounding out of breath. Ronan would just bet his husband was doing the Hustle.

“We just wanted to say goodnight to the kids,” Ronan said, trying not to sound pitiful.

“Say goodnight, kids!” Ten shouted.

“Night!” little voices called out.

“See you tomorrow, Ronan!” Ten snorted and started to laugh.

Without saying goodbye, Ronan ended the call. From his spot at the window, he could see Everly and Aurora doing John Travolta moves from Saturday Night Fever . Who had taught them how to do that?

He pulled the drapes closed so that he couldn’t see his husband partying the night away. “Fuck me with a chainsaw.” He sat down heavily on the couch. Ronan knew in his heart of hearts that they’d made the right decision to get the kids out of the house so they wouldn’t catch what he had, but sitting on his sofa, sick as a dog, with his two best friends, he couldn’t help but feel a little lost.

“Now what do we do?” Fitz asked, sounding pretty lost himself.

“How about we make microwave popcorn and watch a movie?”

“You know,” Jude said, “What just happened with our kids was worse than when Jack died in Titanic .”

“Worse than when Thomas J. died in My Girl ,” Fitz sniffled.

“Or when Kevin was left home alone,” Ronan felt his eyes sting with unshed tears. He knew all three of them were grown-ass men, but right now, he felt like an abandoned child who no one loved or cared about.

“That’s it!” Fitz said, heading for the kitchen. “I’m gonna grab all the junk food in the house. Jude, find something uplifting to watch.”



“What, like Marley and Me ?” Jude asked with a snort.

Fitz chuckled and laughed along with Jude. Seconds later, Ronan joined in. “We can follow it up with A Walk to Remember .”

Fitz laughed harder. He walked into the kitchen. Seconds later, Ronan could hear the microwave buttons beeping. He got off the sofa and went into the kitchen to grab his emergency peanut butter cups out of the freezer. This time he wouldn’t be upset when his friends helped themselves.

Ronan, Jude, and Fitz might be down, but they certainly were not out. Their little party didn’t have loud music or booty-shaking dance moves, but they were taking care of each other together. In Ronan’s mind, that was worth its weight in gold.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Jude

### Snoring and Drooling

After the movie party wrapped up, Jude headed to bed. They'd watched Die Hard , which everyone agreed was a Christmas movie and followed it up with Terminator 2 Judgement Day . He'd gotten a text from Cope showing the kids camped out in front of their living room television sound asleep. He supposed all that dancing had tuckered them out.

It was strange brushing his teeth in Ronan's spare bathroom, which was filled with tub toys, unicorn bath towels and all of Everly's hair accessories. Thankfully he'd brought his own toothpaste or he would have been stuck using his niece's pink bubble gum paste. One sniff of it had Jude's stomach roiling in protest. He knew this bathroom was a taste of his own future. He had no doubt that within the next few years, Lizbet would be following the hair care regimen favored by Everly and Aurora. Which of course would also herald the arrival of make-up. Lip gloss, blue eye shadow, and dark eyeliner were all ahead for his Lizzy B. Jude grinned at himself remembering he'd been the one to calm Ronan down the first time he saw his little princess wearing shiny lip gloss. Ronan would probably have to do the same thing when it was his daughter's turn.

After brushing his teeth and washing his face, Jude stared at himself in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and his cheeks were rosy, courtesy of his fever. He'd taken more medicine before he came upstairs, hoping that he'd be able to sleep through the night.

Walking into Ezra's room, Jude felt a bit blue. He'd taken a nap in the twin bed earlier, but now, the realization that he'd be sleeping without Cope hit him like a sledgehammer to the chest. He thought to send Cope a goodnight text, but didn't want to wake any of the kids. He knew how hard it was to have five kids spend the night. The slightest thing would wake Lizbet and it was hard to get her back to sleep.

Jude knew one night without his family wasn't the end of the world. They'd be back together tomorrow and there would be hugs and kisses to welcome him home. That thought put a smile on Jude's face as he drifted off toward sleep.

He was in that weird space between awake and sleep when a strange noise brought him fully awake. It sounded like a large truck was rumbling down the street. Checking his phone, Jude saw that it was half past three in the morning. There was no way a large truck would be out at this time of day. Shaking his head, Jude figured the sound was a figment of his nearly asleep mind and he snuggled back into the covers. Seconds later, Jude heard the noise again, which was accompanied by the feeling of the house shaking. What the hell was going on?

Jude got out of bed and looked out the window. The street was dark. He didn't see any cars or trucks driving through the neighborhood and there weren't any people on the street. Straining his ears, he listened again and all he heard was dead silence.

Convinced the Nyquil was making him hallucinate, Jude got back into bed. He was about to lay his head on the pillow when the sound came again. He got out of bed and grabbed his phone, turning on the flashlight feature. Walking as quietly as possible, he opened the door and peeked out into the hallway. Moving the beam of light, Jude saw it was empty. Both Ronan and Fitzgibbon's doors were partially closed.

The sound came again and he thought it was coming from Fitzgibbon's room. Jude pushed the door open a bit, to see Fitzgibbon lying flat on his back with all of the covers and a dozen multi-colored unicorns scattered on the floor. Everly would have

a fit if she saw her precious herd being treated like this. He was contemplating snapping a picture when Fitzgibbon let out another rumble, which made Jude jump and yelp in surprise.

“Turn down the television, Jace,” Fitzgibbon muttered, in his sleep. “I hate that horror movie shit.”

Jude agreed completely. He held up his phone to take a quick picture of Fitz. You never knew when blackmail material would be needed. Taking another step toward the bed, Jude snapped a second pic of Fitzgibbon’s wide open mouth and the shimmering puddle of drool on the pillow.

Completely skeeved out, Jude turned and ran into something solid, which shouted and grabbed his arm. “What the fuck?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.” Ronan raised his phone’s flashlight to shine in Jude’s eyes. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

Jude batted at Ronan’s phone, knocking the light away from his face. All he could see were bright green spots dancing in front of his eyes. “I heard a noise and got up to investigate.” As he spoke, Fitzgibbon sucked in a breath and pushed it out in blasts which sounded like machine guns in a war movie. “Christ, he’s shaking the house. What are you doing up?”

“I thought we were having an earthquake, so I got up to check on you dumbasses. That’s when I saw the light in here.” Ronan started to cough. It rumbled deep in his chest.

“Shutthefuckup,” Fitzgibbon mumbled. “Tryna sleep.”

Jude was about to back out of the room when something soft hit him in the face. He

shined the light back to Fitzgibbon, who was now leaning up on an elbow, his eyes glowed red in the shine of the light. He held a unicorn in his hand, which he threw with perfect precision, and hit Ronan in the mouth.

“Ouch, asshole!” Ronan grumbled.

“What the hell are the two of you doing in here?” Fitz asked, sitting up. His hair stuck up in all directions. He looked like something the cat dragged in.

“We heard a noise,” Jude said.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of the dark?” Fitzgibbon smirked at Jude and Ronan. Fitz was obviously gathering blackmail material of his own.

“Of course not,” Ronan said. “Your snores were shaking the entire house. I thought we were having an earthquake.”

“My snores?” Fitzgibbon gasped. “You sounded like you were sleeping with a bike horn. And you,” Fitz pointed to Jude, “sounded like you were sleeping underwater.” He grabbed his phone and after a few taps, a video started to play. Ronan’s face, and his own pool of drool was clearly visible. Seconds later, Ronan gulped in a harsh breath, which sounded like his lawnmower when it rumbled to life. A high pitched honk, which sounded like an enraged goose, filled the room.

“No,” Ronan said. “That’s not me. You must have added the sound effect later.”

“What, later?” Fitz asked. “I’m in bed and sick as a dog, I don’t have the time or the energy to doctor a video of you snoring.”

Jude let out a bark of laughter when Ronan honked again on video. “That’s hilarious, Fitz. It sounds like Ronan’s fucking a chipmunk.”

“I wouldn’t laugh just yet, cowboy.” Fitz tapped the screen and the picture flipped from Ronan to Jude, who was sleeping on his left side with his hands pillowed under his face. His mouth was open in sneer, making him look a bit like Billy Idol. The sound coming from his mouth was decidedly not the rocker. His inhale rumbled like a box truck, but his exhale was one long, high pitched squeak that sounded like a balloon when you let the air out slowly.

“That can’t be me.” What horrified Jude more than the sound he was making, was the fact that Cope was right. He’d been telling Jude about his snoring for six years now and Jude always blew him off. He owed his husband an apology, which he would be more than happy to deliver after he got Fitzgibbon to delete the video. “What’s it gonna cost me for you to get rid of that?”

Fitzgibbon snorted. “Nothing. These videos are priceless to me. I’ve already sent copies to my home and work email, just in case one of you tries something stupid.”

“Stupid’s my middle name,” Ronan said, sounding gleeful. He made a grab for Fitzgibbon’s phone and gave it a tug.

Fitz held on tighter, jerking the phone back, sending Ronan’s back crashing into his front.

“Awww, look, Ronan and Fitzzy are spooning each other.” Jude laughed, as he continued to shoot video of the tug of war.

Ronan started to cough. His shoulders shook with it. His head rested on Everly’s pillow and seconds later, he was fast asleep.

“What the hell do I do now?” Fitzgibbon asked.

“Find a way to climb out and go sleep in Ronan’s bed or on the sofa.” Jude watched

as Fitz wrangled his way off the bed. He stumbled after tripping on a unicorn, but caught himself before he fell.

“I’ll be on the recliner.” Seconds later, Jude heard Fitzgibbon going downstairs.

“Maybe now I can get some sleep.” Jude headed back into Ezra’s room. He looked out the window, across the street to his own house, which was dark. The sun would be up soon and he knew the kids would be excited for Cope to make pancakes with crispy bacon. Wolfie loved to chase Jude around the kitchen with his hands sticky with maple syrup. Jude always let his son catch him. Wolf got such a kick out of slapping his hands on Jude’s cheeks and pretending they were glued to his skin. Jude would miss that this morning.

As he got back into bed, his eyes were misty with unshed tears. He hated being sick, but what he hated more was when his kids weren’t feeling well. He knew it was well worth it to spend the night with his snoring and drooling friends, if it meant the kids stayed healthy.

One thing was for certain, Jude was going to hug the stuffing out of his family when he was finally feeling better.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:46 am*

Ronan

### Breakfast Blues

Ronan felt like he'd been hit by a bus. He'd woken up in Everly's bed, with the left side of his face crusty with dried drool and snot. He made a mental note to order new pillows from Wal-Mart, with same day delivery. His daughter didn't deserve to lay her beautiful head on the remains of Ronan's fossilized drippings. He'd add in more Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, another bottle of Nyquil and definitely more of his favorite chicken soup in the packet. He'd buy enough for all three of them to enjoy together.

When he got downstairs, he found Fitzgibbon in the recliner watching the morning news. Jude was in the kitchen mixing pancake batter.

"Wolf loves pancakes on Sunday mornings." Jude moved to the stove and flipped over the sizzling bacon. "We'll eat in five minutes." He turned and took a long look at Ronan. "How'd you sleep?"

"You mean before or after you woke us all up?" Ronan coughed, his whole body shook, and his head pounded. His stomach hurt from the effort and his lungs felt like they were filled with broken glass. All he wanted to do was have something to eat and to crawl back to bed.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Jude wore a sheepish look. His dark hair was flat and lifeless.



Ronan noticed dark circles under his friend's bloodshot eyes. Jude looked like shit, not that Ronan was in any position to judge. He knew he looked like he had one foot in the grave with the other on a banana peel. "I spent the rest of the night catnapping and waking myself up coughing. The Nyquil isn't really helping. I just want to slather myself in Vicks Vaporub and sleep for a week."

Jude turned back to the stove and started pouring pancake batter into a pan.

Ronan watched, almost hypnotized by Jude's movements. Everly and Ten liked French toast more than pancakes. Ezra would eat anything you put in front of him, with the exception of green beans. Ronan felt his heart squeeze in his chest. He didn't spend many nights away from his family. He hoped they weren't going to have to do this again tonight.

"Breakfast!" Jude called out and coughed. He braced his arms on the kitchen counter until he was finished.

Fitzgibbon walked into the kitchen and grabbed a plate. He piled pancakes and bacon on it before drowning it in maple syrup. He was about to take a bite when the door alarm sounded in the living room.

"Ronan?" Ten called out. He sounded stuffed up.

"Kitchen." Ronan started coughing again.

Ten walked into the kitchen with Everly and Ezra beside him. Both kids were sniffing. "We woke up like this. Same for Cope, Wolf, Lizbet, and Aurora. I'm sorry we made you all camp out here instead of being able to sleep in your own beds."

"It's okay, Ten." Ronan reached for his husband's hand. "We learned a lot about ourselves over the last twenty four hours, didn't we?"

Fitzgibbon nodded with a mouthful of pancakes. “Guess we’re not as independent as we thought.”

“Or as self-sufficient,” Jude added.

“Or very good friends.” Ronan hated to admit that about himself. “Jude and I actually fought over a packet of soup. Fitz filmed us snoring and drooling.” He looked around the table at Fitz and Jude, knowing that he’d never had better friends in his life. “I wouldn’t have wanted to be quarantined with anyone else. I love you guys!” Ronan reached out his hands to pat his friends’ shoulders.

“Speak for yourself,” Fitzgibbon muttered. He got up from the table and set his empty plate in the sink. “The next time I’m sick, I’m checking into the Hawthorne Hotel where I’ll be waited on hand and foot by a staff of handsome guys in tight pants. You both drove me up a frickin wall and I can’t stand to look at either of you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go get Aurora.” Fitz headed into the living room.

Ronan couldn’t help but feel a little down over Fitzgibbon’s pronouncement. Spending the day with him and Jude hadn’t been that bad. He looked at Jude whose bottom lip wobbled slightly.

Fitzgibbon poked his head back into the kitchen. “Just kidding! I love you assholes like brothers. See you at work tomorrow!” Fitz laughed all the way out the door.

“I don’t even have the energy to respond to that.” Jude shook his head. He ate the last piece of bacon on his plate and set it in the sink beside Fitzgibbon’s. “He’s lost his mind if he thinks either of us are going to make it into work tomorrow.”

“Seriously.” Ronan couldn’t see himself moving from the kitchen to the living room at this point, never mind taking a shower and putting on street clothes. “Thank Cope for keeping Ten and the kids last night.”

“You got it. Make sure you change the pillowcases in the kids’ rooms.” Jude sneered, shaking his head. Seconds later, Ronan heard the door alarm sound as Jude walked out the front door.

“I’m gonna order new pillows for everyone.”

“Why, Dad?” Everly asked, climbing into Ronan’s lap. She set her hands on either side of his face.

“Because we got our goo on them.” Ronan pressed a kiss to Everly’s forehead. His lips felt the heat of her fever. “Why don’t we get you changed into new pajamas, and we’ll sack out in my bed and watch a movie like we used to do when you were a baby?”

“Okay.” Everly hopped off Ronan’s lap and headed for the living room.

Ronan was right behind her.

“Ezzie and I will stay down here.” Ten took a seat on the sofa beside his son. He grabbed a tissue from the box on the coffee table in time to catch a loud sneeze. “Ew,” he muttered. “What the hell is this?” Ten reached between the cushions and pulled out the now smashed bag of Ronan’s beloved peanut butter cups.

Ronan snorted. “I was trying to hide them from Jude and Fitz, but I guess the joke was on me since I forgot they were there.”

“Are you okay?” Ten asked.

Ronan nodded. “Yeah, I’m good. Not great, but good. I’m sorry you and the kids got hit with this too. We were all pretty miserable yesterday.”

“Well, we were all pretty miserable without you.” Ten grabbed the fluffy blue throw

and wrapped himself up in it.

“You were?” Ronan asked, feeling his insecurity ebb away. “I thought you were all having the time of your lives over at Cope’s house, eating take-out and dancing.”

Ten shook his head. “The kids danced for about thirty seconds before they all went back to their sleeping bags. We all started feeling sick after dinner. Cope and I watched a few episodes of Gilmore Girls and went to bed. Wolf’s mattress is super hard. My back was killing me when I woke up this morning. It wasn’t the party you thought it was. How was the night here?”

Ronan knew looks could be deceiving. He felt bad for being angry at Ten for living his best life last night. “One of the best nights of my life.”

“What?” Ten asked. “I thought the three of you were at each other’s throats?”

“We were for a while, but when push came to shove, we were there to help each other. Fitz is right, we are brothers.” Ronan bent over Ten and kissed his forehead. “You’ve got a fever. I’ll bring you the bottle of Nyquil.” Ronan headed up the stairs.

“Thanks, babe. Make sure you order enough soup for all of us. I don’t want to fight you for it like you and Jude last night.”

Ronan snorted. “Kaye told you?”

“Yup! I laughed so hard I nearly peed my pants.” Ten grinned at Ronan.

“At the time, it felt like the end of the world. Then Kaye burst into the house dressed in hazmat gear. She acted like a Marine Corps drill instructor and all three of us fell in line.”

“Mom said she made Jude cry because he didn’t have a mother who made him soup

when he was sick. Poor Jude.”

Ronan had forgotten all about that. “She saved our lives. I’ll have to call and thank her later.” Hell, he should send flowers and a box of her favorite chocolates. Kaye really saved the day, even if she was a little mean. Not that Ronan was complaining.

“Dad? Why are my stuffies all over the floor?” Everly called downstairs. She sounded angry.

“Uncle Fitz was giving them flying lessons last night.” Shit, Ronan really should have picked the animals up when he got out of bed this morning. Ronan made a motion like he was throwing a football.

Ten slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

“Really?” Everly asked, sounding excited by the idea.

“They did great for being first timers!” Ronan rolled his eyes. “Feel better, babe. Text if you need anything.”

Nodding, Ten snuggled into his blanket beside Ezra.

“Seep, Dada!” Ezra called after him.

“Night, buddy.” Ronan climbed the stairs, with a smile on his face, feeling worn to the bone. His family hadn’t forgotten about him. They’d missed him just as much as Ronan missed them. Being sick would only last for a few days and then they’d be back to business as usual, solving cold cases and talking to ghosts.

Ronan couldn’t wait to sink his teeth into their next case.

THE END