

“Thunder Thanksgiving-Part 1”

It was the day after Hunter's birthday, which I'd done my best to make special despite the demands of my performance schedule. The early morning flight meant we were both operating on too little sleep, but the soft smile Hunter gave me over his coffee told me it had been worth it. Thankfully, we'd moved past the tension of recent weeks—the Cantina incident, the awards show drama—and found our way back to the comfortable rhythm that defined our relationship at its best.

I'd managed to give him a proper celebration, beginning with birthday sex that reminded us both why making up was sometimes worth the fighting, and ending with the riding boots he'd been eyeing for months but wouldn't buy himself. Hunter had a complicated relationship with our wealth—despite our considerable financial comfort, he still could be very frugal. The boots were top-of-the-line, handcrafted Italian leather that would last decades, and the momentary flash of guilt in his eyes when he'd unwrapped them had quickly given way to genuine pleasure.

Now, as we navigated the familiar chaos of LAX, I found myself settling into the annual ritual of our bi-coastal Thanksgiving journey. The holiday always followed the same carefully negotiated pattern: first to Thousand Oaks for a few days with the Thunder Academy and Hunter's adoptive family, then to Angel Grove for the actual holiday with my extended family circus that had formed around us over the years.

Our luggage retrieved and Thara's carrier secured, we made our way to the parking structure where my LA Jeep waited. I maintained vehicles in strategic cities—the LA Jeep, the Nashville sports car(which had originally lived in Austin), and of course the family cars back in Ireland. It was a practical solution to the scattered nature of my life, though Hunter occasionally teased me about my "fleet."

Zachary and Kelly had dropped off the Jeep yesterday, ensuring it would be waiting for us. The familiar vehicle sat exactly where they'd promised, gleaming under the fluorescent lights of the parking structure.

"I'll drive," Hunter said as we approached the Jeep, already reaching for the keys I'd fished from my purse. It wasn't a question—he always drove when we were together, a habit born from his protective nature and my willingness to let someone else take the wheel for once in my life.

"All yours," I replied, handing them over without protest. After years of marriage, we'd settled into these comfortable patterns—Hunter driving, me controlling the music, both of us arguing good-naturedly about whether his shortcuts actually saved time.

He loaded our luggage into the back while I settled Thara's carrier securely in the backseat between Harley and Arissa. Tomi was strapped into her car seat on the far side, already half-asleep despite the airport chaos. Traveling with three daughters of vastly different ages presented its own logistical challenges, but we'd mastered the art of family transit over the years.

Thara voiced her displeasure with a low growl, making it clear that six hours in various carriers had exhausted her limited tolerance for travel.

"I know, baby girl," I soothed. "Just forty-five more minutes, then you can terrorize the academy grounds all you want."

"Mom, is Arion definitely coming tomorrow?" Arissa asked from her seat, trying to sound casual though the excitement in her voice was unmistakable.

"That's the plan," I confirmed, catching her eye in the rearview mirror. "Celeste is arranging the teleport for tomorrow afternoon. Remember, he'll need to adjust to Earth's atmosphere for a few hours before any activities."

Arissa nodded seriously, though her eyes shone with anticipation. This would be Arion's first visit to Earth, and introducing her Saturnian boyfriend to her extended Earth family was a big step—one that had required considerable planning and numerous diplomatic conversations.

"Is Blake bringing Lindsey?" Harley asked, not looking up from her phone. "She still owes me a rematch from last time."

"Blake and Tori are arriving tomorrow with Lindsey," Hunter confirmed as he navigated out of the parking structure with practiced ease.

Once we were on the road, the California sunshine streamed through the windows, a welcome change from the increasingly chilly Irish weather we'd left behind. Hunter's hand found mine on the console between us, his thumb tracing small circles against my skin—one of those unconscious gestures of affection that had returned now that we'd found our way back to each other.

"Sensei Omino called while you were getting coffee," Hunter said, his voice carrying that particular blend of respect and warmth he always used when speaking of his adoptive father figure. "They're planning a small training demonstration for tomorrow. Some of the senior students have been working on a new technique they want to show you."

I smiled, watching the familiar landscape pass by outside my window. "Let me guess—they want to impress the Queen of Saturn?"

"More like they want to impress Michelle Morris," Hunter replied with a slight laugh. "Though I'm pretty sure at least three of them have posters of you from your last tour."

"Great," I groaned, though there was no real annoyance behind it. "Nothing like trying to maintain royal dignity while teenage boys stare at concert photos of you in leather pants."

"Mom wore leather pants?" Harley perked up, suddenly interested in the conversation. "I need to see these pictures."

"No, you don't," I said firmly, shooting Hunter a warning look that only made his smile widen.

"Your mother was quite the rock star before she embraced her country roots," he told Harley, expertly changing lanes as we approached the freeway.

"Was?" I challenged, eyebrow raised. "Past tense?"

"Is," Hunter corrected smoothly. "Always and forever."

From the backseat, Arissa made a gagging sound. "You guys are so embarrassing."

"That's literally our job," I replied, turning to wink at her. "It's in the parental contract."

As we merged onto the freeway, I felt the familiar mix of anticipation and nostalgia that always accompanied our returns to California. This place held so much of our history—the beginning of our story, the challenges that had shaped us, the moments that had defined who we would become together. Though Ireland was home now, California would always be where we'd found each other.

The traffic was surprisingly light for LA, allowing us to make good time toward Thousand Oaks and the Thunder Ninja Academy hidden in its wooded outskirts. Ahead lay days of training sessions and family meals, of Blake and Tori's visit with their daughter, of Arion's first real experience of Earth culture, of honoring the traditions that had given Hunter stability when he'd needed it most.

I glanced over at him as he drove, his profile outlined against the California landscape. The past weeks had reminded me how precious and how fragile our connection could be—how easily misunderstandings could create distance, and how much work it took to close that space between us.

But we had closed it. And as we headed toward the first stop in our holiday tradition, I felt grateful for the journey that had brought us here, complicated and imperfect as it sometimes was.

"Arissa," I said, glancing back at our oldest daughter, "you remember the cover story we crafted for Arion, right?"

Arissa looked up from her phone with a slight eye roll that reminded me so much of myself at her age. "Mom, yes, I do. But he doesn't need a cover at the Academy," she pointed out, her tone carrying that particular mix of teenage exasperation and logical precision.

"You're right," I acknowledged, "but anytime we leave Academy grounds—and certainly in Angel Grove—he does." The Thunder Academy was one of the few places on Earth where interplanetary visitors didn't need elaborate cover stories, but my hometown was a different matter entirely.

Arissa sighed with the weight of someone carrying the universe's most unreasonable burden. "Yes, Arion is a refugee from Ukraine that moved to Thousand Oaks with his family a couple of years ago. We met when I was visiting Dad's family last year and we've stayed in touch since. A couple of months ago we started dating." She recited the details with practiced precision. "Uncle Billy and Aunt Livvie already have an ID and passport that look legit, and if anyone looks him up, they'll find him in

any system with a complete history. This explains his name, why we're long distance, and doesn't put him 'living' near anyone we know where he'd need cover."

I nodded, impressed despite myself with her thoroughness. "Perfect. Make sure Arion has it down too. Along with his experience in school, sports—it's up to you to make sure he can answer questions like an Earth boy."

"I know, Mom," Arissa replied with quiet confidence. "I got this."

From beside her, Harley suddenly looked up from her phone, clearly having tuned out the entire conversation about her sister's boyfriend. "Mom, can Jake come see us at the New York show?" The question was deliberately casual, though the hopeful undercurrent was unmistakable.

"Absolutely not," Hunter answered immediately, his knuckles whitening slightly on the steering wheel.

I sighed, shooting him a look that said we'd discussed handling this differently. "We can discuss it later," I offered, trying to find middle ground.

"There is nothing to discuss," Hunter maintained, his voice firm. "No."

"Dad, why?!" Harley's voice rose with indignation, the dramatic shift from sullen teenager to outraged victim happening in the blink of an eye.

I turned slightly in my seat to face Hunter, my expression making it clear this wasn't how we'd agreed to approach the subject. The Jake situation had become increasingly complicated in recent weeks. The press had latched onto Jake and Harley's friendship again—not because of anything they'd done, but because some of Millie's fans had decided Jake was "too immature" for her and might be "better suited" for Harley.

The result was a disturbing trend on TikTok where fans were actively "shipping" them—creating videos, edits, and elaborate fantasies about a romantic relationship between them. The fact that Jake was a 23-year-old man and Harley was a 13-year-old child seemed irrelevant to these people, who either didn't know or deliberately ignored the age gap.

All this renewed attention had reignited Harley's crush on Jake, which had been mercifully fading before social media decided to throw gasoline on those embers. What these "fans" saw as cute, harmless fantasy was, in reality, creating a genuinely concerning situation that Hunter and I were trying to navigate carefully.

"Because it's not appropriate," Hunter said, his voice more measured now as he caught my warning look. "Jake is an adult, and this social media situation has already created enough complications."

"But we're just friends!" Harley protested, though the slight flush in her cheeks betrayed the lingering crush she harbored. "And he's Arissa's friend too. It's not fair that she gets to have Arion visit but Jake can't even come to a show!"

"That's different and you know it," Arissa said quietly. "Arion is my boyfriend, and he's my age."

"Jake is my friend, and I don't see why—"

"Harley," I interrupted, keeping my tone gentle but firm. "We're not having this discussion in the car. Your father and I will talk about it later, and then we'll all sit down together. Okay?"

Harley slumped back against her seat with a theatrical sigh, returning her attention to her phone with the sullen resignation that only a teenage girl could perfect. The car fell into momentary silence, broken only by Tomi's soft babbling as she played with a stuffed unicorn in her car seat.

Hunter's hand found mine again, giving it a gentle squeeze—an unspoken acknowledgment of the parenting tightrope we were walking. Raising three daughters across two planets was complicated enough; adding in the challenges of fame, social media, and interplanetary dating made it an exercise in constant adaptation.

"How much longer?" Arissa asked after a few minutes, her voice deliberately light—clearly an attempt to move past the tension.

"About twenty minutes," Hunter replied, matching her tone. "We should be there before dinner."

I smiled gratefully at our oldest, always the peacemaker of the family. As we continued toward the Thunder Academy, I found myself thinking about the complex web of relationships and identities we were all navigating—Hunter and me finding our way back to each other, Arissa balancing her roles as Earth teenager and Saturnian princess, Harley struggling with the complicated realities of growing up in the public eye, and little Tomi, still blissfully unaware of the complexities that awaited her.

None of it was simple, but then again, nothing worth having ever was.

The familiar wooden gates of the Thunder Academy came into view as Hunter navigated the final stretch of private road. No matter how many times we visited, there was something comforting about returning to this place—a sanctuary hidden from the outside world by both natural landscape and ninja techniques, a place where multiple parts of our complicated lives could coexist.

We pulled into the designated parking area, the Jeep settling into silence as Hunter cut the engine. The girls were already unbuckling their seatbelts, the promise of freedom after the long journey energizing even Harley, who moments ago had been committed to her sulking.

Hunter lifted Tomi from her car seat, her little arms immediately wrapping around his neck as I slung Thara's backpack over my shoulder. The cat made her displeasure known with a low growl—a sound that had become so familiar it was practically her signature greeting.

"I know, baby girl," I murmured to her. "Almost free."

Sensei Omino appeared at the entrance to the main building, his weathered face breaking into a warm smile as he spotted us. Though he'd aged visibly since our last visit, he still carried himself with the dignified grace that had commanded respect from generations of Thunder ninjas.

"Grandpa Omino!" Harley's earlier frustration evaporated as she raced toward him, Arissa following at a more measured pace but with equal enthusiasm.

"Girls, I've missed you so," he said, embracing them both with genuine affection. Though not biologically related, Sensei had embraced his role as surrogate grandfather to our children with the same dedication he'd shown in fostering Hunter and Blake decades earlier.

Hunter approached with Tomi in his arms, offering a formal bow. "Sensei, it's good to see you."

"Hunter," Sensei raised an eyebrow, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes, "a bit formal, no?" He released the girls and pulled Hunter into a warm embrace, patting his back with paternal affection.

Hunter returned the hug, the formality melting away. No matter how many years passed or how far we traveled, this man would always be the closest thing to a father Hunter had known after losing his parents.

"Hi Sensei," I said, stepping forward for my own hug once Hunter stepped back.

"Michelle, always lovely to see you." His embrace was warm and genuine—I'd long since moved from 'Hunter's wife' to family in his eyes. "And this little one," he turned his attention to Tomi, who was watching him with curious eyes, "my, how big she has gotten."

He reached for her, and Hunter transferred her carefully into Sensei's arms. Tomi studied him for a moment, her expression serious as she took in his face.

"Tomi give hugs," I prompted gently.

She considered this suggestion before leaning forward to wrap her small arms around Sensei's neck, her face breaking into a delighted smile when he responded with obvious joy.

"Oh, it is so good to see you all," Sensei said, his voice carrying the quiet contentment of a man surrounded by family.

"It's good to be home," Hunter replied, glancing around the academy grounds with obvious affection. "Are Blake and Tori here yet?"

"No, they should be arriving any minute now," Sensei said, adjusting Tomi in his arms as she began to wiggle. "But LeAnn and Cam are here."

I felt Hunter tense beside me, his expression shifting almost imperceptibly—but I'd spent enough years reading his micro-expressions to recognize the discomfort immediately. His jaw tightened slightly, the corner of his mouth drawing down in what anyone else might mistake for concentration rather than displeasure.

"I know it's awkward, Hunter," Sensei acknowledged gently, "but LeAnn is happy. She truly is."

I placed my hand on Hunter's shoulder, offering silent support. The situation was undeniably strange—his foster sister engaged to his ex-boyfriend was the kind of complicated family dynamic that defied easy navigation. Add to that the fact that Cam had never been my favorite person—his arrogance and occasional condescension had always rubbed me the wrong way—and it made for a potentially tense reunion.

But LeAnn's happiness mattered to Hunter, and Cam was going to be family now, connected to us through the complex web of relationships that bound the Ranger community together. Sometimes being an adult meant setting aside old grievances and awkward histories for the sake of the people you loved.

"As long as she's happy," Hunter said finally, his voice carrying a forced neutrality that didn't quite mask his lingering discomfort.

Harley, oblivious to the undercurrents of adult tension, was already bouncing on her toes with impatience. "Can we go see our rooms? I want to change before Lindsey gets here."

"Of course," Sensei nodded, handing Tomi back to Hunter. "You're in your usual quarters. I've had them prepared for your arrival."

As we gathered our luggage and followed Sensei toward the residential area of the academy, I caught Hunter's eye, offering a small, understanding smile. He returned it with a slight nod—an acknowledgment of the complicated dynamics we were walking into, and a silent promise to navigate them together.

Family was never simple—especially not our particular blend of biological, chosen, and intergalactic connections. But it was ours, in all its messy, complicated glory.

"OK, sweet!" Harley exclaimed, her earlier sullenness completely evaporated as she grabbed her backpack. She and Arissa took off toward their rooms with the eager familiarity of returning to a second home, their footsteps echoing down the wooden hallway.

Sensei adjusted Tomi on his hip, her little hands already fascinated by the embroidered emblem on his traditional robes. "I can keep Tomi with me if you two need a moment to settle in," he offered, his perceptive gaze catching the tension Hunter was trying to hide.

I nodded gratefully. "That would be great. If I don't get Thara set up with a litter box soon, she is going to stage a full-scale rebellion."

Sensei laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "Nobody wants that. I've seen what that cat is capable of." He nodded toward his office. "We'll be there when you're ready."

As Sensei carried Tomi away, her delighted babbling trailing behind them, Hunter and I made our way to our assigned quarters. It was the same room Hunter had lived in during his teenage years at the academy—now converted to guest accommodations, though I suspected that was by design so

Sensei could keep it reserved for Hunter's visits. The space carried echoes of the boy he had been, though it had been updated and modernized over the years.

Hunter set our bag down on the bed, his movements methodical as he unpacked essentials. His silence spoke volumes—the careful way he arranged his things, the slight furrow between his brows, the measured pace of his breathing. After decades together, I could read his moods like familiar sheet music, each note and rest carrying meaning.

I focused on freeing Thara from her travel prison, setting up her litter box in the small adjoining bathroom and filling her portable dishes with water and food. When I unzipped the backpack, she emerged with theatrical indignation, stretching each limb individually before trotting directly to her litter box with her tail held high—the feline equivalent of a royal snub.

"Dramatic cat is dramatic," I laughed, watching her performance with amused affection.

"Takes after her owner," Hunter replied, the teasing comment accompanied by a small smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as he sat on the edge of the bed.

I joined him, the mattress dipping slightly beneath our combined weight. "Babe," I said softly, placing my hand on his knee, "are you okay? I know seeing Cam with LeAnn is not easy."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair—that familiar gesture that always betrayed his inner turmoil. "Of all the men in the world, why him?" The question wasn't really directed at me, more at the universe's apparent sense of irony. "It's not that I don't want her to be happy. Of course I do. And she clearly loves him." He paused, frustration evident in the set of his jaw. "I just don't trust him. I don't want him to hurt her."

The concern in his voice was genuine, but we both knew there were layers of complexity here that went beyond simple protective instincts. Hunter and Cam had a long, complicated history—years of on-again, off-again relationship that had stretched across much of our twenties. Their pattern had been as predictable as it was destructive: intense periods together followed by equally intense breakups, usually centered around Cam's desire for commitment that Hunter couldn't give him.

And then there was my role in the whole mess—the times Hunter had turned to me during those "off" periods, the lines we'd crossed more than once when we should have known better. It wasn't my proudest chapter, being the other woman in a relationship that was already struggling to define itself. But history was history, and we'd all grown up since then, found our own paths forward.

"I know," I said, leaning against his shoulder. "But it's her choice..." I hesitated, choosing my next words carefully. "And, this pains me to say, but Cam does seem to care about her. As much as Cam can care about anything that isn't a computer."

The small jab at Cam's notorious dedication to technology coaxed a genuine smile from Hunter. Our history with Cam was complicated enough without adding LeAnn to the equation. When Cam began working with LeAnn on integrating Thunder ninja techniques with modern technology, no one had

anticipated their professional collaboration would evolve into romance. Least of all Hunter, who had watched with increasing concern as his ex-boyfriend and foster sister grew closer.

"I just worry," Hunter admitted, his voice quieter now. "LeAnn sees the best in people. Always has. And Cam... he knows how to be charming when he wants something. I've seen it firsthand."

There was a vulnerability in his admission that touched me. Hunter rarely spoke about his years with Cam, about the push and pull that had defined their relationship, about the pain of wanting someone who wanted something different from you.

"True," I acknowledged, "but he's also grown up a lot since your relationship ended. We all have." I squeezed his hand gently. "And LeAnn is stronger than you give her credit for. She's not going to let anyone walk all over her—not even a genius with an ego the size of Saturn."

Hunter chuckled at that, some of the tension finally leaving his shoulders. "You're right. She did throw him through that wall during training when he tried to mansplain Thunder techniques to her."

"Exactly," I nodded, remembering the story with satisfaction. "She can handle herself. And him."

He turned to face me, his expression softening. "When did you become the voice of reason about Cam? I distinctly remember you having some choice words about him after our last breakup."

"Oh, I still have those words in reserve," I admitted with a small laugh. "But I can simultaneously dislike someone's past behavior and acknowledge they might make a decent partner for someone else. It's called emotional maturity."

"Is that what it's called?" Hunter's smile was genuine now, the worry not completely gone but significantly diminished.

"That's what my therapist tells me," I replied, leaning in to kiss him softly. "Now come on. We should rescue Sensei from Tomi before she convinces him to let her redecorate his office with crayon."

As we stood to leave, Thara emerged from the bathroom, her earlier indignation apparently forgotten as she jumped onto the bed and began kneading the quilt into submission for her nap.

Hunter's arm slipped around my waist as we headed toward the door, the familiar weight of it comforting. "Thanks," he said simply.

"For what?"

"For knowing exactly what to say. Even when it involves being reasonable about Cam."

I smiled up at him. "That's what partners do. We help each other navigate the complicated stuff." I paused at the doorway, turning to face him fully. "And Hunter? If he does hurt LeAnn, we can absolutely zap him together. Royal prerogative."

That earned me a full laugh, the last of the tension dissipating as we headed out to face whatever family dynamics awaited us.

We headed down to Sensei's office, following the familiar path through the academy's wooden corridors. The building had changed little over the decades—the same polished floors, the same subtle scent of sandalwood and tea that had permeated these halls since Hunter's childhood.

As we approached the office, I heard familiar voices—the distinctive cadence of conversation that could only mean one thing.

"Oh my god, they're here!" I quickened my pace, pushing open the door to find Blake and Tori already settled in Sensei's office, looking relaxed and at home.

"Mich!" Tori's face lit up as she spotted me. She rose immediately, crossing the room to wrap me in a warm embrace.

I hugged her tightly, the familiar scent of her subtle perfume bringing back memories of countless gatherings over the years. Though we lived on different continents now, Tori remained one of my closest friends—our bond forged through shared battles, family connections, and the unique understanding that came from loving Bradley brothers.

"It's so good to see you," I said, stepping back to look at her. Tori had barely aged in the decades I'd known her—something about the Water ninja energy keeping her perpetually youthful, her blonde hair now styled in a sleek bob that complemented her professional image as one of Southern California's most sought-after family attorneys.

Behind me, Hunter and Blake were engaged in their own reunion—that particular mix of handshake, high-five, and hug that they'd perfected over the years, communicating volumes of brotherly affection without excessive words.

"Bro, good to see you," Blake said, his smile wide and genuine as he pulled Hunter into a proper embrace.

"Good to see you too," Hunter replied, the tension from our earlier conversation completely absent now. "Really good."

Blake had always been Hunter's anchor—the one constant through every upheaval in his life. Though physically separated by continents and careers, their connection remained unshakable, a brotherhood that transcended biology and time. Blake's transition from professional motocross champion to Factory Blue's management team had given him more stability than his riding days.

"It's so nice to have you all here," Sensei observed from his position behind the desk, Tomi contentedly playing at his feet with a set of colorful megablocks that I was certain he kept specifically for her visits. "Does an old man's heart good."

I glanced at Tomi, who seemed perfectly happy building a tower with methodical focus, completely unbothered by the adult conversation happening around her.

"Where's Lindsey?" Hunter asked, looking around for his niece.

Tori laughed, the sound light and familiar. "Already run off looking for Harley and Arissa. The moment she heard they were here, she was gone—something about showing them her new skateboarding video."

"That girl is a perfect blend of both of you," I observed with a smile. "Tori's analytical mind and Blake's inability to sit still for more than five minutes."

"Hey!" Blake protested good-naturedly. "I resemble that remark."

We settled into comfortable conversation for a while—catching up on the basics of our lives since we'd last been together. Tori's law practice was thriving with several high-profile custody cases that had set important precedents, Blake's management role at Factory Blue had him traveling less than his competition days but still keeping him connected to the sport he loved, and Lindsey was excelling in both academics and sports, much to her parents' pride. The easy rhythm of family catching up, filling in the gaps that video calls couldn't quite bridge.

Eventually, the conversation turned to more serious matters.

"So," Blake leaned forward, his expression shifting to something more focused, "what's this about some magical Thunder Rangers in Ireland? Sensei mentioned something on the phone, but I couldn't quite follow all the details."

I exchanged a glance with Hunter, both of us recognizing the significance of this conversation. The discovery of Celtic Thunder ninjas in Ireland had been unexpected—a branch of the Thunder tradition we'd thought lost centuries ago, now revealed to be alive and practicing in the remote Irish countryside not far from our home in Ballincollig.

"Oh, yes," Sensei nodded thoughtfully. "I have many questions about our new friends as well. However, LeAnn should be present for this discussion. As the academy's historian, her perspective will be valuable."

"I agree," I said, knowing that bringing LeAnn into the conversation meant Cam would likely join as well. "We should all be on the same page about this. The Celtic Thunder ninjas have their own traditions, but the connection to the academy is undeniable. And after their crucial role in defeating the Death Ranger, it's important we're coordinated."

The Death Ranger incident had shaken the entire Ranger community—a dark force wielding powers that none of us had encountered before. The Celtic Thunder ninjas had proven invaluable allies in the battle, their ancient techniques providing a key component in our eventual victory. Now, Hunter was helping them rebuild their academy—a sacred site that had been destroyed by Lothor decades ago, long before he'd turned his attention to Blue Bay Harbor and the Wind and Thunder academies.

"Let's take this to the sitting room," Sensei suggested, rising from his chair with the fluid grace that belied his age. "I'll make some tea. This conversation deserves proper attention."

I picked up Tomi, who protested briefly at being separated from her blocks before settling against my hip. As we moved toward the door, I caught Hunter's eye, offering a small, reassuring smile. The conversation ahead would inevitably bring Cam into our circle, but now we were surrounded by family—Blake and Tori's presence creating a buffer of support and shared history that would make the potential tension easier to navigate.

We all made our way to the sitting room, a spacious area with traditional low tables and cushions arranged in a circle. The room had always been my favorite in the academy—warm wood tones, large windows overlooking the training grounds, and an atmosphere that somehow managed to be both formal and comfortable at the same time.

As we settled in, LeAnn and Cam entered from the opposite doorway. I felt Hunter tense slightly beside me, though his expression remained neutral.

"Hunter! Blake!" LeAnn's face lit up as she crossed the room to embrace her foster brothers. Though not biologically related to the Bradley boys, the bond between them had always been as real as any blood connection.

"It's good to see you, Le," Hunter said, his earlier tension about her engagement momentarily forgotten as he returned her hug with genuine affection.

As the academy's historian and keeper of Thunder ninja traditions, LeAnn carried herself with a quiet dignity that commanded respect without demanding it.

Behind her, Cam hovered with the slightly awkward air of someone who knew they were entering a potentially uncomfortable situation. His eyes met mine briefly, and I managed a tight nod.

"Hey," I offered, the single syllable carrying years of complicated history.

"Hello, Michelle," he replied, his tone carefully neutral but with that underlying precision that had always irritated me—like every word was being measured and evaluated before being released.

I pursed my lips and looked away, focusing instead on adjusting Tomi on my lap. Some wounds healed completely over time; others just formed scar tissue that remained sensitive to the touch.

Tori sighed from her position beside Blake, recognizing the familiar tension. "Don't start, you two," she said with the weary patience of someone who had been playing referee between us for decades. Somehow, despite everything, Tori and Cam had stayed best friends over the years—a dynamic I'd never fully understood given her loyalty to both Hunter and me.

"I was being polite," Cam said pointedly, his tone carrying that slight edge of superiority that still made me want to zap him.

I rolled my eyes but bit back the retort that threatened to escape. This wasn't about ancient history or personal grievances; it was about something far more important.

Sensei's entrance with a tray of steaming tea provided a welcome interruption to the brewing tension. He moved with practiced grace despite his age, setting the tray on the central table before beginning to serve each of us.

"Yogi tea," he announced with a small smile. "Hopefully to keep us all nice and relaxed." The subtle emphasis on "relaxed" wasn't lost on anyone in the room.

Once everyone was served and settled, Blake leaned forward, eager to return to the topic that had brought us together. "Okay, so, magic Thunder Rangers," he said, his curiosity evident. Despite years in management at Factory Blue, he still carried the enthusiastic energy that had defined him as a Ranger.

I couldn't help but laugh at his straightforward approach. "Celtic Thunder Rangers, yes. Tiernan and Saoirse Riordan. They're a lovely couple."

"Amber Thunder and Magenta Thunder?" Blake asked, his eyes lighting up with interest. The discovery of new Rangers always sparked excitement in our community, especially ones connected to our own traditions.

Hunter nodded, his expression softening as he spoke about the Irish Rangers he'd been working with. "Yes. Scorpion and Dragonfly."

LeAnn leaned forward, her historian's interest piqued. "I heard about missing Thunder styles touched by Celtic magic, but we all thought it was just an old ninja folktale," she said, her eyes bright with scholarly enthusiasm. "The Scorpion and Dragonfly styles were mentioned in some of our oldest scrolls, but there was no evidence they'd survived."

"Yeah, very much not just a folktale," I confirmed, thinking about the impressive skills Tiernan and Saoirse had demonstrated during the battle with the Death Ranger. Their unique fighting styles had been both familiar and foreign—clearly rooted in Thunder ninja traditions but evolved through centuries of isolation and Celtic influence.

"What do you know about their academy?" Sensei asked, setting his tea down carefully. As the keeper of Thunder ninja traditions on this side of the Atlantic, he had a vested interest in understanding this long-lost branch of their heritage.

Hunter and I exchanged glances, knowing that what we were about to share would forever change the Thunder Academy's understanding of its own history. The Ord na Toirnín's story was one of survival against impossible odds, of traditions preserved in secret for centuries, and of a sacrifice that had saved not just two young Rangers, but an entire legacy of Thunder ninja knowledge that would have otherwise been lost forever.

"It's called the Ord na Toirnín—the Order of the Thunder," Hunter began, his voice carrying the respect he'd developed for the Irish Rangers and their traditions. "And its history goes back further than even our own academy's records suggest."

He leaned forward slightly, his expression thoughtful as he gathered his words. This was a story he'd come to know intimately over the past months, working alongside Tiernan and Saoirse to rebuild what Lothor had destroyed decades ago.

"According to their oral history, during the 5th century, a group of Thunder ninjas traveled from Japan to Ireland with early Christian missionaries. Their purpose wasn't religious conversion, but protection—they were guarding ancient scrolls and artifacts that they believed needed to be hidden from those who would misuse their power."

Sensei nodded slowly, recognition dawning in his eyes. "The Lost Scrolls of Raijin. Our records speak of them being taken westward for safekeeping, but we assumed they were lost at sea."

"They made it," Hunter confirmed. "The ninjas established a hidden academy in what's now County Cork, integrating with local Celtic traditions and eventually developing their own distinct practices. They became known as the Ord na Toirnín."

LeAnn was practically vibrating with excitement, her historian's mind clearly racing. "This explains the gaps in our own records! The missing Thunder styles—Scorpion and Dragonfly—they weren't lost, they evolved separately!"

"Exactly," I added, picking up the thread of the story. "Over centuries, they developed in isolation, blending Thunder ninja techniques with Celtic magic and traditions. They became protectors of ancient Celtic energies and sacred sites throughout Ireland."

Blake whistled low. "And they've been there all this time? How did no one know about them?"

"They lived dual lives," Hunter explained. "Public personas in the local community, secret training and traditions preserved within their hidden academy. Their isolation was deliberate—they believed their mission was too important to risk outside interference."

"The academy was led by an Seanchaí—the lore-keeper," I continued, carefully pronouncing the Irish title Saoirse had taught me. "The most recent was Ruaidhrí Larkin, Saoirse's father. He was both sensei and scholar, preserving not just fighting techniques but the deep spiritual connection to the ancient Celtic energies."

Hunter's expression darkened slightly. "And then Lothor found them."

The name still carried weight in this room—the villain who had nearly destroyed all ninja academies, who had captured students and teachers alike, who had forced the Bradley brothers to become evil Rangers before they broke free of his control.

"This was years before his attack on the Wind and Thunder academies," Hunter clarified, his voice tight with controlled anger. "It seems Lothor was methodically eliminating ninja academies around the world, and the Ord na Toirnín was one of his first targets."

"The attack was swift and brutal," I said quietly, remembering how Saoirse's voice had broken when she'd recounted this part of their history. "Ruaidhrí sensed Lothor's approach and managed to save Saoirse and Tiernan, but he couldn't save the academy itself."

"Saoirse and Tiernan were teenagers then," Hunter continued. "They were the last ones at the academy with Ruaidhrí. He gave them their morphers—ancient artifacts that had been guarded by the Ord na Toirín for centuries—and then..." he paused, the weight of what came next evident in his hesitation.

"He sacrificed himself," I finished softly. "He channeled all of his life energy into a protective barrier that shielded Saoirse and Tiernan from Lothor's attack, giving them time to escape with the most sacred artifacts and scrolls. The academy was destroyed, but its legacy survived through them."

Silence fell over the room as everyone absorbed the gravity of this sacrifice—one that mirrored what Senseis Watanabe and Omino had been willing to do for their own students years later.

"For decades, Saoirse and Tiernan lived in hiding," Hunter continued after a moment. "They maintained their dual lives—she became a professor of Celtic History at University College Cork, he works as a stonemason and construction worker—while secretly continuing their training and protecting the ancient Celtic energies from threats."

"They never rebuilt the academy?" Cam asked, speaking for the first time since the conversation began. Despite our personal history, his analytical mind was fully engaged with the historical significance of what we were sharing.

Hunter shook his head. "They couldn't risk it. Not with Lothor still out there, and not without more trained Thunder ninjas to help protect it. They became the sole guardians of their tradition, carrying the entire legacy of the Ord na Toirín between them."

"Until the Death Ranger incident," Blake surmised, connecting the pieces.

"Exactly," I nodded. "When the Death Ranger emerged and began targeting sites of power including a sacred grove near Tower, in County Cork. The same grove that Saoirse's mother, Iseult, had died protecting years before."

This part of the story felt especially poignant to me—the parallels between Saoirse losing her mother to corrupted Celtic energy when she was just eight years old, and then facing a similar threat as an adult. The cycle of protection and sacrifice that seemed to define the Thunder ninja legacy across continents.

"The Death Ranger wasn't intentionally targeting the Celtic energies," Hunter clarified. "He was drawn to sources of power, and this grove happened to be one. But his presence threatened to corrupt the energies in the same way that had killed Iseult decades earlier."

"Saoirse and Tiernan morphed for the first time in years to confront him," I continued. "That's what triggered the energy signature that Billy detected."

"Their fighting styles were unlike anything I'd ever seen," Hunter said, a note of admiration in his voice. "Familiar enough that I recognized them as Thunder techniques, but evolved through centuries of Celtic influence. Saoirse's Dragonfly style is all about aerial movement and lightning-fast strikes. Tiernan's Scorpion style focuses on grounding and powerful, precise attacks."

"And their Zords?" Blake asked, the former Ranger in him clearly fascinated by these new additions to the Thunder legacy.

"A Magenta Dragonfly and an Amber Scorpion," Hunter replied. "Activated and controlled through ancient Celtic runes rather than the technology we used. When combined, the Dragonfly perches on the Scorpion's back, creating a formidable battle machine that channels both aerial and ground-based attacks."

LeAnn was practically taking mental notes, her expression intense with concentration. "This is extraordinary. An entire branch of Thunder ninja tradition, preserved in isolation for centuries, evolving alongside Celtic practices..."

"And now you're helping them rebuild," Sensei observed, looking at Hunter with evident pride.

Hunter nodded. "After we defeated the Death Ranger together, Saoirse and Tiernan realized they couldn't remain in isolation any longer. The world is facing threats that require coordinated responses from all Ranger teams. They asked for my help in rebuilding the Ord na Toirnín—not just the physical structures, but reconnecting with the broader Thunder ninja community."

"Which is why we're having this conversation," I added. "They want to establish formal ties with the Thunder Academy, to share knowledge and techniques that have been separated for centuries. They're still cautious—centuries of isolation don't disappear overnight—but they recognize the value of connection."

"This is why I wanted LeAnn present," Sensei said, nodding toward her. "As our historian, you will play a crucial role in this reconnection. There is much to learn on both sides."

LeAnn nodded, her eyes bright with scholarly enthusiasm. "I would be honored to help document and preserve these traditions. The historical significance alone is staggering."

"There's something else," Hunter said, his tone shifting slightly. "Saoirse and Tiernan have agreed to come to California next month. They want to visit the Thunder Academy, to see what our Thunder Academy is like."

This announcement sent a ripple of excitement through the room. The prospect of hosting Rangers from this long-lost branch of Thunder ninja tradition was clearly energizing for everyone—even Cam seemed genuinely interested, his usual reserve momentarily forgotten.

"This is a historic moment for the Thunder Academy," Sensei said, his voice carrying the weight of generations of tradition. "The reconnection of two branches of our legacy, separated for over fifteen hundred years."

"They're still hesitant, but willing," I added, thinking of the careful way Saoirse and Tiernan approached this reconnection—their centuries of isolation making them naturally cautious about outside involvement. "Billy and Livvie are currently working on trying to get their new system up and running. Evidently getting the Celtic magic to work with the Morphin Grid is a whole thing."

"Livvie?" Cam's head snapped up, his brows drawing together in that particular way that signaled his disapproval. The familiar expression immediately set my teeth on edge. "Who's Livvie?"

His tone carried that subtle note of condescension that had always managed to get under my skin—as if any name he didn't recognize must belong to someone unqualified to work on Ranger technology.

"She's a friend," I replied, keeping my voice deliberately even. "She's married to my best friend Jeremy. She figured out we were Rangers, and Billy looped her in." I intentionally omitted Livvie's hacking background and the fact that she'd breached Billy's supposedly impenetrable security systems—details that would only fuel Cam's inevitable criticism.

Cam blinked, his expression shifting from confusion to outrage in the span of a heartbeat. "Seriously, Michelle? You brought in a civilian?" His voice rose slightly, that familiar judgmental edge sharpening. "You are so careless!"

The accusation hit a nerve that had been raw for decades—Cam's perpetual assumption that I was reckless, impulsive, unworthy of the power I wielded. I felt Hunter tense beside me, his hand finding my knee in a gesture that was both supportive and cautioning.

I ignored the warning, leaning forward with narrowed eyes. "I didn't bring her in, Billy did," I replied, my voice dropping to that dangerous register that Hunter recognized as my last warning before lightning started crackling. "And screw you. You're not the keeper of who gets to be involved in any of this."

The tension in the room spiked immediately, years of complicated history charging the air between us. This wasn't just about Livvie—it was about Cam's perpetual judgment, about the way he'd always positioned himself as the authority on all things Ranger-related, about the lingering resentment from our shared past with Hunter.

"Enough," Tori interjected sharply, her attorney voice cutting through the tension. "This isn't productive." She turned to Cam with a pointed look that even he couldn't ignore. "If Billy brought her in, he must have had good reason. His security protocols are legendary."

"And Livvie is brilliant," Hunter added, his voice carrying a calm certainty that helped diffuse some of the tension. "She's been instrumental in deciphering the Celtic runes and creating interfaces between different energy signatures. Billy wouldn't have involved her if she wasn't exceptional."

Cam's jaw worked silently for a moment, clearly torn between continuing the argument and acknowledging that Billy's judgment in technical matters was difficult to question. Finally, he settled back in his seat with a short nod, though his expression remained skeptical.

"Fine," he conceded reluctantly. "But security around Ranger identities exists for a reason. The more people who know, the greater the risk to everyone."

"We're well aware," I replied, my tone still cool but no longer openly hostile. "Livvie has been working with us for months now. She's proven herself trustworthy many times over."

LeAnn cleared her throat gently, her expression suggesting she'd had considerable practice mediating between Cam's rigid adherence to protocol and other perspectives. "Perhaps we could return to discussing the Celtic Thunder Rangers? I'm particularly interested in how their fighting styles evolved separately from our own."

The subtle redirection worked, shifting the conversation back to safer territory. As Hunter began describing the unique aerial techniques of Saoirse's Dragonfly style, I caught Tori's eye across the table. Her slight nod acknowledged what we both knew—that some wounds never fully healed, that history had a way of resurfacing in unexpected moments, and that navigating these complex relationships required constant vigilance.

The conversation flowed more smoothly after that, focusing on the technical aspects of rebuilding the Ord na Toirín and the preparations needed for Saoirse and Tiernan's visit. But beneath the surface, I remained acutely aware of the delicate balance we were maintaining—not just between ancient traditions and modern threats, but between the complicated web of relationships that defined our extended Ranger family.

The conversation about the Celtic Rangers continued for some time, delving into the unique techniques and traditions that had evolved during their centuries of isolation. LeAnn was particularly fascinated by the integration of Celtic runes into their fighting styles, while Blake peppered Hunter with questions about their Zords and battle strategies.

Our academic discussion was abruptly interrupted when the door slid open and three girls burst into the room with the particular energy that only pre-teens and teenagers could generate. Lindsey led the charge, her expression already set in determination that reminded me strikingly of both her parents—Blake's intensity and Tori's focus combined in one formidable eleven-year-old.

"Okay," Lindsey announced without preamble, hands on her hips as she surveyed the adults in the room, "why do Harley and Arissa have their Thunder Morphers and I still don't?"

The directness of the question created an immediate shift in the room's atmosphere. Blake and Tori exchanged one of those loaded parental glances that contained an entire silent conversation—the kind Hunter and I had perfected over years of raising three very different daughters.

"Well, for one thing, they're older than you," Tori replied, her attorney voice carefully modulated to sound reasonable rather than dismissive. "You're eleven, sweetie."

Lindsey was clearly prepared for this argument. "So? I've been training in the Thunder style longer than both of them," she countered, gesturing toward my daughters who had the good sense to look slightly uncomfortable. It was true—Lindsey had been immersed in Thunder ninja techniques since she could walk.

I leaned forward slightly, recognizing the genuine frustration behind her question. "It wasn't something we wanted to do, Linds," I explained gently. "We were facing a pretty bad threat and didn't have a choice. They needed powers to stay safe." The memory of that desperate decision still troubled me—the moment when Hunter and I had realized that our daughters needed Ranger protection to survive the Death Ranger's targeted attacks on our family.

Lindsey's expression softened slightly, though the determined glint in her eye suggested this conversation was merely postponed rather than concluded. She'd clearly inherited her mother's tenacity and her father's unwillingness to back down easily.

Tori, sensing the potential for this discussion to spiral into territory none of the adults wanted to navigate, smoothly redirected. She turned to Arissa with a warm smile. "I heard you got a boyfriend."

The change of subject worked perfectly. Arissa's face transformed from awkward discomfort to radiant enthusiasm in an instant. "Yeah. Arion," she confirmed, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. "He's so amazing."

I caught Hunter's reflexive wince from the corner of my eye. Despite his intellectual understanding that Arissa was growing up, his emotional acceptance of her dating remained a work in progress—especially given the interplanetary complications of her relationship with Arion.

Blake noticed too, his laugh breaking some of the lingering tension. "I see Hunter is thrilled," he observed with the particular delight of someone watching his brother's discomfort from a safe distance.

"Laugh it up," Hunter replied dryly. "Your day is coming." He gestured toward Lindsey with a knowing look that promised future schadenfreude.

"Nah, my Lindsey is never dating," Blake declared with the confident delusion that fathers of daughters often clung to. "Right?"

Lindsey stared at her father with the perfect blend of pre-teen incredulity and secondhand embarrassment. "Well, I mean, at some point I am," she replied, her tone suggesting she was explaining something painfully obvious to someone very slow on the uptake.

Hunter's laugh carried a distinct note of vindication. The brotherhood between them had always included equal parts support and merciless teasing—a balance that had sustained them through orphanhood, evil Ranger spells, and now the challenges of raising daughters.

"When do we get to meet Arion?" Tori asked, genuinely interested in this new development.

"Mom said we're teleporting him in tomorrow morning," Arissa replied, her excitement evident in the way she practically bounced on her toes—a rare display from my usually composed eldest.

I nodded, confirming the plan. "Right after breakfast. Celeste is coordinating with Billy to ensure a smooth transition. Arion will need a few hours to adjust to Earth's atmosphere before any activities."

"Speaking of food," LeAnn interjected smoothly, "who's ready for dinner? The kitchen has prepared something special for our guests."

The mention of food worked its usual magic on teenagers. Their attention immediately shifted, the complex questions about morphers and interplanetary boyfriends temporarily forgotten in favor of more immediate concerns.

As we all began to rise, preparing to move to the dining hall, I caught Hunter's eye across the room. The slight quirk of his eyebrow communicated volumes—amusement at the girls' predictability, relief at the momentary reprieve from difficult conversations, and the shared understanding that our family gatherings were never simple but always worth the complexity they entailed.

After dinner, the group naturally dispersed throughout the academy. Blake and Sensei took the older girls to the training grounds. Tori and LeAnn disappeared somewhere, likely discussing the reconnecting two Thunder academies across international borders.

Hunter and I retreated to the sitting room with Tomi, creating a small island of quiet family time amidst the busy reunion. I'd even brought Thara in from our quarters, knowing she'd eventually forgive the travel indignities if allowed proper exploration of new territory. The sitting room's low tables and cushioned floor made a perfect play area for Tomi, who was contentedly arranging and rearranging a set of colorful blocks.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, dividing my attention between my daughter's industrious building project and Thara's careful investigation of the room's perimeter. Hunter had settled nearby, his back against one of the cushions, his expression relaxed in a way it only truly became when surrounded by family.

The peaceful moment was interrupted when Cam appeared in the doorway, his posture stiff with that particular formality he never seemed to shed, even in casual settings. He hesitated briefly before stepping fully into the room.

"Hunter, can we talk?" he asked, his gaze fixed solely on my husband.

Hunter looked up, his expression shifting subtly from relaxation to wariness. "Yeah... sure."

"Alone?" Cam's eyes flickered briefly toward me before returning to Hunter.

"Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of my wife," Hunter replied, his tone making it clear this wasn't a negotiable point. The slight emphasis on "wife" wasn't lost on any of us—a subtle reminder of boundaries and priorities.

I looked up at Cam with deliberately innocent eyes, folding my hands in my lap with exaggerated attentiveness. "Please, don't mind me. I'm just here with my daughter and cat." The saccharine sweetness in my voice would have made Hunter laugh under different circumstances.

Cam sighed, the sound carrying notes of both resignation and irritation. "Fine." He straightened slightly, shifting into what I recognized as his presentation posture. "I've been working on something you may be interested in."

"Oh?" Hunter's response was noncommittal, but I could sense his curiosity despite his lingering wariness.

"Well, as you know, Michelle's physiology renders her incapable of producing a male heir," Cam began, his tone taking on that clinical detachment that made my skin crawl. "Any child she has will be female, as it is with all of the planetary royal lines. There are some genetic anomalies throughout history, but they are rare."

I felt my body tense, maternal instincts immediately on alert. The casual reference to my "planetary physiology" and reproductive capabilities in the same room as my daughter—even one too young to understand—sent a wave of protective anger through me.

"Yes, I'm aware," Hunter replied, his voice cooling several degrees. "Your point?"

Cam either didn't notice the warning signs or chose to ignore them, forging ahead with the confidence of someone who believed their intellectual pursuits trumped social awareness. "Well, I looked at the anomalies and, after analyzing them along with Michelle's physiology and DNA structure, I think I have determined a way to make a viable fetus with her egg and your sperm that is male. If you're interested, you could have a son."

The words hung in the air like toxic smoke. My jaw dropped, shock momentarily robbing me of speech. The implications of what he was saying—what he had done without consent—were staggering.

Hunter's face flushed crimson, the color rising from his neck to his hairline in the space of seconds. "You what?" The words emerged with dangerous quietness. "Why would you do that?"

Cam seemed genuinely confused by our reaction, his brow furrowing slightly. "I was trying to help. A peace offering, if you will. Allowing you to have a son."

The presumption was breathtaking—the assumption that Hunter must want a son, that our three daughters were somehow insufficient, that this invasive research constituted a "peace offering" rather than a profound violation.

"How did you even get my DNA and other data on me?" I asked, finding my voice at last. Tomi looked up at my tone, her little face registering the tension in the room. I forced myself to soften my expression for her benefit, though my words remained sharp.

"Ranger Database," Cam replied simply, as if this explained and justified everything.

"Billy's database," I clarified, anger building. "That is a breach of intended use. You have access to that for Ranger business, not conducting unsanctioned experiments without the knowledge of the subject!" The thought of him combing through my genetic information, analyzing my reproductive capabilities without my consent, made me feel violated in a way that was both deeply personal and coldly clinical.

Hunter stood abruptly, his movement fluid but charged with barely contained fury. "Are you insinuating my daughters aren't enough? That I need a son?" His voice rose slightly despite his obvious effort to control it. "Or are you just trying to give me something Michelle can't?"

The question cut straight to the heart of the matter—the implication that Cam was attempting to position himself as able to provide something I couldn't, a final competitive move in a relationship that had ended years ago.

"Or do you think he needs a male heir?" I added, rising to stand beside Hunter. "That's misogynistic as fuck."

Cam raised his hands in a defensive gesture, finally seeming to register the depth of our anger. "I was only trying to help."

"No one asked you to, Cam!" I shot back, my hands clenching at my sides. "I never would have consented to you digging around in my DNA."

"Okay, but it could also help your daughters if they ever want a son," he persisted, apparently unable to recognize when to stop digging.

"You had no right!" Hunter's voice had taken on that dangerous edge I recognized from our most serious confrontations—the tone that preceded either lightning strikes or physical action. His body had shifted subtly into a fighting stance, though I doubted he was consciously aware of it.

Thara, sensing the tension, had abandoned her exploration to position herself protectively near Tomi, her tail swishing with agitation. The room felt charged with potential energy—Hunter's anger, my outrage, Cam's oblivious persistence creating a volatile mixture that threatened to ignite at any moment.

I placed my hand on Hunter's arm, both in support and as a gentle restraint. The last thing we needed was a physical confrontation in front of Tomi, regardless of how justified Hunter's anger might be. We'd spent years working on channeling our powerful emotions constructively, on modeling healthy conflict resolution for our daughters.

"What you've done is a violation of our privacy and autonomy," I said, my voice deadly quiet but precise. "You had no right to access our genetic information for personal experimentation, no right to make assumptions about what our family needs or wants, and absolutely no right to present this as some kind of gift."

Hunter's muscles remained tense beneath my touch, but he took a deliberate breath, his years of ninja training helping him maintain control. "I want you to destroy that research," he said finally, each word carefully measured. "All of it. And I want your word that you will never access our genetic information again without explicit consent."

Cam blinked, the reality of our reaction finally seeming to penetrate his scientific detachment. "... I genuinely thought you would be pleased," he said, his confusion appearing genuine. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Intent doesn't negate impact," I replied, the phrase one I'd learned in therapy and found increasingly useful in situations like this. "What you did was wrong, regardless of why you did it."

The tension in the room hung like a physical presence, the three of us locked in a moment that crystallized decades of complicated history. In the background, oblivious to the adult drama, Tomi continued stacking her blocks with focused determination, Thara now watching over her with feline vigilance.

"Cam, for years you have tried to outdo Michelle where I'm concerned," Hunter said, his voice low but intense. The observation cut to the heart of a pattern that had persisted long after their relationship ended—Cam's subtle but consistent attempts to position himself as superior to me, as more compatible with Hunter, as the one who truly understood him.

Cam's expression hardened, his academic detachment giving way to something more personal. "That isn't true," he countered, then immediately undermined his denial with a damning addition, "although if it were, I think I would be justified given that you got her pregnant when you were with me."

The words landed like a physical blow. I felt my breath catch, old guilt surfacing despite years of therapy and reconciliation. Harley's conception had been complicated—a moment of weakness during one of Hunter and Cam's "off" periods that had spiraled into years of deception. First my infidelity to Rocky, then the lie that he was Harley's father rather than Hunter. It wasn't my proudest chapter, and having it thrown in my face now, in this context, felt deliberately cruel.

I glared at Cam, anger mixing with the sting of genuine shame. Using my past mistakes to justify his current violation felt like a particularly low blow—especially when those mistakes had already cost me years of happiness and trust that Hunter and I had worked painfully hard to rebuild.

"We both made mistakes when we were together," Hunter growled, his protective instincts extending to shield me from Cam's accusation. "Do you really want to rehash all of that now?" The warning in

his tone was unmistakable—this path led nowhere productive, only deeper into old wounds better left healed.

A sudden, uncomfortable thought occurred to me, connecting dots I hadn't previously considered. "Are you using LeAnn to try to get to Hunter?" I asked, studying Cam's face carefully. The timing of his relationship with Hunter's foster sister, his continued competitive behavior toward me, his invasive "research" project—it painted a concerning pattern.

Cam blinked, genuine shock registering in his expression. "No!" he protested, his voice rising slightly. "I love LeAnn." The vehemence in his denial seemed authentic, a rare moment of unguarded emotion from someone who typically maintained rigid control.

"You have a funny way of showing it," Hunter replied, skepticism evident in his tone. "Conducting secret genetic experiments involving your fiancée's brother and his wife doesn't exactly scream healthy boundaries."

Cam's posture stiffened, his jaw working silently for a moment before he responded. "My love for LeAnn doesn't negate my past with Hunter," he said finally, a statement that raised more questions than it answered.

The admission hung in the air between us, loaded with implications. I shifted slightly, positioning myself more directly beside Hunter, our shoulders touching in a silent display of unity. Whatever Cam's motivations—whether genuine scientific curiosity, lingering attachment to Hunter, or something more complicated—his actions had crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed.

"Your past with Hunter is exactly that—past," I said quietly but firmly. "We've all moved on, built families, created lives. Whatever you think you're doing with this research, it needs to stop."

Hunter nodded, his arm sliding around my waist in a gesture that was both supportive and declarative. "Michelle's right. This isn't about our history, Cam. This is about basic respect and boundaries in the present. I'm happy with my family exactly as it is. Three daughters, no sons needed."

Tomi chose that moment to look up from her blocks, sensing her father's mention of daughters perhaps, her little face breaking into a smile that momentarily lightened the tension in the room. "Dada," she said clearly, holding up a block as if offering it as a gift.

The simple gesture—so innocent and untouched by the complicated adult emotions swirling around her—seemed to shift something in the atmosphere. Hunter's expression softened as he looked at our youngest daughter, the love in his eyes undeniable.

"Perfect timing, baby girl," I murmured, grateful for the reminder of what truly mattered in this moment.

Cam watched this interaction, something unreadable crossing his face—perhaps recognition of what he was witnessing, or perhaps something more personal that he kept carefully guarded. Whatever it was, he seemed to finally register the depth of his miscalculation.

"I'll destroy the research," he said after a moment, his voice subdued. "You have my word."

The concession felt like a small victory, though the damage to trust had already been done. Some boundaries, once crossed, created permanent changes in relationships. This moment would alter how we interacted with Cam going forward—not just for this visit, but potentially for years to come.

"Thank you," Hunter replied, his tone formal but no longer openly hostile. The ninja training that had shaped him since childhood allowed him to acknowledge the concession without immediately forgetting the offense that had necessitated it.

As Cam turned to leave, I found myself wondering if he truly understood what he had done—not just the invasion of privacy, but the presumption that our family needed "fixing" in some way. That our daughters weren't enough. That Hunter must secretly want what Cam thought he should want.

It was that presumption, more than anything else, that revealed how little he really knew the man Hunter had become.

Cam turned and left the room, his departure marked by a stiff formality that suggested he was retreating to process rather than truly conceding. The tension he'd brought with him lingered in the air like a faint electrical charge, the kind that precedes a storm rather than follows it.

Hunter set his jaw for a moment, watching the empty doorway before deliberately softening his expression as he turned back to our daughter. He crossed the room in two strides and scooped Tomi up from her play area, cradling her against his chest in a gesture that seemed as much for his comfort as for hers. She settled against him naturally, her small hand patting his shoulder in that unconsciously soothing way children sometimes have.

I gathered Thara into my arms, her warm weight grounding me as my thoughts threatened to spiral. She allowed the handling with unusual tolerance, perhaps sensing my need for the tactile comfort of her purring presence.

"Are you okay, baby?" Hunter asked softly, his eyes finding mine across the short distance between us. The anger that had blazed so fiercely moments ago had receded, replaced by a gentle concern that made my heart ache.

I looked down, my fingers absently stroking Thara's fur as I struggled to articulate the insecurity that Cam's "research" had unexpectedly unearthed. "I'm sorry I can't give you a son," I said quietly, the words feeling inadequate even as they left my lips.

It was an old wound I thought had long since healed—this particular limitation of my Saturnian genetics. The royal lines of the planets produced only daughters, with rare exceptions throughout

millennia of history. It had never seemed to matter before, not with our three beautiful girls, but Cam's presumption had somehow found a vulnerable spot I hadn't realized still existed.

Hunter stepped closer, shifting Tomi to one arm so he could gently tilt my chin up with his free hand, forcing me to meet his gaze. "You have nothing to be sorry for," he said, his voice carrying that particular certainty that had always been my anchor in moments of doubt. "You've given me two beautiful daughters and taken on my third as your own. You guys are all I need." His thumb brushed my cheek in a tender gesture. "I love our family. Besides," he added with a small smile that reached his eyes, "I have a son. Harley."

The reference to our eldest daughter's tomboy nature—her preference for sports over fashion, her practical approach to life, her determination to forge her own path—brought an immediate smile to my face. Hunter had never once suggested that Harley should be more traditionally feminine, had encouraged her interests whether they involved dirt bikes or field hockey, had celebrated who she was rather than who society might expect her to be.

"I love our family too," I replied, leaning into his touch. The simple truth of it washed through me, stronger than any lingering insecurity Cam's words had stirred. Our family was perfect exactly as it was—not because it conformed to some external standard, but because we had built it together, through challenges and joys, mistakes and forgiveness, across planets and dimensions and years.

Tomi wiggled between us, reaching for my hair. "Mama," she said clearly, her small face serious as she patted my cheek with her free hand.

"That's right, sweet girl," I murmured, shifting Thara to accommodate Tomi's attention. "Mama's right here."

Hunter's arm slid around us both, creating a small circle of connection in the middle of the sitting room. Thara tolerated being partially squished between us with surprising grace, her purr intensifying as if to remind us that she, too, was an essential part of this family unit.

"Don't let him get to you," Hunter said softly, his lips brushing my temple. "He doesn't understand what we have. He never did."

I nodded against his shoulder, the truth of his words settling into me. What we had built together transcended conventional definitions of family, bridging planets and traditions, combining the Thunder ninja legacy with Saturnian royalty, creating something unique and precious in its complexity.

"I know," I replied, my voice steadier now. "It just caught me off guard—him using my genetics like that."

"He's always been better with data than with people," Hunter observed, the statement neither an excuse nor a complete condemnation, just a simple truth about the man who had once been so important in his life.

As we stood there in our small family circle, I felt the last of the tension drain away, replaced by a certainty that had weathered far greater challenges than Cam's misguided "research." Whatever came next—Arion's arrival from Saturn, the ongoing rebuilding of the Celtic Thunder academy, the inevitable complexities of raising three daughters across two planets—we would face it together, exactly as we were.

That night, when we finally retreated to our room in the academy, the familiar rituals of bedtime provided a comforting normalcy after the day's emotional turbulence. Tomi was asleep in the small crib that had been set up on the other side of the room, her gentle breathing audible. Thara had claimed her spot on my pillow, her eyes gleaming in the dim light as she curled up to sleep.

I changed into the pants and tank top I preferred for sleeping, while Hunter opted for just pajama bottoms as he always did. When we finally slipped beneath the covers, I gravitated toward him instinctively, curling into the warmth of his body. My hands found their way to his chest, fingers splaying against bare skin that still felt like home after all these years. He wrapped his arm around me, drawing me closer, his heartbeat steady and reassuring beneath my palm.

For several minutes, we simply existed in the quiet darkness, the academy sounds muted through the thick walls of the residential quarters. But Cam's words from earlier continued to echo in my mind, stirring questions I thought had been settled long ago.

"You really don't want a son?" I asked softly, the words barely more than a whisper against his skin.

Hunter's arm tightened around me slightly, a gentle sigh escaping him. "Mich, babe, stop," he said, his voice a low rumble I could feel as much as hear. "I want you and our girls. That's it." His hand moved in slow, soothing circles against my back. "I love our family. I love the life we're building."

There was a brief pause, his voice taking on a deeper emotional quality when he continued. "I never thought I'd have a family again after losing my parents, and you gave me that. You're everything. Don't let Cam get in your head."

I nodded against his chest, absorbing his words. The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable, yet something else still nagged at me—a deeper insecurity that Cam's actions had inadvertently unearthed. Not just about my inability to have a son, but about the fundamental question that occasionally haunted me in quiet moments like this.

"Why do you love me?" I asked, the question emerging before I could reconsider it.

"What?" Hunter's confusion was evident in the single word, his body shifting slightly to better see my face in the darkness.

I took a deep breath, committing to the vulnerability of the moment. "Why do you love me? I hear what people say. Even our friends wonder why you're with me." The words came faster now, giving voice to thoughts I usually kept carefully contained. "Amber says you're so down-to-Earth and chill, and I'm so chaotic and self-absorbed. Why are you with me?"

It wasn't just Amber's opinion, though she had been the most direct about it. There had been comments over the years, subtle observations about our contrasting personalities—Hunter's steady reliability versus my more volatile nature, his quiet strength against my dramatic flair, his contentment with simplicity compared to my complex, multi-faceted life.

Hunter sighed, his fingers finding their way into my hair, gently working through the strands in that soothing way he knew I loved. "You're not self-absorbed," he said firmly. "Amber doesn't know you're a Ranger. She doesn't know how selfless you are, how many times you've put your life on the line to protect others."

His defense of me was immediate and genuine, but I noticed he'd sidestepped the core of my question. I pressed further, needing to hear his answer.

"You didn't answer my question," I said quietly. "Why do you love me?" I forced myself to articulate the parts of myself I was most insecure about. "I really am chaotic, jaded, and dramatic."

Hunter shifted, propping himself up on one elbow to look down at me properly. In the faint moonlight filtering through the window, his expression was a mixture of tenderness and mild exasperation—the look of someone being asked to explain why water is wet or why the sky is blue.

"Mich," he began, his voice carrying that particular tone he used when he thought I was being ridiculous but loved me too much to say it outright. "I love you because you're you. Yes, you're chaotic sometimes—you bring excitement and passion into my life. You're dramatic—you feel things deeply and aren't afraid to express them. And if you're jaded, it's because you've seen more of the universe than most people could imagine."

His hand cupped my cheek, thumb brushing gently across my skin. "But you're also fiercely loyal, incredibly brave, and more loving than anyone gives you credit for. You put on this tough exterior for the world, but I know the woman who reads extra bedtime stories to Tomi even when she's exhausted, who checks on Arissa in the middle of the night when she's worried, who defends Harley even when she's being impossible."

I felt my throat tighten with emotion, my eyes burning slightly in the darkness.

"You challenge me," Hunter continued, his voice growing softer. "You don't let me retreat into myself when things get hard. You make me laugh. You understand parts of me that no one else ever has." He leaned closer, his forehead touching mine. "And you've given me a family I never thought I'd have again after losing my parents. How could I not love you?"

The simple sincerity in his words penetrated the layers of insecurity that Cam's actions had stirred up. This wasn't a rehearsed speech or a placating response—it was Hunter's unfiltered truth, offered in the quiet darkness where we'd always been most honest with each other.

"Besides," he added, a hint of humor entering his voice, "have you considered that maybe I'm not as 'chill' as everyone thinks? That maybe I need your chaos to balance my stillness? That your so-called drama is exactly what keeps me from becoming too detached from my emotions?"

I couldn't help the small laugh that escaped me. "Are you saying I'm good for you, Bradley?"

"I'm saying we're good for each other," he corrected gently. "Always have been, even when we were too young and stubborn to admit it."

His lips found mine in the darkness, the kiss carrying decades of shared history—from those first electric encounters in our 20s to the deeper, more profound connection we'd built as partners, parents, and fellow Rangers. When we finally broke apart, I felt steadier, more grounded in the certainty of us.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips. "Chaotic, dramatic self and all."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he replied, drawing me back against his chest as we settled into the comfortable position we'd perfected over years of sharing a bed.

As sleep began to claim me, I found myself reflecting on how fortunate we were to have found our way back to each other after all the detours and complications. Whatever Cam or anyone else might think about our compatibility, the only opinions that truly mattered were our own—and the three daughters who thrived in the love we'd built together.

The next morning, I was drawn from sleep by an insistent knocking at our door—the particular rhythm suggesting urgency rather than emergency.

"Mom, wake up. We need to eat so we can get Arion!" Arissa's voice carried through the wood, her typical composure noticeably absent in the excited pitch of her words.

Hunter groaned beside me, burrowing deeper under the covers as if he could physically escape the reality of our daughter's interplanetary romance. I couldn't help but chuckle at his reaction, the sound still husky with sleep.

"Your reserved daughter is not so reserved this morning," I observed, propping myself up on one elbow to look at the Hunter-shaped lump attempting to disappear into our mattress.

"Kill me," he moaned dramatically, pulling a pillow over his head in a gesture that was half genuine reluctance, half theatrical performance for my benefit.

I nudged him gently with my knee. "Come on, Arion is a good kid. It could be so much worse." I kept my voice light but sincere, knowing that beneath Hunter's exaggerated dismay lay genuine paternal concern. "At least he's respectful, her age, and has a healthy fear of crossing you."

Hunter peeked out from beneath his pillow fortress, one eye visible as he considered my point. "That is one thing I like," he conceded reluctantly, the hint of a smile belying his grumpy facade.

I rolled my eyes affectionately and slipped out of bed, the cool morning air raising goosebumps on my bare arms.

The knocking resumed, more insistent this time. "Mom! Dad! Are you awake?"

"Coming, coming," I called, crossing to the door and opening it just enough to reveal Arissa standing in the hallway, already fully dressed and practically vibrating with anticipation.

My normally composed eldest daughter had transformed overnight into an embodiment of teenage excitement. Her hair was styled with unusual care, her clothes clearly chosen with deliberate attention rather than her typical practical considerations. The sight was both amusing and slightly bittersweet—this visible evidence of her growing up, of her heart extending beyond our immediate family circle.

Arissa bounded into the room the moment the door opened wider, barely acknowledging my disheveled state or Hunter's continued pillow-covered protest. "We need to eat," she announced, as if breakfast were merely an obligatory hurdle between her and Arion's arrival rather than a necessary meal.

I laughed, running a hand through my sleep-tousled hair. "Let us get dressed," I said, gesturing to my obvious state of undress and Hunter's pillow fortress. "We'll meet you in the dining hall, and I promise, after breakfast, we'll get Arion here."

The compromise clearly tested Arissa's patience, but years of diplomatic training as a princess had at least taught her when to concede a point. She sighed with the particular blend of resignation and impatience that only teenagers can perfect. "Okay, hurry up."

Her instruction delivered, she turned and left the room with the same whirlwind energy that had brought her in, closing the door behind her with slightly more force than necessary—a small physical expression of her eagerness.

I turned back to the bed, where Hunter had finally emerged from beneath his pillow, his hair adorably mussed and his expression a complex mixture of amusement and paternal concern.

"And so it begins," he said dryly, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. "Teenage romance across galaxies. Because normal parenting challenges weren't complicated enough."

I crossed to his side of the bed, leaning down to press a quick kiss to his forehead. "Look at the bright side—at least we don't have to worry about them sneaking off to make out in his car. Interplanetary dating has some built-in supervision advantages."

Hunter caught my hand, his thumb tracing small circles against my palm. "True. And I suppose if she had to fall for someone from another planet, at least it's one where you're the queen. Hard for him to misbehave when his girlfriend's mom literally rules his homeland."

"Now you're getting it," I smiled, squeezing his hand before moving toward the bathroom. "Come on, we'd better hurry before she comes back with reinforcements. I wouldn't put it past her to enlist Blake and Tori in her campaign to speed things along."

Hunter groaned again, but he was already standing, reaching for his clothes with resigned acceptance. "Fine, but I reserve the right to use my intimidating dad glare at strategic moments. Royal boyfriend or not, some traditions need to be maintained."

I laughed as I disappeared into the bathroom, the sound echoing slightly off the tiles. "I wouldn't have it any other way. It's practically your paternal duty."

As I turned on the shower, I found myself smiling at the normality of it all—the universal constants of parenting that transcended our unusual circumstances. Nervous fathers, excited daughters, first loves that felt world-changing in their intensity. Some experiences remained fundamentally human, regardless of whether they involved interplanetary teleportation or ancient ninja academies.

While I showered, Hunter took on the morning duties with Tomi, getting her cleaned up and dressed for the day. When I emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel with my hair still damp, I found our youngest contentedly playing with her stuffed unicorn on the bed while Hunter laid out her shoes.

I crossed to the small closet where we'd hung our clothes, considering my options for the day. Given that we weren't planning to leave the academy grounds, I pulled out my purple Wind Ninja uniform, the fabric familiar beneath my fingers. Though I was visiting the Thunder Academy, my identity as the former Purple Wind Ranger made this uniform an important part of who I was. Some affiliations transcended location.

Hunter slipped into the bathroom for his own shower as I dressed, securing my hair in a simple braid that would keep it out of my face. When he emerged several minutes later and donned his crimson Thunder Academy uniform, I couldn't help the appreciative smile that curved my lips. The deep crimson fabric accentuated his broad shoulders and lean physique, the color as striking against his skin now as it had been decades ago when he'd first become the Crimson Thunder Ranger.

"What?" he asked, catching my gaze as he fastened the uniform's traditional belt.

"Nothing," I replied, the smile lingering. "I just always loved you in that uniform. I miss seeing it."

A flicker of understanding crossed his face, memories of our younger days momentarily visible in his eyes. "Maybe I should wear it more often," he suggested, his voice carrying a hint of playfulness despite the early hour.

"Maybe you should," I agreed, crossing the room to straighten his collar—an unnecessary gesture that was really just an excuse to touch him.

The moment was interrupted by Tomi's enthusiastic babbling as she held up her unicorn for our inspection. "Pretty," she declared solemnly.

"Very pretty," I agreed, scooping her up. "And now we need to go find your sisters before Arissa stages a rebellion."

We headed down to breakfast quickly, both of us well aware that Arissa would be counting every minute. The dining hall was already buzzing with activity when we arrived, students and teachers moving through the morning meal with the disciplined efficiency characteristic of the academy.

Arissa was seated at the family table, her posture rigid with barely contained impatience. Harley sat beside her, looking considerably less enthused about the early hour, while Lindsey chatted animatedly about something that had both Blake and Tori smiling indulgently.

"Finally," Arissa said as we approached, her tone making it clear that our perfectly reasonable preparation time had felt like an eternity to her.

"Good morning to you too, sunshine," I replied, settling Tomi into the high chair that had been provided for her. "Contrary to popular belief, proper hygiene is still important on teleportation days."

Breakfast passed in a blur of conversation and hurried bites, Arissa's eyes darting to the clock on the wall with such frequency that even Sensei Omino commented on her unusual restlessness. When the meal finally concluded, she was the first on her feet, practically vibrating with anticipation.

"Now?" she asked, her normally composed demeanor completely abandoned.

"Yes, now," Hunter confirmed, his resignation tinged with affection. "Let's go get your boyfriend."

We made our way to Thunder Ops—the Thunder Academy's equivalent of the Wind's Ninja Ops, though with distinctly different aesthetics. Where the Wind Academy favored natural elements and open spaces, Thunder Ops was built into the heart of the mountain, the technology seamlessly integrated with stone and traditional architecture.

Cam was already at the main console when we arrived, his fingers moving across the controls with practiced precision. He glanced up briefly as our group entered, his expression carefully neutral after yesterday's confrontation.

"Everything's ready," he reported, his focus remaining professional despite the lingering tension.

"I've established the preliminary connection with Saturn."

"OK, let's do this!" Arissa exclaimed, moving to stand directly behind Cam's chair, her excitement palpable.

I couldn't help but laugh at her enthusiasm, so different from her usual reserved demeanor. "Yes. It's okay, Cam. Connect when ready."

Cam nodded and activated the main screen, the large display flickering briefly before resolving into a clear image of the Saturn Royal Palace's teleportation chamber. Celeste, my trusted advisor, stood center frame, flanked by Sir Arion and his son, Young Arion.

The family resemblance between father and son was striking—the same strong jaw, the same watchful eyes, though the son's face still carried the softness of youth. Young Arion stood tall in formal Saturnian attire, his posture reflecting the military discipline his father had instilled, though his eyes immediately sought out Arissa in our group.

"Greetings, Your Majesties," Celeste smiled, offering the slight bow that was customary in formal Saturn communications.

I returned the smile warmly as Blake chuckled quietly beside us, still amused by the royal titles his brother had acquired through marriage. "Hello, Celeste. Is Young Arion prepared for travel?"

"Yes, he is prepared for teleport when ready," she confirmed with a crisp nod, her efficiency one of the many reasons she held such a trusted position in our court.

"And he has been briefed on his cover story?" Hunter asked, his voice carrying the particular blend of royal authority and paternal concern that he'd perfected.

Sir Arion stepped forward slightly, his military bearing evident even through the video connection.

"Yes, Your Majesty. And he knows the importance of maintaining his cover while on Earth, with the exception of approved locations." His gaze shifted briefly to his son, pride and concern equally visible in his expression.

Hunter nodded, satisfied with the response. The cover story we'd crafted for Arion was detailed and carefully constructed, designed to withstand casual scrutiny while explaining his unfamiliarity with certain Earth customs.

"I've been studying American schools so I know how to answer questions," Young Arion added earnestly, his formal speech patterns reflecting his Saturnian upbringing despite his efforts to adopt Earth colloquialisms.

"Very good," I acknowledged with an approving nod. "Then I think we're ready."

Sir Arion's expression softened slightly as he looked at his son. "If you need anything from me, do not hesitate to contact me. Please," he turned his gaze to Hunter and me, "take care of my boy."

The request carried the weight of a father's love—a universal concern that transcended planets and species. This wasn't just the Saturn Head Guard speaking to his monarchs; this was a father entrusting his child to our care.

"Of course, Sir Arion," I promised, my voice gentle but firm. "He will be safe with us on Earth."

The formalities complete, we moved to the technical aspects of the transfer. "Okay, Cam, let me know when your side of the portal is open," Celeste instructed, moving to her own control panel.

Cam nodded, his fingers flying across the keyboard. "Entering coordinates. And... I'm in."

Celeste acknowledged with a sharp nod and activated the portal on the Saturn side. The air in Thunder Ops began to shimmer with a subtle purple light—the characteristic signature of Saturn teleportation energy.

Young Arion took a deep breath, exchanged one final look with his father, and stepped through the shimmering portal. For a brief moment, he seemed to exist in both places at once—a visual echo suspended between worlds—before the energy coalesced and he materialized fully in Thunder Ops, the portal closing behind him.

"Arion!" Arissa's composure completely dissolved as she rushed forward, throwing her arms around him with uncharacteristic abandon.

He returned the embrace with evident joy, though his movements carried the careful restraint of someone conscious of being observed by both his girlfriend's parents and his own father across the galaxy.

"He has arrived safely," Cam confirmed, the readings on his screen showing a successful transfer with no complications.

"Closing portal connection," Celeste announced from the screen.

"Connection closed," Cam echoed, powering down the teleportation matrix.

Before the video connection terminated, Sir Arion leaned forward slightly, his eyes fixed on his son. "Arion, be good. Stay sharp. I love you, my son, and I am here if you need me."

Young Arion gently disengaged from Arissa's embrace to face the screen, standing at attention as he addressed his father. "I promise, Father. I love you too."

With those final words, the connection closed, the screen returning to its default display of academy security feeds.

For a moment, the room was silent save for the soft hum of the computers. Young Arion stood beside Arissa, his presence both foreign and familiar—a boy from another world who somehow fit perfectly into the strange tapestry of our lives.

As the teleportation energy dissipated completely, I stepped forward with a warm smile. "Welcome to Earth, Arion."

The young Saturnian straightened immediately, offering a formal bow that reflected his upbringing in the royal guard. "Thank you, Your Majesty," he replied, his posture perfect despite the lingering effects of interplanetary travel.

I couldn't help but laugh at the formality, so out of place in the casual setting of Thunder Ops. "On Earth, I'm just Michelle," I corrected gently, knowing how difficult it would be for him to adjust to the more relaxed protocols we maintained in our daily lives here.

Hunter cleared his throat pointedly, stepping forward with that particular paternal expression I'd come to recognize over the years. "Mr. and Ms. Bradley," he amended, his tone making it clear this wasn't a suggestion.

I rolled my eyes, though I understood the message he was sending. This was Hunter establishing boundaries, drawing the line between Arion's relationship with us as Saturn's monarchs and his relationship with us as Arissa's parents. "Fine," I conceded with a slight smile.

Arion's gaze darted between us, clearly trying to navigate this unfamiliar social terrain. "I understand... Ms. Bradley," he acknowledged, testing the unfamiliar form of address carefully.

Arissa sighed with the particular blend of exasperation and embarrassment that teenagers reserve exclusively for their parents. "Okay, stop, Dad!" she protested, before turning to Arion with renewed enthusiasm. "Oh, I have so much to show you! The training grounds are amazing, and there's this waterfall that—"

"Maybe introduce him to everyone in here first?" I suggested, interrupting what promised to be a lengthy itinerary.

"Oh, right," Arissa composed herself slightly, gesturing around the room. "That's my Uncle Blake, Aunt Tori, cousin Lindsey, Aunt LeAnn, Uncle Cam, and Grandpa Omio," she said, pointing to each person in turn.

Arion's eyes widened slightly as he took in the assembled group—a rather intimidating welcoming committee for a boy visiting his girlfriend's family for the first time, regardless of interplanetary considerations.

"Nice to meet you," Tori offered kindly, her natural warmth helping to ease some of the tension. As a family attorney, she had a gift for making people feel comfortable in potentially stressful situations.

"Yes, welcome to Earth," LeAnn echoed with a gentle smile, her historian's eyes clearly fascinated by this living connection between worlds.

Arion straightened again, his military training evident in his precise posture. "Thank you. It is lovely to meet you all. I am honored to make the acquaintance of Arissa's extended family," he replied, each word carefully chosen and formally delivered.

"We gotta work on that formal talk," Harley chimed in, breaking the ceremonial atmosphere with her characteristic bluntness. She leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

Lindsey nodded in agreement, her expression equally skeptical. "For sure. No one talks like that," she added.

Sensei Omio's eyes crinkled with amusement as he observed the interaction. "Well then," he suggested gently, "I think it best for you girls to go show Arion around the Academy and perhaps

demonstrate how teenagers communicate on Earth." His diplomatic intervention offered the perfect excuse for the young people to escape the scrutiny of so many adults.

Before Arissa could whisk Arion away, however, Hunter stepped forward, his expression making it clear he had one more thing to establish. "But stay away from the living quarters," he instructed firmly. "We will show Arion to his room later. You are not to be in a dorm room alone, and no rooms with the door closed."

The rules were standard parental guidelines, but delivered with the particular emphasis of a father establishing boundaries for his daughter's first relationship—a universal constant regardless of whether the boyfriend in question was from down the street or across the galaxy.

Arissa rolled her eyes with theatrical exasperation. "I know, Dad!" She grabbed Arion's hand, clearly eager to escape before Hunter could add any more restrictions. "Come on, Arion. I want to show you the Academy."

With that, the four teenagers departed in a flurry of energy and excitement—Arissa leading the way with Arion beside her, Harley and Lindsey following behind.

As their voices faded down the corridor, I caught Hunter's eye with an amused smile. "Mr. and Ms. Bradley?" I teased quietly. "Very subtle, babe."

"Just establishing the ground rules," he replied, unrepentant. "Royal or not, he needs to remember he's dating our daughter, not courting Saturn's princess."

"I think the message was received," I assured him, patting his arm sympathetically. "Loud and clear."

Blake chuckled, moving to stand beside his brother. "Welcome to the dad club, bro."

Hunter sighed, watching the doorway where the teenagers had disappeared.

"Thunder Thanksgiving-Part 2"

I trailed behind Arissa and her boyfriend as we left Thunder Ops, watching them with a mixture of amusement and mild annoyance. My sister had been talking non-stop about Arion visiting Earth for weeks—going over every detail of what she wanted to show him, places she wanted to take him, how he'd react to everything. Now that he was actually here, she'd transformed into someone I barely recognized. Arissa, my normally reserved, bookish sister, was practically skipping as she pulled him along the academy's corridors, pointing out features with animated enthusiasm.

"This is so weird," Lindsey muttered beside me, watching my sister with wide-eyed fascination.

"Tell me about it," I agreed, keeping my voice low enough that Arissa wouldn't hear.

Lindsey looked at me with curious eyes. "What's he like? I mean, when you're not on official calls and stuff?"

"He's okay," I shrugged, trying to sound casual though I actually did like Arion. I'd only been to Saturn a few times since finding out I was a princess, but Arion had always been cool during those visits—showing me the training facilities and treating me like a normal person instead of the heir to the throne. "He knows a lot about fighting techniques. Not as stiff as he seems right now."

Ahead of us, Arion was nodding politely as Arissa explained the significance of a wall scroll depicting ancient Thunder Ninja techniques. His distinctive Saturnian accent became more pronounced whenever he was nervous or trying to be formal.

"The craftsmanship is remarkable," he was saying, his consonants crisp in that particular Saturnian way. "We have similar historical documentation at the Royal Academy, though our methods of preservation differ significantly."

"Hey, Arion!" I called out, deciding to rescue him from what was turning into a history lecture from my sister. "You don't have to pretend to be interested in old scrolls. Arissa will talk about them for hours if you let her."

"Harley!" Arissa shot me a glare, but Arion actually looked relieved.

"I find the history fascinating," he assured her, though I caught the slight grateful glance he sent my way. "But perhaps we could also see the training facilities you've mentioned? I've been curious about Earth martial arts since you first described them."

"The training grounds are this way," Arissa said, redirecting their path down another corridor. "Harley spends more time there than anywhere else when we visit."

"That's because it's the only interesting place here," I replied, quickening my pace to walk alongside them. "History scrolls and meditation rooms aren't exactly thrilling."

"Dad says you're just like Uncle Hunter was at your age," Lindsey informed me with a grin. "Always looking for action instead of studying."

"Good," I declared. "Dad's the best fighter in the family. I'll take that comparison any day."

As we approached the large double doors leading to the training area, I noticed Arion's posture shifting slightly—becoming more alert, more focused. He might act all proper and diplomatic, but fighting was where he came alive, just like me.

"So," Lindsey asked as we pushed through the doors, "do you really have to use a Ukrainian accent as your cover story? Or can you talk normally now that we're alone?"

Arion looked momentarily startled by the direct question. "This is... actually my normal accent," he admitted, the words carrying that distinctive Saturnian cadence. "The Ukrainian cover story was developed because the accents share certain characteristics that would make my speech patterns seem plausible to Earth people."

"It's a good cover," Lindsey acknowledged. "My mom has a Ukrainian client who sounds kind of similar."

The training grounds were mostly empty this morning, with just a few senior students practicing forms in the far corner. The large open space was surrounded by wooden pillars carved with Thunder Ninja symbols, the floor covered in training mats of varying thicknesses for different types of practice.

Arion took in the space with obvious appreciation. "This is impressive. Different from our facilities on Saturn, but I can see how the design supports the Thunder style's emphasis on grounded power."

"What are Saturn's training rooms like?" Lindsey asked, curiosity evident in her voice.

"More technological," I answered, drawing on memories from my few visits. "Everything's got this purple glow, and there are these energy conduits built into the walls and floor. The gravity's different too, which makes some moves easier and others way harder."

"The Royal Academy training facilities were designed to enhance energy manipulation capabilities," Arion explained, his formal speech patterns relaxing slightly as he discussed a subject he was clearly passionate about. "Saturnian combat styles integrate physical techniques with our natural energy manipulation abilities."

"Like our Thunder powers?" Lindsey asked.

Arion nodded. "Similar in principle, though the energy signatures differ significantly. During Harley's visits, we've observed some interesting compatibilities between Thunder energy and Saturnian power."

"We accidentally created this cool effect during my last visit," I elaborated, remembering the moment with pride. "I was showing him some Thunder moves, and he was demonstrating Saturnian forms, and when our energies crossed—boom! violet/crimson light show."

"It was quite remarkable," Arion agreed, a genuine smile breaking through his formal demeanor. "My father was most impressed. He said such cross-planetary energy harmonization was extremely rare."

"Sir Arion doesn't impress easily," Arissa explained to Lindsey. "He's the head of the Royal Guard and basically never praises anyone."

"He said I had good instincts," I added, unable to keep the pride from my voice. Despite only meeting him a few times, earning recognition from Arion's father—a legendary warrior on Saturn—had been a major highlight of my last visit. "That's practically gushing by his standards."

"Would you be willing to demonstrate some of your Thunder techniques?" Arion asked, his accent becoming more pronounced with his enthusiasm. "I've been practicing the forms you showed me, but without a proper instructor to correct my execution."

"Sure," I agreed, already moving toward the center of the training mat. "But then you have to show us some Saturnian moves. Lindsey's never seen them."

"That seems equitable," he nodded, that formal speech pattern returning briefly before he caught himself. "I mean... sounds fair."

I grinned at his attempt at casual speech. "We'll work on your Earth teenager talk while you're here. By the time you leave, you'll be saying 'dude' and 'whatever' like a pro."

"I look forward to expanding my colloquial vocabulary," he replied with complete seriousness, making Lindsey giggle.

Kicking off my shoes, I moved to the center of the mat and began with the basic Thunder forms. As I progressed through the sequences, I gradually incorporated the energy manipulations that came so naturally to me—small violet sparks trailing from my hands and feet as I executed each strike and block.

I was acutely aware of Arion watching with intense focus, analyzing each movement with the eye of someone who truly understood combat techniques. There was something oddly satisfying about having such an attentive audience—especially someone who could actually appreciate the technical aspects of what I was doing.

When I finished with a final energy-enhanced strike that sent a small shower of violet sparks across the mat, Arion nodded appreciatively.

"Your control has improved significantly since your last visit to Saturn," he observed. "The energy distribution through the final sequence was particularly well-executed."

Coming from him, this was high praise. "Thanks, since I became a Ranger I've been training harder," I replied, slightly out of breath but pleased with the recognition. "Your turn now."

Arion stepped onto the mat, removing his Earth-style jacket to reveal a simple black t-shirt beneath. As he took his position, I noticed an immediate change in his demeanor—his earlier awkwardness vanishing completely as he settled into what was clearly familiar territory.

What followed was unlike anything Lindsey had ever seen, though I recognized the forms from my visits to Saturn. His movements were fluid yet precise, combining elements that seemed almost dance-like at times but with unmistakable martial purpose. The energy he channeled had a purple-crimson hue, controlled with a precision that spoke of years of rigorous training.

"Whoa," Lindsey breathed beside me, clearly impressed. "That doesn't look like any martial art I've ever seen."

"It's not," I confirmed. "Saturnian combat styles evolved separately from Earth martial arts for thousands of years. They're built around their natural energy abilities."

As Arion completed his demonstration with a complex sequence that left energy trails lingering in the air, Lindsey broke into spontaneous applause. Even Arissa looked impressed, despite having seen these forms before.

"That was amazing," Lindsey declared. "The way you control the energy is so different from how we do it with Thunder powers."

Arion inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment of the compliment. "Thank you. It's the result of daily training since early childhood. All members of the Royal Guard begin their education at age four."

"Hey, remember that thing we did last time?" I asked, an idea forming. "When our energies created that weird pattern? We should try to show Lindsey."

Arion's eyes lit up with genuine enthusiasm. "The energy harmonization? I've been theorizing about how to reproduce that effect more consistently."

"Let's try it," I suggested, already moving back to the center of the mat. "Maybe if we synchronize our movements instead of just crossing energies randomly?"

"A logical approach," he agreed, taking position across from me.

We began with basic forms from our respective traditions, gradually building up energy as we moved. When I felt my Thunder power reaching the right intensity, I nodded to Arion, who responded by channeling his Saturnian energy to match.

As we moved through mirrored sequences, our energies began to interact—violet Thunder power and purple-crimson Saturnian energy reaching toward each other across the space between us. Where they met, instead of canceling out, they created swirling patterns of light that seemed to dance and pulse with our movements.

"It's working!" I called out, excitement making me channel even more power.

Arion matched my intensity, his formal reserve completely forgotten in the thrill of our successful experiment. The energy pattern between us grew more complex, spiraling and intertwining in ways that drew gasps from both Arissa and Lindsey.

When we finally completed the sequence, letting our energies dissipate gradually, I was breathing hard but grinning with satisfaction. "That was even better than last time."

"Indeed," Arion agreed, a rare smile lighting up his face. "The synchronized movements created a much more stable harmonic pattern. My father would be fascinated by this development."

"Could you teach me some of those moves?" Lindsey asked eagerly. "The ones without the energy part, obviously."

I looked at Arion, who nodded his agreement. "Sure," I said. "We can show you the basic forms. The energy manipulation requires certain genetic factors, but the physical techniques can be learned by anyone with proper training."

As we began showing Lindsey a simplified version of the Saturnian forms, I found myself actually enjoying Arion's presence. Despite only having met in person a few times there was an easy understanding between us when it came to martial arts. We might come from different planets with different traditions, but we spoke the same language when it came to fighting techniques.

"Your stance needs to be wider," Arion instructed Lindsey, his accent softening as he fell into the familiar role of training partner. "Saturnian forms require a lower center of gravity than Thunder styles."

"Like this?" Lindsey adjusted her position, looking to both of us for approval.

"Better," I confirmed. "Think about drawing energy up from the ground through your feet. That's how Saturn techniques work, right?" I glanced at Arion for confirmation.

He nodded, looking slightly impressed that I'd remembered this detail from my limited training on Saturn. "Exactly. Earth-based energy channeling is fundamental to our approach."

As we continued guiding Lindsey through the basic forms, I caught Arissa watching Arion with that soft expression she only ever had when she thought no one was looking. It was still weird seeing my serious, scholarly sister so obviously into someone, but I had to admit Arion wasn't a bad choice. He was respectful, skilled in combat, and didn't treat me like I was just "the little sister" when we trained together on Saturn.

"Your boyfriend's not half bad," I told her quietly when Arion was busy helping Lindsey with a particular stance. "For a royal guard's son, anyway."

Arissa's expression shifted to surprise, then cautious pleasure. "That's practically a ringing endorsement coming from you."

"Don't push it," I warned, bumping her shoulder lightly with mine. "I'm still reserving final judgment until I see how he handles Thanksgiving with the whole family."

"That's fair," she conceded, a hint of worry crossing her face. "Even I'm a little concerned about that."

"He'll be fine," I assured her, surprising myself with the confidence in my voice. "If he can handle Sir Arion as a father, he can handle Uncle Zack's interrogation."

Arissa laughed, the sound relaxed and genuine. "Thanks, Harley."

"For what?"

"For making this easier. I was worried you'd be... difficult about him visiting."

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the sudden sincerity. "Yeah, well, he's not the worst person you could date. At least he can fight."

"High praise coming from you," she teased.

"Like I said, don't push it." But I was smiling as I said it, already planning which hybrid moves to show Lindsey next. Having Arion here on Earth was going to be interesting—and if nothing else, it gave me a training partner who could actually keep up with me.

Maybe this Thanksgiving wouldn't be so boring after all.

After training, we made our way to the sitting room, our bodies pleasantly tired from the workout. Lindsey and I immediately claimed the two bean bags, collapsing into them with the dramatic exhaustion that teenagers excel at. Arissa, ever the responsible one, went to get refreshments while Arion surveyed the casual seating options with barely concealed uncertainty.

He finally selected a nearby chair—still formal compared to our sprawled positions, but at least it was low to the ground, a concession to the relaxed atmosphere.

"So, what do you think of Earth so far?" Lindsey asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

Arion glanced around, his expression thoughtful as he carefully considered his answer. "It is very different than Saturn. I... am still taking it in," he admitted, his formal speech patterns softening slightly.

I couldn't help but laugh at his diplomatic understatement. "Yeah, it's pretty different," I agreed, remembering my own culture shock the first time I'd visited Saturn. The gravity, the colors, the constant formal protocols—it had been overwhelming.

"What is it like going to school on Saturn?" Lindsey asked, her natural curiosity overriding any lingering shyness.

Arion straightened slightly, shifting into what I recognized as his educational mode. "It is different for me than most of my peers because I am the heir to be head guard someday," he explained. "I attend

formal schooling in the morning, but the entire afternoon is dedicated to guard training, which is rules, regulations, and protocols, alongside my battle training."

"That sounds awesome," Lindsey said with genuine envy. "I sit in classrooms all day."

"Yeah, but then after school you can go to the track," I pointed out.

"True," Lindsey nodded, her expression brightening. "Oh, are we taking Arion to the track?"

"Uh, yeah. Did you want your rematch or no?" I asked, referring to our ongoing competition. Last year, I'd barely beaten her, a victory she'd been determined to avenge ever since.

"Of course I do. I've been training. I can beat you this year," Lindsey declared with absolute confidence only.

I rolled my eyes, not bothering to hide my skepticism. "Sure, Linds."

Lindsey stuck her tongue out at me in response—a childish gesture that reminded me she was still straddling the line between kid and teenager, despite her impressive skills on a dirt bike.

Our friendly bickering was interrupted as Arissa returned with a tray holding a pitcher of lemonade and several glasses. She served everyone with her usual precise efficiency, starting with Arion in a gesture that wasn't lost on me—small courtesies that reflected their relationship dynamics.

I took a long drink, the cold liquid heaven after our training session. "Oh my god, this is so good," I sighed appreciatively.

Arion approached the drink with his typical caution, taking a small, experimental sip. His eyebrows rose slightly in surprise. "Oh... this is different than anything I've ever tasted," he said, examining the pale yellow liquid with newfound interest.

"You don't have lemons on Saturn?" Lindsey asked, her tone suggesting this was a tragic oversight in Saturnian agriculture.

"We have similar fruits, but they are more... purple," Arion explained, taking another, more confident sip. "And less sweet. This is quite pleasant."

"Wait until you try actual junk food," I told him with a grin. "Earth's greatest contribution to the galaxy."

"Harley," Arissa admonished, settling into a chair near Arion with her own glass. "We are not introducing him to Earth culture through fast food and sugar."

"Why not? It's the best part," I argued, exchanging a conspiratorial look with Lindsey, who nodded in vigorous agreement.

"I would be interested in experiencing authentic Earth cuisine," Arion said diplomatically, though I caught the hint of curiosity in his eyes. For all his formal training and proper manners, he was still a teenager—and what teenager could resist the forbidden allure of junk food?

"Don't worry," I assured him, ignoring Arissa's warning look. "We'll make sure you get the full Earth experience before you head back to Saturn. Cheeseburgers, pizza, ice cream—all the essentials."

"Perhaps we should focus on introducing Arion to more significant aspects of Earth culture first," Arissa suggested, her tone carrying that familiar note of older-sister authority.

"Food is culture," I countered. "Right, Lindsey?"

"Absolutely," she agreed with the solemn certainty of someone who considered herself an expert on the matter. "You can't understand Earth without trying a proper cheeseburger."

Arion looked between us, clearly trying to navigate the complex currents of sibling dynamics while maintaining diplomatic neutrality. "I would be honored to experience whatever aspects of Earth culture you wish to share with me," he said carefully, though his eyes lingered on me just long enough to suggest he was more interested in my junk food tour than Arissa's probable museum plans.

I couldn't help but grin. Maybe having Arion around for Thanksgiving wouldn't be so bad after all. At the very least, watching him experience his first sugar rush promised to be entertaining.

"So, about that track visit," Lindsey interjected, clearly unwilling to let the subject drop. "When can we go? Today? Tomorrow?"

"We'll have to ask Dad and Uncle Blake," I replied, already imagining Arion's reaction to Earth motorcycles. "But definitely before Thanksgiving. Can't let you go back to Blue Bay Harbor without your annual defeat."

Lindsey scoffed, her confidence undiminished. "Keep talking, Harley. We'll see who's laughing when I leave you in the dust."

As we continued our good-natured trash talk, I noticed Arion watching with fascination—this casual, teasing interaction clearly different from the formal relationships he was accustomed to on Saturn. For all his training in diplomatic protocols and combat techniques, the simple dynamics of cousin rivalry seemed to intrigue him more than anything else we'd shown him so far.

Earth culture lesson number one: family meant being able to talk smack and still love each other at the end of the day. Something told me that might be the most valuable thing he'd learn during his visit.

"Are you coming to Angel Grove again this year?" I asked Lindsey, taking another long sip of lemonade..

Aunt Tori's sister lived out of state, and her mom usually went there for Thanksgiving, which meant Uncle Blake and Aunt Tori often joined us at Mom's family gathering. This year's celebration was set for Angel Grove, where Uncle Zack had settled after the Palisades Fire pretty much destroyed his previous community.

Lindsey nodded, her face brightening. "Yeah, we're going again. Dad says it's becoming our tradition."

"Awesome," I replied, genuinely pleased. Having Lindsey at Thanksgiving made the whole event more bearable—one less adult to dodge questions from and one more ally in the inevitable cousin chaos. "Angel Grove has a great track. I miss it. It was my first home track."

A wave of nostalgia hit me unexpectedly. "I also can't wait to see my Angel Grove friends," I added, my voice softening slightly. We'd moved away from Angel Grove just before Mom and Dad got married three years ago, and despite all the amazing things about our life in Ireland, I still missed my California crew. "Especially Melody, my California best friend."

"Oh yeah, I remember Melody," Arissa chimed in, recognition lighting her face. "I liked her."

"She's the sweetest person on Earth," I agreed, unable to keep the enthusiasm from my voice. "You get to meet the rest of my California friends too though, finally," I added to Arion, realizing he'd have a chance to see yet another side of Earth culture—the legendary Angel Grove teenage social scene.

"Sweet!" Arissa exclaimed. The excitement of showing Arion around and the prospect of reuniting with friends seemed to be breaking through her usual reserved demeanor, allowing a glimpse of the more relaxed person she could be when not weighed down by royal responsibilities.

Arion looked between us with evident curiosity. "I've studied the historical significance of Angel Grove in relation to Earth's Ranger activities," he said, his formal tone contrasting sharply with our casual conversation. "It holds a unique position in the planetary defense archives as the site of the original Ranger team's formation."

I couldn't help but laugh at his textbook description. "Dude, it's not just Ranger history. It's where Mom grew up, and where they have the best pizza on the west coast." I turned to Lindsey for confirmation.

"Absolutely," Lindsey nodded with authority. "Although Dad says that JKP is pretty good."

"Yeah, Mom and Dad still don't like RJ so that's a no go for our family," I said.

"Angel Grove is also where most of the extended family gathers for holidays," Arissa explained to Arion in a more measured tone.

"It's basically Ranger central," I added. "Though nobody talks about that part openly during Thanksgiving dinner."

"I see," Arion replied, though his expression suggested he was still trying to process the complex web of relationships that made up our extended family. "And these friends you mentioned—they are not aware of your... planetary connections?"

"Some, but not all," I shook my head. "As far as they know, I'm just Harley Bradley, daughter of Michelle Morris and Hunter Bradley. The whole princess-of-Saturn thing doesn't come up in normal conversation."

"Which is why we have your cover story," Arissa reminded him. "It's important that my friends and Harley's friends just think you're an exchange student from Ukraine."

"Of course," Arion nodded seriously. "I have studied the cover story extensively and practiced the appropriate behavioral modifications."

"Yeah, about that," I said, exchanging a glance with Lindsey. "We might need to work on making you sound less like you're reading from a diplomatic handbook. Normal teenagers don't say things like 'behavioral modifications.'"

"What would be a more appropriate phrasing?" Arion asked, his genuine desire to get it right evident in his expression.

"Just say 'I know how to act normal' or something," I suggested with a shrug. "Less formal, more casual. Use contractions. Drop words when you can."

"I know how to act normal," Arion repeated carefully, the sentence sounding stiff but less formal than his usual speech.

"Better," I encouraged. "We'll keep practicing. By the time we hit Angel Grove, you'll almost pass for a regular Earth teenager."

"Almost," Lindsey emphasized with a grin.

"Hey, what about a movie tonight?" I suggested suddenly, an idea forming. "That would be perfect for Arion to study Earth teenage culture. Plus, we could introduce him to popcorn."

Arissa looked like she was about to object to my obvious junk food agenda, but Lindsey jumped in enthusiastically.

"Yes! We should watch something classic. Something that really shows Earth culture," she declared.

"Like what?" Arissa asked skeptically.

I thought for a moment, considering what would best represent Earth to someone from another planet. "Star Wars," I decided with a grin, the irony not lost on me. "Nothing says Earth culture like a movie about space."

"I would be interested in observing how Earth people conceptualize space travel and alien civilizations," Arion said, his formal tone at odds with the genuine curiosity in his eyes.

"Then it's settled," I declared, already imagining Arion's reaction to the Millennium Falcon and lightsabers. "Movie night tonight. But first, we should probably find Dad and Uncle Blake to ask about the track."

As we finished our lemonade and prepared to search for the adults, I caught Arissa watching Arion with that soft expression again. Despite my teasing, I was genuinely glad to see my sister happy. And if bringing her alien boyfriend to Earth for Thanksgiving made her smile like that, well... I could certainly think of worse ways to spend the holiday.

I stood up to go find my dad when my phone vibrated in my pocket. Pulling it out, I glanced at the screen and felt my mood instantly sour. Rocky. Again.

I hit decline without hesitation, shoving the phone back into my pocket with more force than necessary. He just wouldn't leave me alone, no matter how clear I made it that I wanted nothing to do with him. I knew he was hoping to see me during our Angel Grove visit, but as far as I was concerned, he wasn't my dad anymore. He never had been, biologically speaking, and he'd certainly stopped acting like one when he chose his new family over me.

The worst part was what Mom had finally told me last year—that when Rocky found out he wasn't my biological father, he'd actually asked Dad to keep me away from Mom. If he'd had his way, I never would have seen my mother again. What kind of person does that to a kid?

I knew Mom wasn't perfect. She'd messed up big time by lying about who my real father was. But she was still my mom, and I loved her. Despite everything, she tried—really tried—to be there for me.

"Excuse me, I need to go talk to Mom and Dad. I'll be back," I said, trying to keep my voice casual despite the anger bubbling up inside me.

Arissa's eyes narrowed slightly. "You okay, Har?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine," I replied dismissively, already heading for the door.

I found my parents in Grandpa Omino's office, along with Uncle Blake and Aunt Tori. Tomi was sitting on Mom's lap, happily playing with what looked like a traditional Thunder ninja doll that Grandpa Omino had probably given her.

"Mom, Rocky tried to call me again," I announced without preamble, interrupting whatever conversation they'd been having.

Mom sighed, her expression shifting from relaxed to tense in an instant. "I told him to leave you alone," she said, frustration evident in her voice. This wasn't the first time we'd had this conversation.

"He won't," I replied flatly, crossing my arms over my chest. "He keeps calling and texting like he has some right to talk to me."

As if on cue, Mom's phone began to ring. She glanced at the screen and her jaw tightened. "Speak of the devil," she muttered, shifting Tomi to a more comfortable position.

"I don't want to see him," I insisted, my voice rising slightly despite my efforts to stay calm. "He needs to get that!"

Mom nodded, her expression sympathetic as she answered the call. "Hello?... Yes, I know. She told me. She wants you to leave her alone, Rocky... She doesn't see it that way... You need to..."

Dad's patience visibly snapped. He reached over and took the phone from Mom's hand with a swift movement that spoke volumes about his own feelings toward Rocky. Mom's expression was complicated—a mixture of irritation at having the phone taken from her and relief at not having to continue the conversation.

"Rocky, you need to back off," Dad said, his voice carrying a dangerous edge I recognized from when he was genuinely angry but trying to control it. "She said no... I'll ask her..." He covered the phone with his hand and looked at me. "He asked if you will have lunch with him Friday and hear him out. After that, he said he will never bother you again if that's what you want."

I sighed heavily, torn between wanting to scream "absolutely not" and the temptation of finally being free from his constant attempts at contact. "I don't want to," I said, my voice smaller than I intended.

"I'll go with you," Dad promised immediately, his expression making it clear this wasn't negotiable. He wasn't letting me face Rocky alone.

"So will I," Uncle Blake added unexpectedly.

Dad turned to look at him, surprise evident on his face.

"What?" Uncle Blake shrugged with a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Someone has to make sure you don't kill Rocky."

"Fair," Dad acknowledged with a slight nod, the tension in his shoulders easing marginally.

I considered my options, realizing that having both Dad and Uncle Blake there would at least ensure the lunch wouldn't drag on. And maybe, just maybe, saying everything I needed to say to Rocky's face would help me finally move past this anger that kept bubbling up whenever I thought about him.

"Okay, fine," I conceded reluctantly. "I'll do it, but only so I can say everything I want to say, and then I am done with him. For good."

Dad nodded, understanding in his eyes as he returned to the phone call to finalize the details. I caught Mom watching me with a mixture of concern and something else—guilt, maybe, or regret. She knew better than anyone that this mess was partly her creation, even if Rocky's subsequent actions had been entirely his own choice.

Aunt Tori reached over and squeezed my hand briefly—a simple gesture of support that somehow meant more than any words could have.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," she said quietly, her attorney voice giving way to the gentler tone she used with family. "No one would blame you for setting a boundary."

"I know," I replied, appreciating her support but already resolute in my decision. "But if doing this once means he'll finally leave me alone, it's worth it."

Besides, a small part of me—a part I didn't like to acknowledge—wanted him to see exactly what he'd lost. I wanted Rocky to understand that I was doing just fine without him, that Dad was more of a father to me than he was.

I wanted him to know that some mistakes couldn't be fixed with a lunch and an apology, no matter how sincere.

Michelle

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After Hunter finished the call and handed my phone back to me, I passed Tomi to him and walked out of the office, my movements stiff with barely contained anger. The familiar pressure was building behind my eyes—that warning sign of impending tears that I refused to let fall. Not here, not now, not over Rocky.

I was furious. Furious with Rocky for continuing to push when Harley had made her feelings clear. Furious with Hunter for taking my phone out of my hand like I was incapable of handling the conversation myself. But mostly, I was furious with myself for the tangled mess I'd created years ago that was still hurting my daughter.

"Breathe, Mich," Tori's voice came from behind me as she followed me.

I turned to face her, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "I just want him to go away," I admitted, the words carrying more emotion than I'd intended.

Tori's expression softened with understanding. "I know," she said, leaning against the wall beside me. "But he was Harley's father for eight years. He loves her."

"I know," I sighed, the anger momentarily giving way to a more complicated grief. "He was a great father to her, and they used to be so close. Harley was a complete daddy's girl."

The memories flooded back unbidden—Rocky teaching Harley to ride a bike, his patient voice guiding her through the wobbles and falls. The way he'd attended every karate tournament, cheering louder than any other parent. The bedtime stories, the inside jokes, the special handshake they'd created when she was five.

"But after the truth came out... things changed," I continued, my voice quieter now. "He was still involved for a while and co-parented with Hunter and me. Then he started dating Aisha, and eventually decided to adopt her daughter."

The pain in my chest sharpened at the memory of Harley's face when she'd learned about the adoption. "This really hurt Harley. Rocky never once brought up the idea of adopting her. It didn't matter that Hunter never would have signed away his rights—the fact that Rocky didn't even ask spoke volumes to Harley. She felt Rocky chose Tamara over her, and nothing has been the same between them since."

Tori nodded, her eyes reflecting a deep understanding that came from years of working with families torn apart by circumstances both within and beyond their control. "It's a complicated situation," she acknowledged. "For both of them."

"I created this mess," I said, voicing the guilt that never quite left me, despite years of therapy and Hunter's constant reassurances. "If I'd just been honest from the beginning about Hunter being Harley's father..."

"You can't change the past, Mich," Tori reminded me gently. "And beating yourself up over it doesn't help Harley now."

She was right, of course. Tori had always possessed that rare ability to cut through my self-recrimination without dismissing the legitimate pain beneath it.

"I just hate seeing her hurt," I admitted, leaning back against the wall and closing my eyes briefly. "And I hate that there's nothing I can do to fix it."

"Maybe this lunch is what she needs," Tori suggested carefully. "A chance to say everything she's been holding inside. Closure, even if it's not the kind Rocky is hoping for."

I nodded, though uncertainty still churned in my stomach. "Maybe. But I wish Hunter hadn't just grabbed the phone from me like that. I was handling it."

Tori's lips quirked in a knowing smile. "Were you?"

"Okay, maybe not well," I conceded with a reluctant smile of my own. "But still."

"Hunter's protective," Tori shrugged. "Of both of you. Always has been. Blake's the same way—it's hardwired into them. And when it comes to Harley..."

"I know," I sighed, some of my irritation with Hunter fading. His protectiveness of Harley had always been fierce, even before he knew she was his biological daughter—the way he'd instinctively stepped into a paternal role with her, never treating her as an obligation or an afterthought.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" I asked after a moment, the question carrying all my maternal worry. "At this lunch, I mean."

"With both Hunter and Blake there? Rocky won't even have a chance to say anything that could upset her," Tori assured me. "Besides, Harley's stronger than we sometimes give her credit for. She's got your backbone and Hunter's determination."

"That's what worries me," I replied with a wry smile. "She's got my impulsiveness too."

Tori laughed, the sound lightening the atmosphere. "True. But she's also got something neither you nor Hunter had at her age—a stable family who has her back, no matter what. That makes all the difference."

Her words settled over me like a balm, easing some of the tension I'd been carrying. Tori was right. Whatever happened with Rocky, Harley wouldn't face it alone. She had Hunter and Blake with her, and the rest of us supporting her from a distance. She had the security that came from knowing exactly where she belonged and who would always be there for her.

"When did you get so wise?" I asked, bumping Tori's shoulder lightly with mine.

"Occupational hazard," she replied with a smile. "Spend enough time mediating family disputes, you pick up a few things."

The sound of approaching footsteps drew our attention. Hunter appeared at the end of the hallway, Tomi balanced on his hip. His expression was questioning, checking if I was still angry with him for the phone incident.

I offered a small smile, letting him know we were okay. We'd talk about it later, in private, but the momentary irritation had faded in the face of more important concerns.

"Everything alright?" he asked as he reached us, his free hand automatically finding mine.

"Getting there," I replied honestly. "Where's Harley?"

"She went back to find the girls and Arion," he said. "Blake's with them. I think they're planning to show Arion around the grounds."

I nodded, grateful that Harley had distractions to take her mind off the Rocky situation, at least for now. "Good. She needs that."

Tomi reached for me, her little face lighting up with a smile that never failed to melt my heart. As I took her from Hunter, her warm weight settled against me like an anchor to the present moment—a reminder that despite all the complications of our past, we'd created something beautiful together.

"We should join them," I suggested, shifting Tomi to a more comfortable position. "I want to see Arion's reaction to the waterfall."

As we made our way through the academy corridors, Hunter's hand found the small of my back—that familiar, grounding touch that had been a constant through all our years together. Whatever challenges came our way, we would face them together, just as we always had.

And right now, that meant focusing on making this Thanksgiving visit a positive experience for our daughters, complicated ex-husbands notwithstanding.

The next two days seemed to fly by in a blur of training sessions, academy tours, and the promised movie night—which had been a success, if Arion's fascinated questions about lightsabers and the Force were any indication. Before we knew it, it was time to head to Angel Grove for the second half of our Thanksgiving adventure.

Thankfully, we hadn't had too many further issues with Cam after the fertility discussion, short of his usual sarcastic assholery. He'd maintained a professional distance during group activities, though I

occasionally caught him watching Hunter with an expression I couldn't quite decipher—something between regret and resignation, perhaps.

We gathered in the academy courtyard for goodbyes, the morning sun casting long shadows across the traditional wooden architecture. Sensei Omino embraced each of us warmly, his weathered hands resting briefly on Hunter's shoulders as he spoke quietly to his foster son. LeAnn hugged the girls with genuine affection, promising to visit us in Ireland soon. Even Cam managed a civil farewell, though his formal bow to me carried none of the warmth of the others' embraces.

Blake loaded his family into their rental car while Hunter organized our luggage in the Jeep, tetris-ing bags to make room for six people including Arion. The teenagers piled into the backseat with Tomi secured in her car seat between Arissa and Arion, an arrangement that had Harley rolling her eyes but accepting with minimal complaint.

As we pulled away from the Thunder Academy, I felt the familiar mixture of nostalgia and relief that always accompanied these departures—fondness for the place that had shaped Hunter's life, combined with eagerness to return to the more relaxed atmosphere of my childhood home in Angel Grove.

The California landscape rolled past our windows, so different from the Irish countryside we'd grown accustomed to. Tomi fell asleep within the first twenty minutes of the drive, her head lolling against the side of her car seat. In the back, the older girls and Arion had retreated into their own world of shared earbuds and whispered conversations, occasionally punctuated by Harley's more boisterous laughter.

Hunter drove in silence, his expression distant, hands resting on the wheel. There was tension in his shoulders though, a subtle tightness that most people wouldn't notice but that I'd learned to read over our years together.

"Baby? You okay?" I asked quietly, my hand finding his knee in a gentle touch.

"Huh?" He blinked, pulled from whatever thoughts had claimed his attention. "Yeah. Fine." He paused, glancing briefly at me before returning his eyes to the road. "LeAnn asked a favor of me, and I'm not sure it's something I can do."

"What is it?" I asked, though I had a sinking feeling I already knew. There were only so many favors that could put that particular expression on Hunter's face.

He sighed heavily, his fingers tightening slightly on the steering wheel. "She set a date for the wedding. It's in the spring." Another pause, longer this time. "She wants Blake and me to stand up with her in place of a typical wedding party."

"Oh..." The single syllable carried all my understanding of the complicated emotions this request must have stirred. The idea of Hunter standing up with his sister while she married his ex-boyfriend

was awkward on multiple levels—a tangled web of past relationships and present loyalties that defied simple resolution.

"I want her to be happy," Hunter continued, his voice low enough that the teenagers couldn't overhear. "I want to do this for her, but... it's so weird."

I nodded, my hand squeezing his knee gently. "Yeah... just a bit." I understood his conflict perfectly—the desire to support LeAnn warring with the inherent discomfort of the situation. "Are you going to do it?"

"I don't know," he admitted, the rare uncertainty in his voice revealing how much this was weighing on him. "Probably. She's my sister. But... I just don't know."

I studied his profile, noting the slight furrow between his brows that appeared whenever he was deeply troubled. This wasn't just about standing up at Cam's wedding—it was about all the complicated history between them, the years of on-again, off-again relationship that had defined much of Hunter's twenties. It was about the ways Cam had hurt him, the trust that had been broken, and the uncomfortable reality of now having to welcome him into the family as LeAnn's husband.

"You don't have to decide right now," I reminded him gently. "You can take some time to think about it."

"I know," he sighed. Then, his lips quirked in a humorless smile. "Just one more thing to add to the Rocky drama and introducing Arion to the extended family."

"Speaking of," I lowered my voice even further, "how do you think Arion is handling everything so far? The Earth immersion experience?"

The question successfully shifted Hunter's focus, as I'd hoped it would. His expression lightened slightly as he glanced in the rearview mirror at our daughter's boyfriend, who was currently listening intently to something Arissa was explaining, his formal posture somewhat at odds with his Earth clothing.

"Better than I expected," Hunter admitted. "He's making an effort. And Harley seems to like him."

"They bonded over fighting techniques," I smiled, remembering the energy harmonization demonstration the girls had excitedly shown us. "Apparently, they discovered some interesting effects when Thunder and Saturnian energies interact."

"Yeah, Blake mentioned that. Said it was impressive." Hunter's voice carried a note of pride despite his lingering concerns about Arissa dating. "Though I'm still not sure how I feel about our thirteen-year-old daughter having a boyfriend from another planet."

"At least we know where he is at all times," I pointed out pragmatically. "Hard to sneak around when interplanetary teleportation is involved."

That earned me a genuine laugh, the tension in Hunter's shoulders easing slightly. "True. And Sir Arion would probably have him doing laps around Saturn if he stepped out of line."

"Exactly," I agreed, grateful to see him relaxing. "One parenting advantage of dating royalty."

We fell into a comfortable silence, the familiar rhythm of our conversation having accomplished what I'd hoped—giving Hunter a temporary reprieve from his concerns about LeAnn's request. We'd return to it later, in private, when he'd had more time to process his feelings. For now, it was enough to remind him that he wasn't facing the decision alone.

As the "Welcome to Angel Grove" sign appeared in the distance, I felt the familiar flutter of anticipation that always accompanied returns to my hometown. No matter how many years passed or how far we traveled, Angel Grove would always hold a special place in my heart—the site of so many firsts, the backdrop to the most formative years of my life.

And now we were bringing a piece of Saturn to this quintessentially Earth town.

With so many people converging on Angel Grove for Thanksgiving, there was no way we could all fit at Zachary and Kelly's house. Mom was staying with them while our family had rented a house nearby to accommodate our expanded numbers. Blake had opted for a hotel for his family, probably valuing the privacy and pool access for Lindsey.

We pulled up to our rental—a charming bungalow with a wide front porch and mature oak trees shading the yard. The self-check-in process was a blessing after the long drive, allowing us to bypass the social niceties that would have been required with an in-person host.

"Everyone grab your own bags," Hunter instructed as we unloaded the Jeep, passing Tomi to me so he could handle the heavier luggage.

The interior was spacious and bright, with an open floor plan and comfortable, if somewhat generic, furnishings. Four bedrooms meant we had just enough space: a master suite for Hunter and me, a small room for Tomi with space for her portable crib, a room for Arion (Hunter's non-negotiable requirement), and a room for the older girls to share.

"Why do we have to share?" Harley had protested when we first discussed the arrangements.

"There are four bedrooms."

"Because I trust you to rat your sister out if she tries to sneak off to be alone with Arion," Hunter had replied bluntly, earning an indignant "Dad!" from Arissa and a smug grin from Harley, who never passed up an opportunity to exercise sisterly surveillance.

Now, as we dispersed to our assigned rooms, I could hear Harley already claiming the bed by the window, her voice carrying through the hallway as she informed Arissa which drawers she'd be using. Some battles weren't worth fighting, and bedroom territory disputes between teenage sisters definitely fell into that category.

I set Tomi down in the living room, where she immediately began exploring her new surroundings with the methodical curiosity that characterized her approach to everything. Her systematic investigation of the furniture—touching each surface, peering under the coffee table, testing the bounce of the sofa cushions—reminded me so much of Hunter's analytical nature that I couldn't help but smile.

"What?" Hunter asked, catching my expression as he returned from carrying the last of the bags inside.

"Nothing," I replied, nodding toward our youngest. "Just thinking about how much she takes after you."

His eyes softened as he watched Tomi, that particular expression of wonder that still appeared whenever he observed our children—as if he couldn't quite believe they were real, that we had created this family together.

"Poor kid," he joked, though the pride in his voice belied his words.

We took a few minutes to settle in, unpacking essentials and getting oriented to the rental's layout, and getting Thara set up, but I could feel the familiar urgency building—that sense of limited time and too many people to see. Angel Grove visits always felt this way, a delicate balancing act of family obligations, friend reunions, and nostalgic revisiting of old haunts.

"So, what's the plan?" Hunter asked, joining me in the kitchen where I was examining the coffee maker with critical interest. After years together, he'd learned to recognize my mental scheduling mode.

"We have a lot to fit in," I sighed, abandoning the coffee maker to pull out my phone and check the messages that had accumulated during our drive. "I want to see Zachary and Kelly, obviously. Harley's already texting Melody about meeting up with her friends. Kat just moved back to Angel Grove with the kids and wants me to see their new house. And Arissa wants to show Arion what a normal American town looks like."

"So basically, we're being pulled in four different directions," Hunter summarized.

"Five, if you count the fact that we need groceries for the house," I added, scrolling through my messages. "And Mom wants us all for dinner tonight at Zachary's."

"Of course she does," Hunter nodded, unsurprised.

The sound of teenage footsteps thundering down the hallway announced the arrival of the older girls, both looking expectant and slightly impatient. Arion followed at a more measured pace, his expression genuinely interested in whatever adventure awaited.

"Mom, can Aunt Dana pick me up?" Harley asked, already dressed in her favorite jeans and a purple hoodie that had seen better days. "I want to see Mel."

Before I could answer, Arissa jumped in. "And can we walk to the park? Arion wants to see more of the town, and it's only a few blocks away."

I exchanged a glance with Hunter, the silent communication of parents weighing independence against supervision, especially with an interplanetary visitor in the mix.

"Why don't you all go to the park? Mel and the others can meet you there," I decided, "but I want you back by six for dinner at Uncle Zack's. And text me when you get to wherever you're going. Remember the cover story if anyone asks questions."

"We will," Arissa promised, her expression serious. Despite her excitement about showing Arion around, she never took the responsibility of maintaining his cover lightly.

"I will adhere strictly to the established narrative," Arion assured us, his formal speech patterns still evident despite Harley's ongoing efforts to teach him more casual phrasing.

"Just say 'I'll stick to the story,'" Harley suggested with an exaggerated sigh. "We've talked about this."

"I'll... stick to the story," Arion repeated, the more casual phrasing sitting awkwardly on his tongue but his effort evident.

Hunter suppressed a smile, his initial wariness about Arion gradually giving way to a reluctant appreciation for the young Saturnian's earnest attempts to adapt to Earth customs. "Just be back by five-thirty so you have time to change for dinner," he added.

As the teenagers Hunter turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "And what about us?"

"We," I said, hoisting Tomi onto my hip, "are going to see my brother and his family. Then swing by the grocery store on the way back."

"Divide and conquer," Hunter nodded, accepting the plan with the ease of long practice. "Classic Bradley family vacation strategy."

I smiled, leaning in to kiss him briefly. "Exactly."

Harley

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Arissa, Arion, and I arrived at Angel Grove Park, the familiar landscape washing over me with a wave of nostalgia. This had been my playground growing up—the trees I'd climbed, the paths I'd raced along, the lake where I'd spent countless summer afternoons. Being back felt both strange and comforting, like slipping on an old favorite jacket that somehow still fit perfectly.

I'd texted Mel to meet us here, and I spotted her and the rest of my California crew hanging out at their usual picnic table by the lake. My heart did a little jump at the sight of them—the friends I'd

grown up with, the ones who knew me before I discovered I was a princess, before we moved to Ireland, before everything changed.

"Mel!" I cried, unable to contain my excitement as I broke into a run.

"Har!" Melody's face lit up with that sunshine smile that hadn't changed since we were six years old, racing toward me with equal enthusiasm. We collided in a hug that was probably too tight but felt exactly right, the kind of embrace that made the months of separation disappear in an instant.

Melody had always been my emotional anchor in Angel Grove—the sweet, level-headed counterpoint to my more impulsive nature. With a doctor mom and fire chief dad, she'd grown up with the same sense of duty and responsibility that defined my own Ranger family, though she expressed it through kindness rather than combat skills.

"Hey Har!" Kimber called from the table, her Venusian heritage evident in her effortless grace even in simple jeans and a t-shirt. As the Princess of Venus and daughter of a Sailor Soldier, she understood the whole "secret royal identity" thing better than most.

"It's been a while," Aaron said with his easy smile, giving me a casual salute. His mechanical genius had saved my bike more times than I could count during our childhood adventures.

"Yeah, thought you'd never come back," Logan teased, his designer sunglasses pushed up on his perfectly styled hair. His dad's fortune made him the richest kid in our group, a fact he never let anyone forget.

"We hoped anyway," Ally added with a smirk that didn't quite reach her eyes. We'd never been the best of friends—our connection was simply that we shared the same social circle. As Aaron's twin sister and a top cheerleader at Angel Grove Middle School, she tolerated me more than embraced me.

I made my rounds, hugging each of my friends with varying degrees of enthusiasm. "It is so good to see all of you. I missed you so much!" The words felt inadequate for the emotion swelling in my chest. Video calls and text messages were poor substitutes for being together in person.

"We missed you! It hasn't been the same without you here!" Melody said, her genuine warmth making me feel instantly at home. She turned to include my sister in the greeting. "And Arissa, it's good to see you again. Guys, this is Harley's sister Arissa. Riss, these are our friends Logan, Aaron, Ally, and Kimber."

Arissa offered a polite smile, her reserved nature a stark contrast to my exuberant reunions. "Nice to meet you all. This is my boyfriend Arion," she said, gesturing to the Saturnian who stood slightly behind her, observing the social dynamics with careful attention.

"Nice to meet you," Arion said, his accent drawing curious looks from my friends. He was doing his best to sound casual, but the formal Saturnian speech patterns were still evident beneath his attempts at Earth teenager talk.

I glanced around the group, noticing two significant absences. "Where's JJ and Addy?" I asked, looking for my cousins. Uncle Tommy's death three years ago had hit them hard, and I'd been trying to stay in closer touch since then, especially with Addy who was my age.

"Coming soon," Aaron replied with a shrug.

Melody's expression softened with concern. "They're still adjusting to the move, I think. They can be kind of standoffish sometimes."

I nodded, understanding immediately. "I know leaving Reefsides is hard for them. Aunt Kat wanted to get out of the house she lived in with Uncle Tommy, but to them, it was the last place they saw their dad." The loss of Uncle Tommy had left a hole in all our lives, but especially for his children.

"I've done my best to help them adjust," Melody said softly, her natural compassion evident in her voice. She'd always been the caretaker of our group, the one who made sure everyone felt included.

"Oh, I know you have, Mel," I assured her, squeezing her hand briefly. "Give them time." I turned to Arion, who was still standing somewhat awkwardly at the edge of our circle. "Oh, Arion, this group is safe. Their parents are all Rangers or Sailor Soldiers. They know who we are," I explained, after quickly checking that no other park visitors were within earshot.

"Yeah, that's Princess Kimber of Venus," Arissa added, nodding toward Kimber who was perched on the picnic table with casual elegance.

Arion's eyes widened with recognition, his royal training immediately kicking in. "Oh! I had no idea, Your Highness," he began, starting to bow formally as he would to any planetary royalty.

"No! Not here! She is just Kimber," I hissed, grabbing his arm to stop him mid-bow. The last thing we needed was someone noticing a teenager performing formal court gestures in the middle of Angel Grove Park.

Kimber giggled, clearly amused by Arion's reaction. As someone who also balanced a royal identity with normal teenage life, she understood the adjustment better than most.

"Sorry..." Arion straightened, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Yeah, I'm not a princess here," Kimber explained with an easy laugh. "Just a cheerleader and volleyball player."

I could see Arion processing this—the concept of setting aside royal protocols in public settings was clearly still new to him, despite our coaching. On Saturn, royal identities were acknowledged at all times, regardless of setting.

"Earth is weird," he murmured, just loud enough for me to hear.

"You have no idea," I whispered back with a grin. "And we're just getting started."

We settled around the picnic table, falling into the easy rhythm of conversation that only happens with people who've known each other since elementary school. It amazed me how little everyone had changed at their core, despite the years and distance between us. We were essentially the same people, just in slightly taller bodies with more complicated lives.

Ally was still a pain in the ass, rolling her eyes at half my stories and checking her phone whenever the conversation drifted away from cheerleading or her social status. Aaron remained awkwardly endearing, his eyes lighting up when Arion mentioned Saturnian transportation technology—I could practically see him mentally disassembling alien engines. Logan maintained his carefully cultivated image as Angel Grove's resident rich kid, designer labels on every piece of clothing and that subtle condescension in his voice when anyone mentioned something he deemed beneath him.

Mel was still the sweetest person I'd ever met, asking thoughtful questions about Ireland and genuinely listening to the answers, her eyes reflecting sincere interest in every detail of my life abroad. And Kimber remained flawless as always—that Venusian grace making even the simple act of sitting on a picnic table look like it belonged in a fashion magazine spread.

I couldn't help but notice how close Mel and Kimber had become in my absence. They had inside jokes now, finishing each other's sentences and exchanging those knowing glances that spoke volumes without words. A twinge of jealousy shot through me before I could stop it—a childish fear of being replaced that I immediately tried to squash. I had two best friends myself—Kora back in Ireland and Melody here in California. Why shouldn't Mel have the same?

Still, it stung a little to see the space I'd once occupied so seamlessly filled by someone else. I wondered if they even missed me as much as I'd missed them.

I was pulled from my spiraling thoughts by a familiar voice approaching from behind.

"Hey," JJ called out, his tall frame casting a shadow across our table.

My cousin had grown at least two inches since I'd last seen him in person, his shoulders broader, his face more defined—the physical transformation from boy to young man happening in the time we'd been apart. At fifteen, he was already taller than Uncle Tommy had been, though his eyes carried the same intensity I remembered from my uncle.

"JJ, hey," I said, standing to hug him before turning to his sister. "Addy!"

Addy's hug was briefer, more reserved than the enthusiastic embraces we'd shared as younger kids. The loss of Uncle Tommy had changed her in ways that went beyond normal growing up—there was a guardedness in her eyes that hadn't been there before, a careful distance she maintained even with family.

"Hey Har," JJ said, his smile genuine despite the shadows that seemed to linger around him these days. "Good to see you. You too, Riss."

Arisa offered a small wave.

"How's the move going?" I asked, genuinely concerned about how they were adjusting to Angel Grove after spending most of their lives in Reefside.

JJ shrugged, that universal teenage gesture that conveyed everything and nothing. "It's fine. Different, but fine."

"Mom's teaching at the dance studio downtown," Addy added, her first words since arriving. "And we're both training at the Blue Dragon."

The mention of martial arts training sparked a flicker of the old Addy—her passion for the fighting arts had always been our strongest connection, the one thing that consistently brought her out of her shell. Like me, she'd inherited her father's natural talent for combat, though she expressed it through more disciplined forms than my somewhat chaotic approach. I hoped the mention of Rocky's dojo wouldn't cause questions about him I didn't want to answer.

"We should spar while I'm here," I suggested, hoping to keep the topic away from Rocky. "I've been working on some new techniques at the Thunder Academy."

A hint of genuine interest crossed Addy's face. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Energy manipulation mostly," I said, careful to keep my voice low despite our relative privacy. "I can show you later, somewhere more... discreet."

The subtle reference to our shared Ranger heritage drew a small circle of understanding among us—all children of Rangers or Sailors, all carrying the weight of that legacy in different ways. It was the invisible thread that bound us together regardless of distance or time apart.

"That would be cool," JJ nodded, some of his usual enthusiasm breaking through the careful facade he'd been maintaining. "We've been working on some new forms too. Dad's old journals had some techniques he never got around to teaching us."

The mention of Uncle Tommy's journals created a momentary hush—the bittersweet reality of discovering new connections to him even in his absence. I caught Melody watching JJ and Addy with that gentle concern that was so characteristically her, always attuned to others' emotional states.

"So," Logan broke the silence, clearly uncomfortable with the emotional undercurrent, "what's it like dating an alien?" He directed the question at Arissa with his typical lack of tact, gesturing toward Arion who had been quietly observing our reunion.

Arissa's cheeks flushed slightly, but she maintained her composure. "He's not an alien. He's Saturnian. There's a difference."

"Same planet, different kingdom," I added, coming to her defense as I always did when Logan pushed boundaries. "Like how you're technically human despite being a pain in the ass."

Aaron snorted with laughter while Ally shot me a glare. Kimber rolled her eyes at the familiar dynamic, while Melody intervened with her natural diplomacy.

"How about we show Arion around the park?" she suggested, standing and brushing off her jeans.

"There's the new playground equipment by the lake, and they finally fixed up the gazebo where we used to have picnics."

"Good idea," I agreed, grateful for her peacekeeping skills. Some things never changed—Melody diffusing tension had been a constant since kindergarten.

As we gathered ourselves to continue our reunion tour, I caught Arion watching us with fascination—this complicated web of friendships, rivalries, and shared history clearly as alien to him as any Earth custom we'd introduced. I nudged him gently, offering a reassuring smile.

"Welcome to Earth friendships," I whispered. "Complicated, messy, and completely worth it."

His answering smile suggested he was beginning to understand.

We meandered through Angel Grove Park, following the familiar paths that wound around the lake and through groves of oak trees that had shaded generations of teenagers. The California sunshine felt different from Irish light—warmer, more direct, casting sharper shadows across the manicured lawns. I'd forgotten how much I missed this place, with its specific smell of freshly cut grass mixed with water from the lake and the distant scent of hot dogs from the vendor near the playground.

Our conversation flowed naturally, jumping from topic to topic with the easy rhythm of long-established friendships. Logan regaled us with tales of his latest skiing trip to Aspen, while Aaron enthusiastically described the vintage motorcycle he was restoring. Kimber and Ally debated cheer routine techniques, with Melody occasionally mediating when the discussion grew too heated.

Even Arion began to relax as we walked, his formal posture gradually softening as he adjusted to the casual dynamics of our group. When Aaron asked about transportation on Saturn, Arion's face lit up with genuine enthusiasm, his hands animating his explanation of gravitational propulsion systems. I caught Arissa watching him with a small, private smile—pleased to see her boyfriend finding common ground with her sister's friends.

"So you're saying Saturn vehicles don't touch the ground at all?" Aaron asked, completely fascinated.

"Correct," Arion nodded, forgetting to be self-conscious in his excitement to share knowledge. "They utilize repulsion fields generated by—" He caught himself, glancing around to ensure no random park-goers were within earshot. "By, uh, special technology," he finished lamely.

"Dude, that's awesome, I wonder if they are similar to Astro Gliders" Aaron grinned, clearly already imagining how such systems might work.

"What about racing?" JJ asked, joining the conversation with unexpected interest. "Do you have competitions like we do here?"

"We have several forms of competitive transport navigation," Arion replied, his formal phrasing slipping back in his enthusiasm. "The Royal Academy hosts annual trials that test precision and speed through obstacle courses."

"Sounds like podracing," Logan smirked, referencing the Star Wars movie we'd made Arion watch.

To my surprise, Arion actually laughed—a genuine, unguarded sound I'd rarely heard from him. "The comparison is not entirely inaccurate," he admitted.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to find a text from Lindsey: *Where are you guys? Mom and Dad are boring. Can I hang with you?*

I smiled, typing back quickly: *Angel Grove Park, by the big oak near the lake. Come join!*

"Lindsey's coming," I announced to the group. "She's bored with adult stuff."

"Cool," Melody nodded, always welcoming to newcomers. "I've only met her a couple times, but she seems nice."

"She's awesome," I confirmed. "Total daredevil on a dirt bike. Gives me actual competition, unlike some people." I shot a pointed look at Logan, who had once claimed to be a motocross prodigy until he'd face-planted during his first actual race.

"Whatever," he rolled his eyes. "Some of us have better things to do than get covered in mud."

"Like what? Shopping for another designer jacket?" I teased, falling back into our familiar banter as if I'd never left Angel Grove.

Addy snorted with unexpected laughter, the sound breaking through her careful reserve. When I glanced at her, surprised, she shrugged but didn't look away—a small victory in reconnecting with my cousin.

We settled near the massive oak tree that had been our unofficial meeting spot since elementary school, its sprawling branches providing perfect shade against the afternoon sun. JJ and Aaron immediately climbed up to their favorite perch, while the rest of us claimed spots on the grass or leaned against the trunk.

Lindsey arrived about fifteen minutes later, practically skipping across the lawn in her eagerness to escape adult supervision. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a practical ponytail, her Blue Bay Harbor Sharks t-shirt marking her as proudly from her hometown despite being in Angel Grove territory.

"Freedom!" she declared dramatically as she reached us, flopping onto the grass beside me. "Dad was talking about Thunder Ninja history with Uncle Hunter and I thought I was going to die of boredom."

"Welcome to teenager paradise," I grinned, performing quick introductions for everyone who hadn't met her before.

Lindsey integrated into our group with surprising ease, her natural confidence and lack of pretension making her instantly likable. Even Ally, who typically regarded newcomers with suspicion, seemed to warm to her when they discovered a shared interest in surfing.

As the afternoon stretched on, I found myself relaxing in a way I rarely did anymore. There was something freeing about being with people who had known me my whole life, who had shared the ordinary milestones of childhood alongside the extraordinary reality of our Ranger heritage.

Watching Arion laugh at something Aaron said, seeing Lindsey and Addy comparing martial arts techniques, observing Mel and Kimber's easy affection while including others in their conversation—it felt like worlds colliding in the best possible way. My California life and my new reality blending together, if only for this brief, perfect afternoon.

Of course, perfection never lasts in our world. The universe has a twisted sense of timing when it comes to Ranger families.

The first sign that something was wrong came from the other side of the park—screams cutting through the peaceful afternoon air, followed by the sound of running feet and panicked shouts. We all turned toward the commotion, conversations dying mid-sentence as we spotted them: weird, short, lizard-looking creatures swarming across the grass, moving with jerky, unnatural movements.

"What the hell is that?" Logan asked, his usual arrogance giving way to genuine alarm.

"Good question," JJ replied, his body automatically shifting into a fighting stance—the instinctive response of someone raised by a legendary Ranger.

The creatures were unlike anything I'd seen before—not putties or tengas or any of the foot soldiers from the stories our parents had told us. They had scaly green skin, elongated heads with yellow eyes, and moved with a strange, skittering gait that seemed almost insect-like despite their reptilian appearance. And they were definitely terrorizing civilians, overturning picnic tables and chasing screaming families across the park.

Without discussing it, our entire group moved toward the chaos rather than away from it—the Ranger legacy running strong in our blood, even for those who'd never morphed. I caught Arissa's eye, the silent communication between us confirming what we both knew: this was no ordinary park disturbance.

"Hey! Ugly! Knock it off!" I shouted, deliberately drawing their attention away from a mother struggling to gather her children. The closest creature's head snapped toward me, those eerie yellow eyes focusing with predatory intensity.

"What the heck, Har?!" Melody cried as the creatures abandoned their previous targets and began scrambling toward us with alarming speed.

"I'm a Ranger, remember?" I shot back, already shifting my weight to prepare for the incoming attack.

"Yeah, I'm not!" Mel retorted, her usual calm giving way to understandable panic. Despite growing up in a Ranger family, she'd never been in actual combat before.

"No, but we can fight," JJ stated with quiet confidence, stepping forward to position himself at the front of our group. The son of Tommy Oliver wasn't about to back down from a fight, powers or no powers.

Lindsey nodded, moving to stand beside him. "Let's do it." The determination in her voice reminded me so much of Uncle Blake that I couldn't help but smile despite the danger.

By this point, the park had emptied of civilians, their panicked exodus leaving an eerie silence broken only by the hissing sounds of the approaching creatures. The sudden absence of witnesses created an opportunity—those of us with powers could use them without fear of exposure.

"Arissa, Lindsey, Arion—don't hold back," I said quickly, my voice pitched low so only our immediate group could hear. "The rest of you, stay behind us if you can."

"Not happening," Addy replied, stepping up beside her brother. "Dad taught us more than just basic self-defense."

Aaron and Kimber moved forward as well, while Melody, Logan, and Ally hung back slightly—not retreating, but acknowledging their more limited combat experience.

The first creature lunged at us with surprising speed, clawed hands outstretched. I reacted instinctively, channeling a burst of violet Thunder energy through my palm that sent it flying backward into three of its companions. Beside me, Arissa's crimson energy flared as she created a defensive barrier, while Arion's distinctive purple-crimson Saturnian power manifested in a controlled burst that scattered another group of attackers.

Lindsey, despite not being morphed, managed to channel enough of her Navy Thunder energy to enhance her kicks and punches, sending creatures tumbling with each precisely aimed strike. JJ and Addy moved with the coordinated efficiency of lifelong martial artists, their fighting styles clearly influenced by Uncle Tommy's teachings.

Even without powers, the others weren't helpless. Kimber's Venusian heritage gave her enhanced agility, allowing her to evade attacks with graceful movements that seemed almost dance-like. Aaron used his mechanical knowledge to improvise, grabbing a fallen branch and wielding it like a staff with surprising effectiveness.

"There's too many of them!" Melody called out, backing away from a creature that had broken through our defensive line.

She was right—for every lizard-thing we knocked down, two more seemed to appear, skittering out from behind trees and bushes. We were holding our own, but barely, and without the ability to morph, we were at a significant disadvantage.

"We need to regroup!" I shouted, knocking another creature back with a Thunder-enhanced punch. "Form a circle, backs together!"

"We need to morph," Arissa said urgently, her crimson energy flaring as she pushed back two creatures simultaneously.

"Only two of us have powers," I reminded her, frustration evident in my voice. Despite all our training, without morphers, we were fighting at a significant disadvantage.

"I knew I needed a morpher!" Lindsey exclaimed, executing a perfect Thunder-style sweep kick that temporarily cleared a space around her.

"We could all use one right now," Addy added, her voice tight with concentration as she blocked a clawed strike aimed at her face.

Before any of us could say another word, the world dissolved into streams of multicolored light. That familiar sensation of molecular deconstruction washed over me—the disorienting rush of teleportation that I'd experienced only a handful of times before. When the light faded and my vision cleared, we were standing in a high-tech command center, sleek consoles and glowing monitors surrounding us.

As my eyes adjusted to the sudden change in lighting, I recognized our rescuer immediately. The distinctive lab coat, the intelligent eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, the air of scientific authority that hadn't changed since he was a teenager.

"Uncle Billy?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Hi, Harley," he replied with that slight smile that always made him look younger than his years. Billy Cranston—the original Blue Ranger, genius inventor, and one of the few people my mother trusted implicitly with both her Ranger and Saturn secrets.

JJ stepped forward immediately, his father's leadership instincts evident in his stance. "Uncle Billy, you have to let us go back and stop those things," he demanded, his voice carrying an authority beyond his fifteen years.

"With what power?"

The new voice came from the doorway where Minh Kwan stood watching us, arms crossed over her chest. At eighteen, she carried herself with the confidence of a seasoned Ranger—which made sense, given that she'd taken up the Yellow Ranger mantle after Aunt Trini died in battle three years ago. Her mother's death had hit the entire Ranger community hard, but Minh had honored her legacy by becoming one of the most dedicated Rangers of the younger generation.

"Then you do something!" Addy cried, her frustration breaking through her usual reserve.

"Calm down," Minh replied, her tone gentler than her words. She turned to Billy with a questioning look. "Billy, you sure about this? They're still so young and impulsive."

Billy laughed, the sound carrying years of Ranger memories. "So were you when you got your powers. And I was fourteen when I got my Blue Ranger power. Michelle was only thirteen when Zordon picked her." He glanced at me and Arissa. "And Harley and Arissa already have powers."

Minh sighed, her resistance visibly crumbling. "Fine."

Kimber stepped forward, her usual grace momentarily forgotten in her confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Billy's expression turned serious as he moved to a central console, bringing up images of the lizard creatures we'd been fighting. "Angel Grove is facing a new threat. Those creatures in the park were just the test to see what sort of resistance exists. They were sent by Cobra X and his son Viper." The screen shifted to show a humanoid figure in elaborate armor with distinct reptilian features. "Cobra is a warlord set on ruling Earth. We need a dedicated team to take on this threat. Veterans aren't going to do it this time. It's your turn."

Melody's eyes widened, her face paling slightly as the implications sank in. "Me? A Ranger? You're joking," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Afraid not, Melody," Billy replied, his tone gentle but firm. "You're our new Pink Ranger. You will control the Phoenix Zord."

The shock on Melody's face mirrored what I was feeling inside. Sweet, kind Melody—who'd never thrown a punch in anger, who volunteered at animal shelters and baked cookies for new neighbors—was being asked to step into one of the most demanding roles in the universe.

"We are all getting powers?" JJ asked, his voice carefully controlled despite the excitement I could see in his eyes.

"Yes," Billy confirmed, moving to a wall panel that slid open to reveal a series of morphers, each glowing with a different color. "I created these powers some time back in case Angel Grove ever needed a new team. They're all based around your father's White Ranger power..." He picked up a white morpher, holding it out to JJ. "And I can think of no one better to take on the mantle of the White Ranger and the Tiger Zord."

JJ accepted the morpher with reverence, his eyes glistening slightly at the mention of his father. "With honor," he said simply, the weight of Tommy's legacy evident in his voice.

Billy turned to Addy next, offering her a purple device. "Addy, you will take the Purple Ranger power and the Pegasus Zord."

"Shouldn't that be my power?" I asked before I could stop myself. The Purple Ranger power had been my mother's, after all—a legacy I'd grown up hearing about.

"The Purple Ranger power is no longer blood-locked to your mom's bloodline, and you have a morpher already," Billy explained patiently.

I nodded, swallowing my momentary disappointment. He was right, of course. I already had my Violet Thunder powers, and Addy deserved her own connection to the Ranger legacy beyond just being Tommy's daughter.

"What about the rest of us?" Aaron asked, his usual awkwardness replaced by eager anticipation.

Billy continued distributing the morphers, each assignment clearly the result of careful consideration.

"Aaron, you will be the Blue Ranger and control the Unicorn Zord. Allison, you will become the Green Ranger and control the Lion Zord. Kimber, the Orange Ranger power is yours, as is the Mermaid Zord. Logan, you will be our new Red Ranger and control the Dragon Zord." He turned finally to Minh. "And Minh, you will take on a new Yellow Ranger power and control the Griffin Zord."

The expressions around the room ranged from shock to excitement to disbelief—the magnitude of what was happening slowly sinking in for everyone. We were being chosen as the next generation of Rangers, entrusted with powers that would forever change our lives.

"And me? Am I chopped liver?" Lindsey asked, her indignation cutting through the momentous atmosphere. Despite being the youngest, she'd never been one to stay quietly in the background.

Logan smirked, his newfound Red Ranger status already going to his head. "You're eleven," he pointed out dismissively.

Lindsey rolled her eyes. "And yet I am more qualified and better trained than you."

"Stop, you two," Billy interrupted before the argument could escalate. He turned to Lindsey with a smile, reaching into a separate compartment. "Lindsey, I cloned the Navy Thunder Morpher for you." He handed her a device that looked identical to Uncle Blake's morpher, its deep blue casing gleaming under the command center lights.

Lindsey's face lit up with pure joy as she accepted it, holding the morpher as if it were made of precious glass. "Really? My own Thunder Morpher?" Her voice cracked slightly with emotion.

"Really," Billy confirmed. "Blake helped me design it specifically for you. It's tuned to your energy signature, just as his is to his."

I couldn't help but smile at Lindsey's reaction—the pure, unfiltered excitement that I remembered from when I'd first received my own morpher. Despite all the complications and responsibilities that came with being a Ranger, that initial moment of being chosen, of being entrusted with that power, was something special.

As I looked around at my friends—all holding their new morphers with varying degrees of awe and trepidation—I realized that everything had just changed.

"It's your turn to take on the legacy your parents have all created," Billy said, his gaze moving from one face to another, acknowledging the weight of the heritage each of us carried. "You are the Power Rangers Genesis."

The name hung in the air for a moment—Genesis, the beginning. A new chapter in the Ranger legacy that had protected Earth for generations. I felt a shiver run through me at the significance of it.

JJ stepped forward, naturally assuming the leadership role that seemed to be his birthright as Tommy Oliver's son. His expression was resolute, his grip on his new morpher confident. "Then it's time to morph and take care of those reptiles."

"They are called Scalekins," Billy corrected, bringing up more detailed images on the command center's main screen. The creatures' anatomy was displayed in clinical detail, highlighting vulnerable points and attack patterns.

"Ew," Melody wrinkled her nose, her initial shock giving way to determination despite her obvious discomfort. The transformation from sweet, cautious Melody to Pink Ranger was already beginning, even before she morphed.

I looked around at my friends and felt a surge of pride mixed with adrenaline. This was what we were born for, what our parents had prepared us for whether they realized it or not. Years of martial arts training, of hearing Ranger stories, of living with the knowledge that the universe was bigger and more dangerous than most people could imagine—it had all led to this moment.

"Ready?" I asked, raising my Thunder morpher. The familiar violet energy hummed against my palm, eager to be released.

"Ready!" The response came in unison, a chorus of voices united in purpose for the first time.

Arisa, Lindsey, and I moved in perfect synchronization, our Thunder Ninja training evident in our matching stances. "Thunder Storm, Ranger Form! Power of Thunder!" The familiar energy rushed through me as the violet light enveloped my body, transforming me into the Violet Thunder Ranger.

Beside me, Arissa's crimson light and Lindsey's navy energy flared as they completed their transformations, the three Thunder Rangers standing ready in our distinctive armor.

JJ raised his morpher next, his voice carrying the echo of his father's as he called out the phrase that had initiated Ranger transformations since the beginning: "It's Morphin Time!"

One by one, the others followed, their voices gaining confidence with each call:

"Lion Power!" Ally's voice rang out, green energy swirling around her as she embraced the power she'd been chosen to wield.

"Unicorn Power!" Aaron called, blue light transforming the awkward mechanic into a warrior with newfound purpose.

"Mermaid Power!" Kimber's transformation was graceful even in its intensity, orange energy flowing around her like water.

"Phoenix Power!" Melody's voice was stronger than I'd ever heard it, pink light rising around her like flames as she accepted her destiny.

"Griffin Power!" Minh's confident call reminded us that she'd done this before, yellow energy crackling around her experienced form.

"Pegasus Power!" Addy's transformation was accompanied by purple light that seemed to dance with a life of its own, as if celebrating finding its new wielder.

"Dragon Power!" Logan's red energy erupted with characteristic showmanship, the power seemingly amplifying his already considerable confidence.

"Tiger Power!" JJ's white light was the brightest of all, illuminating the command center as he completed the transformation that connected him most directly to his father's legacy.

As the light of our combined morphing sequence faded, we stood transformed—no longer just a group of teenagers, but Power Rangers. The armor felt both foreign and familiar, like something I'd been waiting to wear my whole life without realizing it. Each suit was uniquely designed while maintaining the cohesive team aesthetic—the Thunder Ranger suits with their distinctive helmets and armor standing slightly apart from the Genesis Rangers' more unified appearance.

I caught my reflection in one of the command center's monitors—the Violet Thunder Ranger looking back at me with the same mixture of awe and determination I felt inside. This wasn't my first time morphing, but it was the first time doing so as part of a full team, and the difference was palpable.

"The Scalekins are still attacking civilians in the park," Billy said, his voice breaking through our collective moment of wonder.

"What about me?" Arion asked, looking somewhat out of place as the only non-Ranger in the room.

"You've been fighting longer than most of them," I pointed out, not wanting him to feel excluded. "But someone does need to tell our parents what's happening before they freak out about us disappearing."

Arion nodded, accepting the mission with characteristic dignity. "I will inform them of the situation."

"Rangers," Billy said, his hand hovering over the teleportation controls. "Remember what your parents have taught you, trust your instincts, and most importantly—work as a team."

With a nod from JJ, we positioned ourselves for teleportation, the formation coming naturally despite never having practiced it. The white, red, and yellow Rangers in front, blue, green, and orange flanking them, purple, violet, and navy completing the triangle.

"May the Power protect you," Billy said, the traditional blessing carrying decades of history as he activated the teleportation sequence.

Multicolored light enveloped us once more, and we were streaking back toward Angel Grove Park—ten Rangers united in purpose, ready to face our first battle together. As the world reformed around us, I caught sight of the Scalekins still rampaging through the park, unaware that everything had changed.

They were about to learn exactly what happened when you threatened a planet protected by Power Rangers.

We materialized in the center of the park, our combined teleportation creating a shockwave of multicolored energy that immediately drew the Scalekins' attention. Their yellow eyes fixed on us with predatory focus, hissing sounds rising from their throats as they registered our transformed presence.

"Hey ugly! We're back," I called out, unable to resist the traditional Ranger battle taunt. "Two Ranger teams!"

The creatures hesitated, clearly not expecting to face morphed Rangers. Their primitive intelligence seemed to be processing this new threat, reassessing their chances against armored opponents rather than vulnerable teenagers.

"Thunder Rangers, take the lead. Genesis Rangers, cover us," Arissa commanded, stepping forward with the authority that came naturally to her as the leader of the Thunder Ranger team. Her crimson armor gleamed in the afternoon sunlight as she assumed a fighting stance.

JJ and Minh exchanged glances, their helmets not quite hiding their reaction to Arissa's automatic assumption of leadership over both teams. As the White Ranger, JJ was the natural leader of the Genesis Rangers, while Minh had her own years of experience to draw on.

"We have more experience than you guys," Arissa added, sensing their hesitation. It wasn't an unreasonable point—the Thunder Rangers had been training with our powers for months, while the Genesis team had literally just morphed for the first time.

"Excuse me?" Minh's tone carried years of Ranger experience, her yellow helmet tilting slightly in challenge. As an active Ranger before today, she clearly wasn't about to take orders from the leader of another team.

The Scalekins, sensing our momentary disunity, began to advance again, their clawed hands flexing in anticipation. We didn't have time for a leadership debate—we needed to act now.

JJ stepped forward, his white armor seeming to gather light around it as he moved between the two teams. "Genesis Rangers, cover the perimeter," he stated, his voice carrying that natural authority I recognized from Uncle Tommy. "Thunder Rangers, cover the interior."

It was a diplomatic solution that acknowledged both teams' strengths while respecting their separate command structures—keeping the more experienced Thunder Rangers in the center where the fighting would be most intense, while positioning the Genesis Rangers to prevent any Scalekins from escaping into the civilian areas beyond the park.

Arisa nodded, recognizing the tactical wisdom of the plan. "Agreed."

The brief moment of tension dissolved as quickly as it had formed, replaced by the immediate necessity of battle. We moved into position with surprising coordination for two newly allied teams—the Thunder Rangers forming a triangle in the center while the Genesis Rangers spread out to create a wider perimeter.

"Genesis Rangers, follow my lead," I heard JJ call to his team as the Scalekins charged.

"Thunder Rangers, on me," Arissa commanded, her crimson energy flaring as she prepared to engage.

The battle erupted in a chaos of motion and energy—Thunder powers crackling through the air as Arissa, Lindsey, and I engaged the closest creatures. My Thunder staff materialized in my hands with a thought, the familiar weapon an extension of myself as I swept it in a wide arc that sent three Scalekins flying backward.

From the corner of my visor, I caught glimpses of the Genesis Rangers finding their footing with their new powers. Melody seemed to have discovered her Phoenix Bow, pink energy arrows streaking through the air with surprising accuracy for someone who'd never used a weapon before. Aaron was wielding a Blue Unicorn Lance with growing confidence, while Kimber's Orange Mermaid Trident flashed in the sunlight as she moved with her natural grace.

Ally had found her Green Lion Axe, the weapon's weight initially challenging her but her cheerleader strength quickly adapting to its power. Logan, predictably, had thrown himself into combat with his Red Dragon Sword with more enthusiasm than technique, while JJ moved with the practiced precision I'd expect from Uncle Tommy's son, his White Tiger Saber cutting through Scalekins with controlled power.

Addy was wielding her Purple Pegasus Staff with natural skill, her dancer's balance and martial arts training giving her excellent control of the weapon's reach and impact. Minh moved like the experienced Ranger she was, her Yellow Griffin Daggers flashing in deadly arcs as she cut through enemies with practiced efficiency.

"They're trying to flank us!" Lindsey called out, her Navy Thunder powers creating a barrier that temporarily blocked a group of Scalekins attempting to circle around our position.

"I've got it!" Kimber responded immediately, her Mermaid Trident spinning in her hands as she moved to reinforce Lindsey's position. The Orange and Navy Rangers worked together instinctively, their powers complementing each other despite belonging to different teams.

Similar partnerships were forming across the battlefield—Aaron and Arissa combining their Blue and Crimson energies to create a devastating attack pattern, Melody and I covering each other's blind spots as if we'd choreographed it in advance, JJ and Addy moving with the synchronized precision that came from years of training together.

"They're retreating!" Logan called out, his Red Ranger helmet turning to track a group of Scalekins that had broken away from the main battle.

"Genesis Rangers, pursue!" JJ ordered his team. "Don't let them escape!"

"Thunder Rangers, maintain the center!" Arissa commanded simultaneously, ensuring that our smaller team held the strategic position in case this was a diversion.

The two teams worked in concert while maintaining their separate command structures, the Genesis Rangers pushing outward to chase the fleeing Scalekins while we Thunder Rangers secured the park's central area. Their disorganized retreat quickly became a rout as we drove them back, our confidence growing with each successful attack.

As the last Scalekin disappeared into what looked like a swirling portal that opened briefly at the edge of the park, we regrouped in the center of the battlefield, adrenaline still pumping through our systems.

"Genesis Rangers, status report," JJ called, his White Ranger helmet turning to check each member of his team.

"Thunder Rangers, check in," Arissa echoed, looking toward Lindsey and me.

A chorus of affirmatives followed from both teams, the Genesis Rangers sounding slightly breathless but exhilarated. First battles had that effect—the rush of successfully using your powers, of facing actual enemies and emerging victorious, created a high unlike anything else.

"That was..." Melody's voice trailed off, as if she couldn't quite find words for the experience.

"Amazing," Aaron finished for her, his usual awkwardness replaced by genuine excitement.

"It was just the beginning," Minh cautioned, her experienced voice tempering our celebration. Her Yellow Griffin Daggers gleamed as she returned them to her belt. "Those were foot soldiers. Their leaders will be much stronger."

"Then we'll be stronger too," I replied, feeling the truth of it in my bones. What we'd just accomplished had only scratched the surface of our potential as allied teams.

As we stood together in the afternoon sunlight—two Ranger teams united by purpose if not by command structure—I couldn't help but feel that something momentous had just begun. The Power Rangers Genesis had made their first stand alongside the Thunder Rangers, creating an alliance that would be formidable against whatever threats came next.

"Melody!"

The panicked cry cut through the post-battle adrenaline as Aunt Dana came running across the park toward us, her doctor's instincts clearly in full maternal overdrive. Behind her, an entire contingent of former Rangers was rapidly approaching—a parental response team that would have been comical if not for the expressions of alarm on their faces.

Uncle Carter was right behind his wife, his fire chief training evident in his rapid assessment of the scene as he approached. Aunt Ashley and Uncle Andros moved with the synchronized efficiency that came from years as both Rangers and partners, while Aunt Kat's face showed the particular worry of a mother who had already lost too much and couldn't bear to lose more.

Uncle Wes and Aunt Jen, Logan's parents, were scanning the area with the tactical awareness of their Time Force training, while Aunt Mina and Uncle Adam moved with the quiet grace that belied their combined Sailor and Ranger heritage. Mom and Dad were slightly more measured in their approach, exchanging knowing glances—after all, they'd already been through this with Arissa and me.

Uncle Blake and Aunt Tori followed close behind, their expressions a mixture of concern and resignation as they spotted Lindsey's navy morpher still clutched in her hand.

"Power down!" JJ commanded his team, recognizing that there was no point maintaining their morphed state now. The Genesis Rangers' suits dissolved in flashes of colored light, revealing ten teenagers who suddenly looked a lot less confident than they had moments ago.

"Thunder Storm, power down," Arissa called, and our Thunder Ranger suits disappeared as well, leaving us in our civilian clothes and facing a very awkward situation.

I exchanged glances with Arissa, both of us recognizing that we were about to witness something rare—a multi-generational Ranger meltdown. When this day started, Arissa and I were the only ones with morphers. Now, all our friends and cousins had some serious explaining to do.

"What. Just. Happened?" Aunt Dana asked, her voice tight with maternal concern as she reached her daughter. Her eyes moved across the group, taking in the morphers now visible in everyone's hands.

"We can explain," Melody began, her voice higher than usual as her mother enveloped her in a tight hug that seemed equal parts relief and restraint.

"You'd better," Uncle Carter replied, his fire chief authority evident in his tone. "One minute you're at the park, the next there are reports of monster attacks, and then you're all just... gone."

"Billy gave us morphers," JJ stated simply, stepping forward with the quiet confidence that reminded me so much of Uncle Tommy. He held up his white morpher, facing the assembled parents directly.

"We're the Power Rangers Genesis."

The stunned silence that followed was broken by Aunt Kat's soft "Oh, Tommy" as she looked at her son standing tall in a role that his father would have recognized all too well.

"All of you?" Uncle Andros asked, his gaze moving between his twins with an expression I couldn't quite read—concern mixed with something that might have been pride.

"Genesis and Thunder," Logan confirmed, holding up his own red morpher with unmistakable satisfaction. "Two teams."

Mom stepped forward, her expression more understanding than angry. Having gone through this with Arissa and me already, she was in a unique position to mediate. "I'm guessing Billy had his reasons," she said, looking from one new Ranger to another.

"There wasn't exactly time for a family meeting," I added, grateful for Mom's calmer approach. "The Scalekins were attacking civilians. Billy teleported us out, gave them morphers, and sent us back to handle it."

"Scalekins?" Uncle Adam repeated, exchanging a look with Aunt Mina that suggested the name meant something to them.

"Cobra X's foot soldiers," Addy explained, her voice steadier than I would have expected given the circumstances. "Billy said he and his son Viper are targeting Earth."

The name Cobra X sent a ripple of recognition through the assembled parents, their expressions shifting from confusion and concern to something more complicated—the look of veterans who recognized an old enemy's return.

Dad placed a reassuring hand on Uncle Wes's shoulder, the gesture of one Ranger parent to another. "I know this is a shock," he said quietly. "We felt the same way when the girls got their morphers. But if Billy thought this was necessary..."

"We need to talk to him," Aunt Jen said firmly, her hand on Logan's shoulder in what looked like equal parts protective gesture and restraint. "All of us."

"He's expecting you," Minh spoke up, her experience as an established Ranger giving her words more weight. "He sent me to help the Genesis team because he knew what was coming. This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision."

"That doesn't make it right," Uncle Wes replied, though I caught a flicker of something like understanding in his expression. The former Red Time Force Ranger had his own complicated history with destiny and predetermined roles.

"Look," Mom interjected, her years of Ranger experience evident in her calm approach, "what's done is done. They're Rangers now. Hunter and I have been through this already with Harley and Arissa. It's not easy, but fighting it won't change anything."

As if to emphasize her point, a small crowd of curious onlookers had begun to gather at the edges of the park, drawn by the aftermath of the Scalekin attack and the unusual gathering of adults and teenagers in its wake.

"Michelle's right," Aunt Tori said, her voice carrying the calm authority that made her such an effective attorney. "This isn't the place. We should go to the command center and hear Billy out before making any judgments."

Aunt Dana nodded reluctantly, though the protective arm she kept around Melody's shoulders told me this conversation was far from over. "Fine. But I have questions. A lot of them."

As our large group began to move away from the battlefield, I fell into step beside Lindsey, who looked simultaneously thrilled about her new morpher and concerned about the parental reaction.

"Your parents taking it okay?" I whispered, nodding toward where Uncle Blake and Aunt Tori were walking with Dad, deep in conversation.

She grimaced slightly. "Dad keeps looking at my morpher like it might explode. Mom's being all lawyer-calm, which is somehow scarier."

I couldn't help but smile sympathetically. "It gets easier. They'll adjust, just like Mom and Dad did with us. It helps that they've all been there themselves."

"Yeah," she agreed, her expression brightening. "And did you see me out there? I totally nailed that Scalekin that was trying to flank us!"

I bumped her shoulder affectionately. "Not bad for your first morphed battle, cousin."

As we prepared for teleportation to the command center, I caught Mom and Dad watching all of us with an expression I recognized—the complicated mixture of pride, worry, and resignation that came with being Ranger parents. They'd already walked this road with Arissa and me, which put them in a unique position to help the others navigate what came next.

Because becoming a Ranger wasn't just about getting powers and fighting monsters. It was about joining a legacy that stretched back generations—a legacy our parents understood better than anyone.

Michelle

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One look at my friends' faces told me exactly what they were going through. The panic, the horror, the instinctive parental fear—I'd experienced it all when Hunter told me he'd given Harley and Arissa their morphers. I'd been furious then, convinced he'd made an unforgivable decision without consulting me. But eventually, I'd come to accept it was the only choice he could have made in that moment. Hunter did what he had to do to protect our daughters. I didn't like it, but I'd accepted it.

I was certain Billy had his reasons too.

We arrived at the Command Center hidden beneath Cranston Tech—Billy's state-of-the-art facility that served as both his corporate headquarters and the secret base for Ranger operations in Angel Grove. As we materialized in the main chamber, the familiar blend of alien technology and Earth innovation surrounded us. Viewing screens displayed data on the Scalekins and their energy signatures, while the central console glowed with the soft blue light that had characterized every Command Center since Zordon's original.

Billy stood at the main controls, his expression a careful mask of scientific detachment that didn't quite hide his concern as he observed our arrival. He'd clearly been expecting this confrontation, though perhaps not quite so many angry parents at once.

The moment our teleportation was complete, the room erupted into a cacophony of parental outrage. Every Ranger parent except Hunter and I started talking simultaneously, their voices overlapping in a chorus of accusation and disbelief.

"Billy, how could you—" Dana began, her doctor's composure momentarily abandoned.

"Melody is only thirteen—" Carter interjected, his protective instincts on full display.

"Tommy would never have agreed—" Kat's voice carried the weight of her late husband's legacy.

"Don't you remember what we went through—" Ashley's concern was evident as she glanced at her twins.

"How could you not ask us—" Jen's Time Force training couldn't hide her maternal worry.

Billy held up his hand, the simple gesture somehow cutting through the chaos. The room fell silent, years of Ranger respect for the original Blue Ranger still strong despite their anger.

"One at a time," he said calmly, his gaze moving from one former Ranger to another. "Look, I know you're angry, but you all knew this day would come."

"But to give them morphers without talking to us," Wes said, his usual easygoing demeanor replaced by paternal concern. As the former Red Time Force Ranger and head of WesCo, he was accustomed to being consulted on major decisions, especially those involving his son.

I stepped forward, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu. Not long ago, I'd been the angry parent. Now I found myself defending the very action that had infuriated me when Hunter did it.

"Wes, you weren't on our original team," I reminded him gently. "Zordon didn't exactly ask our parents." None of our families knew about our Ranger identities; we'd been chosen and thrust into battle without parental permission or knowledge.

"This is a different situation," Adam countered, his normally calm voice carrying an edge of frustration. "We already know about Rangers."

"Oh come on, Adam," I replied, unable to keep the slight exasperation from my tone. "Kimber is going to be Sailor Neo Venus someday anyway. This is her destiny." As the daughter of a Sailor Soldier and a Ranger, Kimber's path had been set long before today.

I caught Mina's expression softening slightly at my words—the acknowledgment of her daughter's Venusian heritage and the destiny that came with it. As a Sailor Soldier herself, she understood the weight of legacy better than most.

"I'm sorry if you're upset with my actions," Billy said, his voice carrying the quiet authority that had developed over decades of Ranger service. "But I did what had to be done, just like every Ranger mentor has done. Cobra X has entered our solar system, and you all know as well as I do he isn't going down easily."

He moved to the central console, bringing up images of a reptilian warlord. Cobra X was a name I had heard before. He was a former lieutenant in another villain's army once. Clearly, he'd risen through the ranks over the years.

"Veteran Rangers aren't meant to be active teams anymore," Billy continued, his gaze moving from one former Ranger to another. "You are all there for the big, urgent missions. We need an active team, so I created one."

The truth of his words settled over the room. We were all still Rangers in our hearts and could morph when needed, but our days of regular patrols and daily battles were long behind us. We had careers, families, responsibilities that extended beyond our Ranger duties. The world still needed full-time protectors, and that role would always fall to the younger generation.

I glanced at Hunter, finding his eyes already on me. The silent communication between us acknowledged the irony of my position—defending Billy's decision to give morphers to our friends' children when I'd initially been so angry about our my daughters receiving powers. Life had a way of shifting perspectives when you least expected it.

"They performed admirably in their first battle," Billy added, bringing up footage from the park. The screens displayed the Genesis and Thunder Rangers working together to defeat the Scalekins, their natural teamwork evident despite their lack of formal training together.

I watched the video with a mixture of pride and apprehension. Harley and Arissa moved with the confidence that came from months of practice with their powers, while the newly minted Genesis Rangers were finding their footing with impressive speed. JJ's leadership echoed Tommy's so strongly that I saw Kat's hand fly to her mouth, tears gathering in her eyes as she watched her son step into his father's legacy.

"They're so young," Dana whispered, her doctor's eyes cataloging every near-miss and potential injury as Melody fought on screen.

"We were young too," Carter reminded her gently, his arm around her shoulders. "You were a medic in Lightspeed when you were barely out of high school."

"That was different," she protested, though her voice lacked conviction.

"Was it?" I asked softly. "We were all chosen because we were needed, Dana. Just like they are now."

The room fell silent as we all watched our children fighting on the screens—the next generation of Rangers taking up the mantle we'd carried in our youth. It was a moment both beautiful and terrifying, filled with pride and fear in equal measure.

"I understand your concerns," Billy said, his voice gentler now. "Believe me, I do. I wouldn't have chosen them if I didn't believe they were ready—and if there had been any other option."

"You could have called us," Andros said, his voice carrying the weight of someone who'd lost too much to Ranger battles in the past. "We would have come."

"And you will," Billy assured him. "When the bigger threats emerge, we'll need all of you. But for the daily defense of Angel Grove? It's time for a new team."

I watched my friends' expressions as they processed Billy's words, the initial shock and anger gradually giving way to reluctant understanding. They were all former Rangers—they knew how this worked, knew that the Power chose as much as any mentor did. Deep down, they'd probably been preparing for this day since their children were born, just as Hunter and I had eventually come to terms with Harley and Arissa's destiny.

"They'll need training," Blake said finally, his eyes on Lindsey who stood tall despite being the youngest new Ranger. "Proper training, not just thrown into battle."

"That's where you all come in," Billy nodded. "Who better to train the next generation than their own parents?"

And there it was—the compromise that would begin to bridge the gap between parental concern and Ranger necessity. Not preventing their children from taking up the mantle, but guiding them through it with the wisdom of experience.

As the conversation shifted toward practical matters of training schedules and command structure, I caught Harley's eye across the room. She gave me a small smile—part excitement, part gratitude for my support—and I felt that familiar mixture of pride and terror that had become my constant companion since learning of her powers.

This wasn't how any of us had planned to spend our Thanksgiving visit to Angel Grove, but then again, Ranger life had never been predictable. All we could do was adapt, support each other, and hope that we'd prepared our children well enough for the challenges ahead.



### “Thunder Thanksgiving-Part 3”

It had been a couple of days since the kids had all gotten their powers and since then it had been a whirlwind of training and family visits.

We knew very well that Cobra X was the Genesis Rangers' enemy, but while we were in town the Thunder Rangers could help.

I was sitting at Kat's house the night before Thanksgiving. It was a nice 3 bedroom house that was close to the park and schools. I knew it had been hard for Kat living in the house she shared with Tommy in Reefside and JJ attending Reefside High where Tommy had once taught was hard on him too. Moving to Angel Grove had been a hard decision, but one Kat felt she had to make for her kids and herself.

Hunter was in the back training with the kids while I sat inside having tea with Kat, Tomi playing on the floor nearby.

“How are you really doing?” I asked.

“It's hard Mich,” Kat replied, her Australian accent thick with emotion, “I thought a fresh start would be good for the kids but Addy just isn't adapting. And now this Ranger thing. The idea of both my kids being Rangers. It terrifies me,” Kat said.

“I know. And I know its even harder this time of year,” I said as I reached for her hand. Tommy had passed away just before Thanksgiving 3 years ago.

“I still miss him so much. Some days the idea of going on without him seems unbearable,” Kat said, tears welling in her eyes.

“I miss him too. We will always miss him,” I said softly. It had been a couple of days since the kids had all gotten their powers, and since then, life had been a whirlwind of training sessions and family visits. Every available moment had been dedicated to preparing the new Rangers for whatever Cobra X might throw at them next.

We understood that Cobra X was primarily the Genesis Rangers' enemy to face, but while the Thunder Rangers were in town, we could provide support and experience. It was an unspoken agreement among all the parents—we might have concerns about our children becoming Rangers, but we would ensure they were as prepared as possible.

I was sitting in Kat's living room the night before Thanksgiving, a steaming cup of tea warming my hands as I watched her move around her kitchen with the practiced efficiency of someone trying to stay busy. Her new house was lovely—a modest three-bedroom home close to the



park and schools, decorated with warm colors and family photos that managed to be both a tribute to Tommy and a fresh start for their family.

I knew how difficult the decision to leave Reefside had been. The house she had shared with Tommy there held too many painful memories—not just of their life together, but of how it had ended. That house was where Robo Rita had staged her sneak attack, where my brother had been murdered in what was initially made to look like suicide. The thought still made my stomach clench with a mixture of grief and rage. Tommy deserved better than that end—a legendary Ranger taken down not in glorious battle but in his own home, when he should have been safe.

Hunter was in the backyard running the kids through training exercises—the rhythmic sounds of combat practice floating through the partially open window. I could hear Harley's distinctive laugh occasionally rising above the general noise, followed by JJ's more measured instructions. My nephew had his father's natural leadership abilities, though I'd been too blinded by my own ego to properly acknowledge that in Tommy when he was alive—a regret that still haunted me.

Tomi played contentedly on the floor nearby, her small hands busy with the wooden blocks that Kat had pulled from storage—toys that had once belonged to her own children. My youngest seemed blissfully unaware of the tension that had permeated our visit, happily building and knocking down towers with single-minded focus.

"How are you really doing?" I asked Kat as she finally settled into the armchair across from me, her own tea cradled between her palms.

She sighed, her shoulders dropping slightly as the question penetrated the cheerful hostess persona she'd been maintaining. "It's hard, Mich," she admitted, her Australian accent thickening with emotion as it always did when she let her guard down. "I thought a fresh start would be good for the kids, but Addy just isn't adapting. And now this Ranger thing..." She shook her head, looking toward the backyard where our children were training. "The idea of both my kids being Rangers. It terrifies me."

"I know," I said softly, understanding her fear better than most. "And I know it's even harder this time of year." I reached across the coffee table to take her hand, offering what comfort I could through the simple connection.

Tommy had been killed just before Thanksgiving three years ago. The holiday would always carry that shadow for us all, the empty chair at our table a reminder of what we'd lost.

"I still miss him so much," Kat whispered, tears welling in her eyes despite her obvious effort to contain them. "Some days the idea of going on without him seems unbearable."

"I miss him too," I replied, my own throat tightening with a complex mixture of grief and guilt. The last conversation I'd had with my brother had been an argument—our competitive natures and strong personalities clashing over Ranger strategy, of all things. We'd never had a chance to reconcile before Robo Rita's attack. I hadn't even invited him to my wedding. "We will always miss him."

The simple acknowledgment seemed to release something in Kat, allowing her tears to fall freely now. "JJ is so much like him," she said, her voice barely audible over Tomi's happy babbling. "The way he took charge yesterday, the natural leadership... it was like seeing Tommy again."

I nodded, having noticed the same thing. JJ had Tommy's presence, that indefinable quality that made people naturally look to him for direction. It was both a blessing and a curse for a teenager still finding his own identity.

"And now he's the White Ranger," Kat continued, a humorless laugh escaping through her tears. "Billy says it's coincidence, that the power chose him independently, but..."

"But it feels like destiny," I finished for her, understanding completely. The parallels were impossible to ignore—Tommy's son taking up his father's color, leading a new team against a new threat. It was poetic and terrifying in equal measure.

"I'm proud of him," Kat admitted, wiping at her tears. "Of course I am. But after what happened to Tommy... the thought of losing my children too..."

She didn't need to complete the thought. The way we'd lost Tommy—not in battle but in what should have been the safety of his own home—had shattered our sense of security. It was one thing to face danger morphed and prepared; it was another to be ambushed where you should be safe.

"I should have been there for him more," I said quietly, the guilt that had become my constant companion these past three years surfacing again. "We wasted so much time competing with each other, trying to prove who was the better Ranger, the better leader. All those stupid arguments..."

"He loved you, Michelle," Kat said firmly, her hand squeezing mine. "You know that. Brothers and sisters fight—it's what they do. But he was so proud of you, of everything you accomplished."

I wished I could believe her completely, but the memory of Tommy's frustrated expression during our last argument was etched too deeply in my mind. We'd both said things we couldn't take back, and then there had been no more chances.

"I just wish..." I started, then shook my head. Wishes couldn't change the past, couldn't bring my brother back or give me the opportunity to tell him I was sorry, that I loved him, that I respected him despite our differences.

"I know," Kat said softly, understanding in her eyes. "Me too."

Tomi chose that moment to toddle over with a block clutched in her small hand, offering it to Kat with a solemn expression.

Kat's face softened as she accepted the block, the simple gesture from my daughter momentarily breaking through her grief. "Thank you, sweetheart," she said, her Australian lilt gentling.

I watched as Kat set the block carefully on the coffee table, treating it with the reverence of a priceless gift rather than a child's toy. It was one of the things I'd always admired about her—her ability to find joy in small moments even amid profound loss.

"Tommy would be so proud of them," I said softly, watching Tomi return to her block collection. "Not just JJ and Addy, but all of them. Taking up the mantle, protecting Earth just like we did."

"I know," Kat nodded, her tears slowing as she gathered herself. "And he'd be the first one out there training them, wouldn't he? Probably driving them harder than any of us."

I couldn't help but smile at the image. "Absolutely. Complete with motivational speeches about Ranger history and teamwork."

"God, the speeches," Kat laughed, the sound watery but genuine. "The kids used to time them. JJ's record was counting seventeen 'once a Ranger, always a Ranger' in a single pep talk."

The shared memory lightened the mood slightly, allowing us both a moment of fondness amid the grief. Tommy had been many things—hero, leader, friend, husband, father, brother—but subtle had never been one of them, especially when it came to Ranger pride.

Through the window, I could see Hunter demonstrating a defensive maneuver to Addy, his patience evident even from a distance. The kids responded to him differently than they did to their own parents—less defensive, more receptive to criticism.

"Hunter's good with them," Kat observed, following my gaze. "They respect him."

"He understands what they're going through," I said, watching as he corrected Addy's stance with careful precision. "The weight of legacy, the pressure to live up to expectations. He and Blake felt that their whole lives at the Thunder Academy."

Kat nodded, her eyes lingering on her daughter. "Addy's been different since they got their powers. More focused. Almost... peaceful, in a strange way."

"It gives her connection to Tommy," I suggested gently. "A way to honor him that feels tangible."

"I think you're right," Kat agreed, her expression thoughtful. "For both of them, really. JJ's been talking more about him, asking questions about Tommy's time as a Ranger that he never wanted to discuss before."

The healing potential in this unexpected development wasn't something I'd considered, but it made sense. Becoming Rangers gave JJ and Addy a new way to process their grief, to feel connected to their father through shared experience rather than just memories.

"Maybe it's helping them make sense of why he was targeted," Kat added quietly.

"Understanding the life he led, the enemies he made... it doesn't make it easier, but it gives context."

I nodded, though the reminder of how Tommy died sent a fresh wave of pain through me. We'd all struggled to come to terms with the fact that Robo Rita had specifically targeted my brother, staging his death to look like suicide to demoralize the Ranger community. By the time we'd uncovered the truth, the damage had been done—both to our hearts and to Tommy's legacy, temporarily tarnished by the false narrative before we could clear his name.

"I wish we'd caught her sooner," I said, the familiar regret surfacing again. If we'd realized what was happening, if we'd connected the dots faster, maybe Tommy would still be alive.

"We can't think that way," Kat said firmly, echoing what I'm sure my own therapist would say.

"We did everything we could with what we knew at the time. Tommy wouldn't want us to torture ourselves with 'what ifs.'"

She was right, of course. Tommy had always been forward-looking, focused on the next mission, the next challenge. He wouldn't want us dwelling on the past, especially not when the next generation needed our guidance.

As we sat in companionable silence, watching our children train in the fading afternoon light, I found myself grateful for this quiet moment amid the chaos of the past few days. Tomorrow would bring Thanksgiving dinner with the extended family, more training for the kids, and all the complications of blending our lives with the new reality of two active Ranger teams.

But for now, this connection with Kat, this shared understanding of what it meant to lose someone we loved to the dangers that came with the Ranger life, was exactly what we both needed.

The next day was Thanksgiving, and it promised to be chaotic. Zachary and Kelly were hosting, with Mom lending her culinary expertise as always. The guest list was extensive: Kat with JJ and Addy, Blake and Tori with Lindsey, our family with Arion in tow, and of course Zachary and Kelly's brood. As if our family gatherings weren't complicated enough, Arion would be

experiencing his first Earth holiday—and neither Mom nor Kelly (nor Kelly's children) knew about Rangers or Saturn royalty.

We arrived at Zachary and Kelly's spacious home to find the usual holiday division of labor already in progress. Mom and Kelly commanded the kitchen with military precision, the rich aromas of roasting turkey and fresh-baked bread filling the air. Zachary and Blake were settled in the living room, eyes glued to a motocross event playing on the massive television. Through the sliding glass doors, I could see Tori supervising the younger kids in the backyard—Lindsey alongside Zachary's children Dekker (12) and Lachlyn (10). Zachary's adult children, Michael (21) and Ava (19), hadn't arrived yet, but I expected them to appear soon.

"Hey! Happy Thanksgiving," I called out, making my rounds through the house. Hunter followed with Tomi on his hip, while Arissa guided Arion through the unfamiliar family dynamics with careful introductions. Harley immediately gravitated toward the kitchen, likely hoping to snag an early taste of whatever was baking.

After completing the obligatory greetings—hugs from Mom, a warm welcome from Kelly, fist bumps from the guys—the kids escaped to the backyard to join their cousins. Hunter and I settled into the living room, where Blake and Zachary were debating the merits of a particularly daring jump by one of the racers.

I plopped down on the sofa next to my brother and nudged him playfully. "Still pretending you're a pro racer?"

Zachary nudged me back, his expression mock-offended. "I race."

"You race amateur. Always have," I teased, unable to resist the familiar sibling dynamic. "You're an actor with a hobby, big brother."

The gentle ribbing was an annual tradition. Zachary had been riding motocross since he was ten, but unlike Blake and Hunter, he'd never turned professional. His passion for racing remained firmly in hobby territory while his acting career took center stage. Yet every year, he insisted he could beat the Bradley brothers in a race, and every year, both former pro champions proved him wrong.

"This year is different," Zachary insisted, his eyes never leaving the screen as a rider executed a perfect whip. "I've been training."

Hunter chuckled from his position in the armchair, Tomi now contentedly settled on his lap. "You say that every year, Zack."

"And every year, you eat our dust," Blake added with the particular satisfaction of someone who had spent years proving the same point. "But hey, tradition is tradition."

Zachary's competitive streak was legendary—a family trait he'd passed down to me. "We'll see," he said cryptically, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I might have a few new tricks."

"Speaking of new," Blake said, his attention shifting to the backyard where Arion was being introduced to American football by an enthusiastic JJ, "how's the boyfriend adjustment going?"

Hunter's expression tightened slightly, though he'd made remarkable progress in accepting Arissa's relationship over the past few days. "He's... fine," he admitted reluctantly. "Respectful. Good with the training exercises."

"High praise from Hunter Bradley," I teased, knowing how difficult it was for him to acknowledge any positive qualities in the boy dating his daughter.

"Don't push it," Hunter warned, though there was no real heat behind his words. "I'm still getting used to the idea of our thirteen-year-old having a boyfriend from another planet."

Blake laughed, clapping his brother on the shoulder. "Just wait until Lindsey starts dating. I might need to borrow your intimidation techniques."

"I've got plenty to share," Hunter assured him with a grim smile that made both Blake and Zachary laugh.

The sliding door opened as Tori stepped in from the backyard, bringing with her the sounds of children's laughter and the crisp November air. "The kids are asking when we're eating," she announced, crossing to perch on the arm of Blake's chair. "Apparently, football works up an appetite."

"Mom says thirty minutes," I replied, having received the kitchen update during my initial rounds. "Turkey's resting, sides are almost done, and I think Kat just arrived with the pies."

As if on cue, the front door opened, and Kat's voice called a greeting from the entryway. JJ and Addy must have already been outside with the other kids, as she appeared alone, carrying two bakery boxes that undoubtedly contained her famous pecan and pumpkin pies.

"Perfect timing," Kelly called from the kitchen. "We're just setting up the buffet."

The familiar controlled chaos of a family Thanksgiving began to unfold—Mom directing traffic in the kitchen, Kelly arranging the dining room, Kat joining the food preparation while the men were dispatched to collect children and set up additional seating. The house filled with the overlapping conversations and laughter that defined our gatherings, a cacophony of family noise that somehow never felt overwhelming.

I found myself in the kitchen, automatically falling into the rhythm of helping Mom and Kelly with last-minute preparations. Mom was stirring gravy with focused precision while Kelly arranged a massive turkey on a platter, her movements practiced and efficient.

"So," Mom said casually—too casually—as she handed me a bowl of cranberry sauce to transfer to a serving dish, "Arisa's friend seems nice."

The deliberate vagueness of "friend" wasn't lost on me. Mom knew Arion was more than that, but she was fishing for details in her typically subtle way.

"He is," I agreed, keeping my tone equally light. "They met when we visited Thousand Oaks last year. He's been a good influence on her—very studious, respectful."

"Ukrainian, you said?" Kelly asked, looking up from her turkey arrangement. "That must be difficult with everything happening there."

I nodded, the cover story flowing easily after days of practice. "His family relocated before the worst of it, thankfully. They're settled in California now, though his father travels back frequently for work."

The half-truths came naturally after years of protecting our Ranger identities. It wasn't that I wanted to lie to my mother or Kelly, but the complexity of explaining Saturn, interplanetary royalty, and Ranger powers was far beyond what this holiday gathering could accommodate.

"Well, he seems like a lovely young man," Mom said, her approval evident. "Though I'm surprised Hunter is taking it so well."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Trust me, it's been a process. But he's coming around."

Kelly smiled knowingly as she finished with the turkey. "Fathers and daughters. Zachary is already dreading when Lachlyn starts showing interest in boys."

"As he should," I replied with a grin.

The kitchen door swung open as Harley appeared, her expression hopeful. "Can I help?" she asked, though her eyes were fixed on the freshly baked rolls cooling on the counter.

"You can take these to the table," Kelly said, handing her a basket of rolls with a knowing look. "And yes, you can have one on the way."

Harley's face lit up with delight as she accepted the basket, immediately selecting a roll for herself before heading toward the dining room. Some traditions transcended generations—stealing warm bread before dinner had been my own favorite Thanksgiving activity at her age.

Through the window, I could see Hunter organizing the kids into teams for what appeared to be a pre-dinner game of touch football. Arion looked slightly confused by the rules but was gamely following JJ's instructions, while Arissa watched with obvious pride. Tomi had been passed to Blake, who was bouncing her on his knee while explaining something to Lindsey with animated gestures.

The sight of our blended family—biological and chosen, Earth and Saturnian, Ranger and civilian—filled me with a warmth that had nothing to do with the overheated kitchen. For all the complications and secrets, for all the grief and challenges we'd faced, there was something beautiful about this moment, this gathering of people who loved each other despite their differences.

"Michelle," Mom's voice broke through my thoughts, "can you call everyone in? We're ready."

I nodded, moving toward the back door to summon the football players. As I stepped outside, I was struck by the tableau before me—Hunter demonstrating a proper throwing technique to Arion, Addy and JJ engaged in good-natured sibling rivalry over team selection, Lindsey and Harley arguing strategy with the intensity of professional coaches.

"Dinner's ready!" I called, my voice carrying across the yard.

The response was immediate—a chorus of excited exclamations as the game was abandoned in favor of food. The kids raced past me toward the house, Hunter bringing up the rear with an amused expression.

"Successful coaching session?" I asked as he reached me, slipping my arm through his.

"He's a quick learner," Hunter admitted, his eyes following Arion as the young Saturnian held the door open for Arissa. "Though I'm pretty sure he thinks Earth sports are barbaric compared to whatever they play on Saturn."

"Probably," I agreed with a smile. "But he's trying. For her."

Hunter's expression softened slightly. "Yeah, he is." The reluctant approval in his voice was progress—small but significant.

As we turned to follow the kids inside, I caught sight of Kat standing in the doorway, watching JJ and Addy with a mixture of pride and melancholy that I recognized all too well. The empty space beside her—where Tommy should have been—seemed almost tangible in that moment.

I squeezed Hunter's arm gently before releasing him. "I'll be right in."

He nodded, understanding in his eyes as he continued toward the house while I approached Kat.

"You okay?" I asked softly, coming to stand beside her.

She offered a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Just having a moment. Watching them play, seeing JJ take charge like that... it's so much like Tommy."

I nodded, feeling the familiar ache of my brother's absence. "I know. I was thinking the same thing."



"It gets easier," Kat said after a moment, her voice steady. "Most days. But then there are moments like this when it feels as fresh as it did three years ago."

I slipped my arm around her shoulders, offering silent support as we watched our families file into the dining room. "He'd love this, you know. All of us together, the kids becoming Rangers, carrying on the legacy."

"He would," she agreed, straightening her shoulders with visible effort. "And he'd be telling us to stop moping and enjoy the turkey."

I laughed, the sound slightly watery but genuine. "Absolutely. Probably with some comment about how food tastes better after saving the world."

Kat's answering laugh held the same bittersweet quality, but there was real warmth in it too.

"Let's not keep everyone waiting," she said, turning toward the dining room where voices were already raised in excited conversation.

As we joined the others, I found myself thinking about the complex tapestry of our lives—the threads of joy and grief, of ordinary family moments and extraordinary Ranger responsibilities, all woven together into something stronger than its individual strands.

Around the expansive dining table, I studied each face in our gathered family. My mom, her eyes bright with the joy of having her children and grandchildren together. Zachary, his usual exuberance tempered with the quiet dignity that fatherhood had gradually instilled in him. Kelly, whose patient strength had been our family's anchor through countless storms. Their children created a vibrant presence—Michael and Ava, now adults with their own emerging lives, alongside the younger Dekker and Lachlyn, whose excitement for the holiday was infectious.

Kat sat with quiet grace, her Australian accent warming her words as she helped serve her children. JJ maintained his father's composure, the responsibility of being the White Ranger already evident in how he carried himself, while Addy's more reserved nature seemed to have softened slightly since receiving her powers. Blake and Tori completed the circle with Lindsey between them, their family unit a testament to the enduring bonds that had formed during our Ranger days.

My gaze shifted to my own family—Hunter, whose steadfast love had given me a foundation when everything else seemed uncertain; Arissa, poised between childhood and adolescence with remarkable grace; Harley, fierce and determined even at thirteen; and little Tomi, blissfully unaware of the complexities surrounding her as she babbled happily in her high chair. Even Arion, nervous but earnest in his desire to fit into this unfamiliar Earth tradition, had become part of our extended circle.

I was profoundly grateful for each of them, even as I acknowledged the empty space that would always exist where Tommy should have been. His absence was a constant reminder that our family story contained chapters of both profound joy and devastating loss.

As everyone settled into their seats, Arissa leaned close to Arion, her voice pitched low but still audible to those nearby. "So this is turkey," she explained, indicating the centerpiece of our feast. "It's traditional for Thanksgiving. And these are mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole..."

She continued her methodical explanation of each dish, her diplomatic training evident in the way she provided context without making Arion feel self-conscious about his unfamiliarity. The Ukrainian cover story worked perfectly in this situation—Thanksgiving was uniquely American, making it entirely plausible that Arion would need guidance through the culinary traditions.

"We eat all of this together?" Arion asked, his accent carefully maintained as he eyed the overflowing plate Arissa was helping him assemble.

"Yes, but you don't have to try everything if you don't want to," she assured him. "Some flavors might be new to you."

"In Ukraine, we have many holiday feasts also," he added, seamlessly incorporating details from his cover story. "But nothing quite like this."

I caught Hunter's eye across the table, sharing a moment of silent appreciation for how well Arion was handling the situation. His careful navigation of Earth customs while maintaining his cover identity showed a maturity beyond his years—a quality that even Hunter had grudgingly come to respect.

"Before we eat," Mom announced, bringing the scattered conversations to a halt, "I think we should take a moment to share what we're thankful for. It's been a tradition in our family since Michelle and Zachary were children."

The familiar ritual prompted a mixture of groans and smiles around the table—the teenagers predictably less enthusiastic than the adults about public declarations of gratitude. Dekker rolled his eyes in classic pre-teen fashion, while Lachlyn bounced excitedly in her seat, clearly eager for her turn. JJ maintained a respectful silence, though I caught the brief flash of pain in his eyes at another family tradition without his father.

"I'll start," Mom offered, her hands folded in front of her plate. "I'm thankful for having my family together, for the health and happiness of my children and grandchildren, and for another year of precious memories."

The sentiment was simple but heartfelt, setting the tone as we proceeded around the table. Each person shared something—from Zachary's gratitude for his thriving career and family, to Kelly's appreciation for the new acting opportunity she'd recently been offered. Michael spoke of his gratitude for his first real job after college, while Ava mentioned being thankful for her roommates at university. Dekker, after some prompting from Kelly, mumbled something about being grateful for his new gaming system, which earned him a gentle nudge from his father.

When it came to Kat, she paused, emotion briefly overwhelming her before she gathered herself. "I'm thankful for new beginnings," she said finally, her gaze resting briefly on JJ and Addy. "For the strength to move forward while honoring the past, and for the support of friends who have become family."

JJ's contribution was surprisingly thoughtful. "I'm thankful for opportunities to make a difference," he said, the double meaning clear to those who knew about his new Ranger status. Addy, quieter but equally sincere, expressed gratitude for "finding my place," a sentiment that resonated with her recent transformation into the Purple Ranger.

Blake's thankfulness for Lindsey's academic achievements was met with an embarrassed but pleased smile from his daughter, who then expressed her own gratitude for "awesome cousins who always make holidays fun"—a sentiment that made Harley beam from across the table.

When my turn came, I found myself unexpectedly emotional. "I'm thankful for second chances," I said, reaching for Hunter's hand across the table. "For the family we've built together, for the legacy we're passing on to our children, and for the wisdom to appreciate what truly matters."

Hunter's fingers tightened around mine, his understanding of the layers in my gratitude evident in his eyes. Our journey together had never been straightforward—from our tumultuous beginnings to the complications of blending our lives across planets and Ranger teams—but the family we'd created was worth every challenge we'd faced.

"I'm thankful for the strength I see in each of you," Hunter added when his turn came, his gaze moving deliberately around the table. "For the courage to face whatever comes next, together."

The simple words carried deeper meaning for those of us who understood the reference to our children's new Ranger responsibilities. It was Hunter's way of acknowledging the pride and fear we shared as parents watching the next generation take up the mantle of planetary protection.

When we reached Arion, he looked momentarily panicked before composing himself. "I am thankful for your welcome," he said carefully, his accent consistent but his sincerity unmistakable. "In my country, family is everything. Being included in yours is... very special to me."

Arisa beamed beside him, her hand finding his under the table in a gesture of support that didn't escape my notice—or Hunter's, judging by his slight frown.

As the ritual concluded with Lachlyn's enthusiastic thanks for "the best family ever and also pie," Zachary raised his glass in a toast. "To family—those present and those we carry in our hearts. May we never take for granted the time we have together."

"To family," we echoed, glasses raised in unified acknowledgment of the bonds that held us together through joy and sorrow, through ordinary holidays and extraordinary challenges.

As the meal began in earnest, conversation flowed naturally around the table—stories and laughter, gentle teasing and genuine interest. I watched as Arion cautiously sampled each dish, his expression shifting from uncertainty to delight as he discovered favorites.

"The sweet potatoes with the small marshmallows," he declared after careful consideration, "these are exceptional."

"Mom's secret recipe," I confirmed with a smile. "She's been making them the same way since we were kids."

"Not so secret," Mom corrected with a laugh. "Just canned sweet potatoes, brown sugar, and marshmallows. But sometimes the simplest recipes are the best."

"On Sat—in Ukraine," Arion caught himself quickly, "we have nothing like this combination of sweet and... what is the word?"

"Savory," Arissa supplied smoothly, covering his near-slip with practiced ease. "The contrast between sweet and savory flavors is very American."

I held my breath for a moment, but the conversation continued without pause, the almost-revelation passing unnoticed amid the general dining chatter. Hunter's eyes met mine briefly, a shared moment of relief at the crisis averted.

As the meal progressed, I found myself drawn into conversation with Kat about her dance studio in Angel Grove. "The children are wonderful," she was saying, her expression animated in a way I hadn't seen since before Tommy's death. "There's this little girl, barely five, who reminds me so much of myself at that age—absolutely determined to master every move, no matter how many times she falls."

"You should see Tomi," I replied, nodding toward my youngest, who was happily smashing sweet potatoes with focused intensity. "Hunter's been teaching her basic stances, and she won't stop until she gets them exactly right. Stubborn as her father."

"I heard that," Hunter called from further down the table, where he was engaged in what appeared to be a spirited debate with Blake and Zachary about motocross technique.

"You were meant to," I shot back with a grin, the familiar banter drawing laughs from those nearby.

The easy flow of conversation, the overlapping threads of family stories and shared memories—it was exactly what Thanksgiving should be, a celebration of connection that transcended the everyday challenges we faced.

As plates emptied and conversation mellowed into the comfortable lull that follows a satisfying meal, I caught sight of JJ and Addy exchanging glances across the table—the silent communication of siblings who shared a secret. Their new Ranger identities had given them something that belonged uniquely to them, a connection to their father's legacy that no one could take away.

In that moment, despite the complications and the secrets, despite the grief that would always accompany our holidays, I felt a profound sense of rightness. This was family in all its messy, complicated glory—imperfect but resilient, forever changed by loss but still capable of growth and joy.

And for today, that was enough.

Hunter

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The day after Thanksgiving, I found myself driving Harley to meet Rocky for lunch. Every protective instinct in me opposed this meeting. Rocky had hurt my daughter repeatedly, pulling away when she needed him most, making her feel secondary to his new family. But Harley had insisted on this final conversation—a chance for closure—and there was no way I would let her face it alone.

Apparently, Blake shared my concerns. My brother had firmly inserted himself into our plans, claiming he wanted to "keep the peace," though his real motivation was transparent. He didn't trust me to maintain my composure with Rocky—a fair assessment, considering our history.

We dropped the rest of our family at Zack's place and collected Blake. Michelle was joining Kelly, Tori, and Kat for their annual post-Thanksgiving Christmas shopping expedition, while the older kids headed to the park. Tomi would stay with Lea.

"You sure about this?" I asked Harley as we drove toward the restaurant, studying her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her expression was resolute, though I could detect the tension in her shoulders—the same way Michelle carried stress.

"I'm sure," she replied, her voice steadier than I'd expected. "I need to say what I need to say, and then I'm done."

Blake shot me a warning glance from the passenger seat, his message clear: *Stay calm. This is about Harley, not your issues with Rocky.*

I nodded slightly, acknowledging his unspoken advice. This wasn't about my feelings toward Rocky—my lingering anger over how he'd treated Michelle when the truth about Harley's paternity emerged. This was about supporting Harley through what she needed to do.

When we arrived at the restaurant, Rocky was already there, seated at a booth near the back. His expression brightened momentarily when he spotted Harley, then faltered slightly when he registered Blake and me following behind her.

"It's good to see you, Har," Rocky said, standing to offer her a hug as we approached the table.

Harley sidestepped the embrace, sliding directly into the booth. "You wanted to see me? I'm here." Her tone was cool, controlled—a defense mechanism I recognized all too well.

The four of us settled around the table, an awkward silence descending until Rocky cleared his throat.

"Yeah, I did," he began, leaning forward with earnest intensity. "Harley, you're my daughter. I love you. I hate this distance between us. I want us to get back to where we were."

I felt my jaw tighten at his presumption, but kept silent, focusing on maintaining a neutral expression. This was Harley's conversation to lead.

She stared at Rocky as if he'd suddenly sprouted a second head. "Are you even serious right now? I am not your daughter. You made that clear when you put Tamara and Aisha before me."

The hurt beneath her words was palpable, raw despite her efforts to sound detached. I resisted the urge to place my hand on her shoulder, knowing she needed to handle this herself.

"That isn't fair, Harley," Rocky countered, his expression pained. "I love Aisha. Was I supposed to stay single after your mom and I divorced?"

"No, of course not," Harley replied, her voice rising slightly with frustration. "But you also didn't have to forget you had a family before her."

I watched her carefully, proud of how articulately she was expressing feelings that many adults would struggle to verbalize. My daughter had always been perceptive, but the maturity with which she was handling this difficult conversation impressed me.

"I didn't," Rocky insisted. "I never forgot about you, Harley. If this is about the adoption, I've told you before, Aisha gave me permission to adopt Tam. She didn't have any father in the picture. I knew Hunter would never sign away his rights to me, so I couldn't adopt you."

The explanation sounded rehearsed, as if he'd repeated it to himself many times. Perhaps he had—a justification that allowed him to avoid confronting the real issue.

"You never even asked," Harley countered, cutting straight to the heart of the matter. Her voice carried the particular pain of a child who had felt replaced, discarded.

Rocky turned to me, a challenge in his eyes. "Hunter, would you have let me adopt her?"

"Not a snowball's chance in hell," I replied without hesitation, my voice deliberately low and controlled despite the anger simmering beneath the surface.

"See," Rocky said, gesturing toward me as if I'd just proven his point.

Blake shifted beside me, a subtle reminder of his presence—and his role as potential peacekeeper if things escalated. But I maintained my composure, focusing on Harley's needs rather than my own impulse to confront Rocky more directly.

"That's not the point," Harley said, frustration evident in her voice. "The point is that you never tried. You never even talked to me about it. You just went ahead and adopted Tam, making it clear that she was your real daughter and I was... what? Some leftover from your marriage to Mom?"

The raw hurt in her question made my chest tighten. I'd known Harley was struggling with Rocky's choices, but hearing her articulate it so clearly—the feeling of being replaced, of being considered less important—sparked a protective fury that I carefully contained.

Rocky's expression shifted from defensive to genuinely pained. "Harley, that's not how it was. I never thought of you that way. You were my daughter for eight years before I knew the truth. Those feelings don't just disappear."

"But they changed," she insisted, leaning forward. "Everything changed when you found out Hunter was my biological father. You started pulling away. You stopped coming to my tournaments, you missed my birthday for Tam's recital, you—"

"That's not fair," Rocky interrupted. "I was trying to balance two families. I couldn't be everywhere at once."

"You managed to be at all of Tam's events," Harley shot back, her voice steady despite the emotion behind her words. "And when you did show up for mine, it felt like an obligation, not because you wanted to be there."

I watched the exchange with a mixture of pride in Harley's articulate confidence and pain at hearing how deeply Rocky's actions had hurt her. Part of me wanted to step in, to shield her from having to fight this battle, but I knew this confrontation was necessary for her healing process.

"I'm sorry if it felt that way," Rocky said, his tone softening. "That was never my intention. I was trying to figure out my place in your life when Hunter came into the picture. It wasn't easy, Harley. I raised you, loved you as my own, and then suddenly had to share you with your biological father."

"Share me?" Harley repeated, incredulity sharpening her voice. "Is that what you think happened? Mom and Hunter never tried to keep me from you. They encouraged me to maintain our relationship. You're the one who pulled away."

"I didn't pull away, Harley. I always loved you," Rocky insisted, leaning forward with an earnestness that seemed rehearsed rather than genuine.

"Even if I believed that, and I don't," Harley countered, her voice gaining strength, "I know now what you tried to do when you found out about my paternity. You told my dad to take me and keep me away from my mom. You never wanted me to see her again. My mom!" Her voice cracked slightly. "Who does that to a kid?!"

The raw pain in her question made my chest tighten. Michelle had eventually told Harley about Rocky's initial reaction to the paternity revelation—his demand that I take sole custody and keep

Michelle away from her daughter. It had been a devastating betrayal for Harley to learn, shattering what remained of her relationship with Rocky.

"I was angry, and your mom has never been the most... stable," Rocky started, his tone defensive.

That was where I drew the line. I could sit silently through many things for Harley's sake, but I would not allow Rocky to disparage Michelle. "Wait a damn minute," I interrupted, my voice dangerously low. "Mich is an incredible mother, an amazing wife, and a wonderful person."

Rocky's eyes narrowed as he turned to face me directly. "Look at what she's done to Harley! She has no privacy, the media is on her all the time, and she has a crush on a man twice her age—Jon's son, no less!"

I felt Blake tense beside me, preparing to intervene if necessary, but it was Harley who responded first, her eyes narrowing with a cold fury that reminded me strikingly of Michelle.

"You cunt!" she spat, the word hanging in the air between them.

Rocky's eyes widened in shock, clearly unprepared for such language from the girl he'd helped raise.

I fought back a chuckle. While the 'C-word' was extremely taboo in America, in Ireland it was thrown around casually in certain contexts. Clearly, Harley had been adapting to her Irish school friends' vocabulary—another sign of how much had changed since Rocky had been part of her daily life.

"Harlyn Nicole!" Rocky exclaimed, his tone scandalized.

"What?" Harley challenged, unrepentant. "You don't know who I am anymore. What has Mom done to me, exactly? Supported me in my career ambition? Let me use her studio for demos? Take me on tour? Get me a manager?" Her voice rose with each question, years of bottled frustration finally finding release.

"And she has nothing to do with Jake," she continued, addressing his accusation directly. "I fell for him, sorry not sorry. I don't mind the media attention. It comes with my music being successful." She took a deep breath, her voice steadying. "Mom isn't perfect, but she loves me. She is a good mom... and for you to try to have me taken away from her because of a mistake she made when she was trying to do what she thought was best for me? That is gross."

I felt a surge of pride watching Harley defend her mother so fiercely. Her loyalty and clear-sighted assessment of the situation showed a maturity beyond her years.

Blake placed a steadying hand on my shoulder, silently reminding me to let Harley handle this. She didn't need my intervention; she was holding her own with remarkable composure.

Rocky's expression shifted from shock to a more calculated calm. "I can see Michelle has influenced your perspective significantly," he said, his tone suggesting this was somehow a negative

development. "But you need to understand that I was trying to protect you. Your mother was unstable, jumping from relationship to relationship, keeping secrets—"

"Don't," Harley cut him off, her voice sharp. "Don't pretend you were trying to protect me. You were trying to hurt Mom because she hurt you. You were using me as a weapon."

The brutal accuracy of her assessment seemed to land like a physical blow. Rocky flinched, his rehearsed justifications momentarily abandoned.

"That's not—" he began, then stopped, reconsidering his approach. "I made mistakes, Harley. I was hurt and angry when I found out Hunter was your biological father. I said things I shouldn't have, made demands that weren't fair to you."

"Or to Mom," Harley added pointedly.

"Or to your mother," Rocky conceded reluctantly. "But that doesn't erase the eight years I spent raising you, loving you as my daughter. Those years were real, Harley. My love for you was—is—real."

I watched Harley carefully, recognizing the conflict in her expression. Despite everything, part of her still cared for the man who had been her father figure during her early childhood. That bond, complicated as it had become, couldn't simply be erased.

"Maybe your love was real," she said finally, her voice quieter but no less resolute. "But love isn't just a feeling, Rocky. It's what you do. And what you did was choose Aisha and Tamara over me, again and again. What you did was try to take me away from my mother. What you're doing right now is trying to blame her for things that aren't her fault."

Rocky seemed momentarily at a loss for words, perhaps genuinely confronting the consequences of his actions for the first time. "I never meant to make you feel secondary, Harley," he said finally. "I was trying to build a new life while holding onto what mattered from my old one. I didn't handle it well, and I'm sorry for that."

The apology sounded sincere, but it addressed only part of the issue. I noticed he didn't apologize for his attempts to separate Harley from Michelle, or for his comments about Michelle's stability as a parent.

"I appreciate the apology," Harley said, her tone measured. "But it doesn't change where we are now. You wanted this lunch to try to go back to how things were, but that's not possible. Too much has happened."

"So that's it?" Rocky asked, a note of desperation entering his voice. "You're just cutting me out of your life completely?"

Harley considered this for a moment, her expression thoughtful. Then something hardened in her eyes—a decision crystallizing with finality.

"Yeah, I am," she said, her voice suddenly steady and cold. "I've been telling you to leave me alone for over a year. You can't even respect my wishes! I only came to this lunch to tell you in person that if you don't leave me alone, I will get a restraining order."

The bluntness of her statement seemed to physically rock Rocky back in his seat. His expression shifted from hopeful to desperate in an instant.

"Harley, please," he begged, reaching toward her across the table.

She pulled back, avoiding his touch. "No, this isn't a negotiation. I'm not sure how restraining orders work across countries, but I will figure it out." Her voice didn't waver. "I'm serious, stay away from me. You said if I heard you out, you'd leave me alone. Maybe keep one of your promises?"

The challenge hung in the air between them—sharp, pointed, impossible to deflect. I felt a complex mixture of emotions watching my daughter stand her ground so firmly. Pride in her strength, sadness that it had come to this, and beneath it all, a simmering anger at Rocky for pushing her to this point.

"Harley..." Rocky started again, his tone shifting toward the authoritative voice he'd used when she was younger—a tactical error that was immediately apparent in the way Harley's expression closed off completely.

She turned to me, deliberately cutting off whatever Rocky had been about to say. "Dad, can we go? I want to get food somewhere else."

I nodded immediately, understanding her need to escape this situation. Blake was already sliding out of the booth, his movements casual but his eyes alert—ready to intervene if Rocky tried to prevent our departure.

Harley stood and walked toward the exit without a backward glance, her shoulders straight despite the emotional weight I knew she must be carrying. Blake followed close behind her, placing himself protectively between her and Rocky as they made their way through the restaurant.

I lingered for just a moment, leaning slightly toward Rocky and speaking just loud enough for him to hear. "If you go anywhere near her again, a restraining order will be the least of your concerns." My voice carried the quiet certainty of someone who had faced far more dangerous adversaries than an ex-husband. "You know what I'm capable of."

The threat wasn't empty. While I'd never use my Ranger abilities for personal vendettas, Rocky knew exactly how formidable I could be even without them. Years of Thunder ninja training had made me dangerous long before I ever touched a morpher.

Rocky's expression flickered between outrage and genuine fear—a recognition that this wasn't just the protective posturing of a father, but a promise from someone with the skills to enforce it.

I didn't wait for his response. Turning on my heel, I followed Blake and Harley out of the restaurant, the tension in my shoulders gradually easing as I put distance between myself and the man who had caused my daughter so much pain.

Outside, Harley was already climbing into the back seat of our Jeep, her movements quick and deliberate. Blake stood by the passenger door, his expression questioning as I approached.

"Everything okay?" he asked quietly, his tone making it clear he was asking about more than just the final exchange with Rocky.

"It will be," I replied, glancing toward Harley through the car window. She sat with her head bowed, fingers rapidly typing on her phone—probably texting Michelle about what had happened. "She made her choice. Now we support her through it."

Blake nodded, his hand briefly squeezing my shoulder before he slid into the passenger seat. As I took my place behind the wheel, I caught Harley's eye in the rearview mirror.

"You okay, Har?" I asked, keeping my tone gentle but matter-of-fact. She wouldn't want excessive sympathy right now—just steady support.

"Yeah," she replied, her voice stronger than I'd expected. "I'm actually hungry now. Can we get burgers?"

The simple request—so normal, so teenage—felt like a lifeline back to ordinary family dynamics after the emotional intensity of the confrontation with Rocky. "Absolutely," I agreed, starting the car. "I think we all deserve a good burger after that."

"And maybe milkshakes?" Blake suggested, his tone deliberately light. "I feel like this is definitely a milkshake-worthy situation."

A small smile tugged at Harley's lips—not her usual full grin, but a start. "Definitely milkshakes," she agreed.

As we pulled away from the restaurant, I felt a complex mixture of emotions. Relief that the confrontation was over, pride in Harley's strength, lingering anger at Rocky, and beneath it all, a deep sadness that it had come to this. No child should have to cut ties with someone who had been a parent to them, regardless of the circumstances.

But Harley had made her decision, and it was clear from her demeanor that it had been the right one for her. The weight of Rocky's expectations, his inconsistent presence, his inability to truly accept her new family—all of it had become too heavy for her to carry. Setting down that burden had been necessary for her own well-being.

Michelle

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After finishing our shopping expedition with my sisters-in-law, I headed to Billy's place. We hadn't had a chance to talk alone since the Genesis Rangers got their powers, and there were things I needed to discuss with the original Blue Ranger turned mentor.

Billy's home was modern but modest—a testament to his practical nature despite the considerable fortune he'd amassed through Cranston Tech. The clean lines and minimalist aesthetic reflected his methodical mind, though touches of blue throughout the space served as subtle nods to his Ranger heritage.

He greeted me with a warm smile and led me to his sleek kitchen, where he prepared coffee with the same precision he applied to everything. Once settled in his sparsely furnished living room—all ergonomic furniture and cutting-edge technology—I curled my legs beneath me on his surprisingly comfortable sofa and cradled the steaming mug between my hands.

"You still Ranger non grata?" I asked with a laugh, referencing the collective parental outrage that had followed his decision to give morphers to our children.

Billy chuckled, his expression rueful but unapologetic. "I think they're all coming around. Maybe I should have asked them first, but I needed a team and there wasn't time."

"I get where they're coming from," I admitted, taking a sip of the perfectly brewed coffee. "I was livid at Hunter when he gave Harley and Arissa their morphers without talking to me first, but in hindsight, I understand. Sometimes you have to make the call."

The memory of that argument with Hunter still stung slightly—the betrayal I'd felt at such a major decision being made without me, the fear for our daughters' safety, the complex emotions of seeing them follow in our footsteps sooner than I'd wanted. But time and perspective had softened those initial reactions, replacing anger with understanding.

"Exactly," Billy nodded, relief evident in his expression at finding an ally. "And while we've never faced Cobra X directly, we've heard of him. He's not someone to take lightly."

"No, he's not," I agreed, my mind flashing to the reports we'd received from other planetary defense systems about Cobra X's path of destruction. "You really think the kids are ready?"

Billy nodded without hesitation. "I do. Minh has been at this for a few years now. She can help guide them and..." he paused, a self-deprecating smile crossing his face, "well, I guess I'm their Zordon."

I laughed at the comparison, though it was more apt than he probably realized. "Yeah, suppose you are. Somehow that's fitting."

There was a certain poetic symmetry to it—Billy, the analytical genius of our original team, now stepping into the mentor role that Zordon had once filled for us. The torch passing not just to a new generation of Rangers, but to a new generation of guides as well.

Billy's expression grew more serious, his eyes studying me carefully. "I know it took you by surprise to see Addy with the Purple Morpher. Are you okay? You wanted that bloodlock broken. This is what you said you wanted."

The question touched on something I'd been processing since seeing Tommy's daughter morph into the Purple Ranger—a complex mixture of emotions I hadn't fully untangled yet.

"It was what I wanted," I confirmed, tracing the rim of my coffee mug thoughtfully. "I'm happy Master Purple is free and my bloodline isn't bound to the Purple Power anymore. It just was surprising to see someone that wasn't my heir..." I paused, gathering my thoughts. "I'm glad Addy is the first Purple Ranger not bound by my bloodlock, though. At least it's still family."

For generations, the Purple Power had been tied exclusively to my maternal bloodline—a restriction that had felt increasingly like a burden rather than an honor. Breaking that bloodlock had been a deliberate choice, a way to free both the power and my daughters from an obligation neither had asked for. Seeing Addy take up that mantle felt right, a way for Tommy's legacy to continue through his daughter while also honoring our shared family history.

Billy nodded, understanding in his eyes. "I thought it seemed fitting too. I guess there's a new Thunder Ranger team as well, with Lindsey getting her morpher."

"Yeah," I smiled, thinking of Blake's daughter and her fierce determination to join her cousins as a Ranger. "Even if the team is split by an ocean, although Lindsey is already trying to convince her parents to let her go train in Ireland after the Celtic Rangers finish rebuilding their Academy."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Billy said with a knowing smile. Lindsey's tenacity was legendary among our extended family—a trait she'd inherited from both her parents in equal measure.

I took another sip of coffee, letting the warmth spread through me as I considered the new generation of Rangers now taking shape. There was something both terrifying and deeply moving about watching our children step into the roles that had defined our own lives so profoundly.

"How are the kids handling it?" Billy asked, his question gentle but direct. "The transition to Ranger life isn't easy, even with parents who understand."

"Better than I expected, honestly," I admitted, thinking of the training sessions I'd observed over the past few days. "The Thunder Rangers had a head start, of course. Arissa and Harley have been training with their powers for months now, and Lindsey took to hers like she was born for it."

"Blake's daughter was practically destined to be the Navy Thunder Ranger," Billy observed with a smile.

I nodded, remembering the moment Lindsey had first morphed—the way the Navy Thunder energy had enveloped her with such natural affinity, as if welcoming home a long-lost heir. "The Genesis

team is coming along too. JJ has his father's natural leadership, though he's less..." I searched for a diplomatic way to phrase it.

"Less prone to inspirational speeches?" Billy suggested with a knowing smile.

I laughed, grateful for his understanding. "Exactly. Tommy could turn ordering coffee into a motivational moment. JJ's quieter, more strategic, but the others respond to him just as naturally."

"And Addy?" Billy asked.

"She's finding her footing," I said thoughtfully. "The Purple Power seems to have given her a confidence I hadn't seen before. There's something healing in it for her, I think. A connection to Tommy that goes beyond memories."

Billy nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Powers often find us when we need them most. The Purple choosing Addy now, when she's still processing her father's death... it feels like more than coincidence."

"The Power always knows," I agreed, echoing the phrase that had become something of a mantra among veteran Rangers. "I just wish..." I trailed off, the familiar weight of regret settling over me.

"That Tommy could see them?" Billy finished gently.

"Yeah," I admitted, my throat tightening slightly. "He would have been so proud, Billy. His son as the White Ranger, his daughter as the Purple..."

Billy reached across the space between us, his hand briefly squeezing mine in understanding. "He is proud, Michelle. Wherever he is, he knows. And he'd be proud of you too, for supporting them even though it wasn't what you originally wanted for your own kids."

The simple affirmation touched a place in my heart that still ached with the loss of my brother. Tommy and I had wasted so much time competing, trying to prove which of us was the better Ranger, the better leader.

"I hope so," I said quietly. "I hope he knows I'm looking out for his kids, that I'll do everything I can to keep them safe."

"He knows," Billy assured me, his certainty a comfort. "Just like he knows you've been helping Kat navigate this transition. That couldn't have been easy, given your history."

I smiled ruefully, thinking of the complicated path that had led Kat and me to our current friendship. "Ancient history. We both loved Tommy, in different ways. That's what matters now."

Billy nodded, his expression thoughtful. "It's strange, isn't it? How time shifts everything. The rivalries that once seemed so important fade away, and what remains are the connections that truly matter."

"Very philosophical, Billy," I teased gently, though his words resonated with my own reflections. "But yes, you're right. The older I get, the more I realize how precious those connections are—and how easily they can be lost if we don't nurture them."

We fell into a comfortable silence for a moment, each lost in our own thoughts. Billy had been part of my life for so long—from those early days as Rangers to now, with our children carrying forward the legacy we'd helped establish. There was a depth to our friendship that didn't require constant conversation, a shared understanding built on decades of parallel experiences.

"So," I said finally, setting my empty coffee mug on the sleek side table, "what's your assessment of our new teams? Honestly."

Billy considered the question with his characteristic thoroughness. "They have potential—extraordinary potential, actually. The Thunder Rangers have the advantage of established powers and training, but the Genesis team brings fresh perspectives and abilities that complement them well."

"But?" I prompted, hearing the unspoken reservation in his tone.

"But they're young," he acknowledged. "Even younger than we were when we started. And Cobra X isn't like the enemies we faced in the beginning. He's more calculating, more patient. He studies his opponents before striking."

The assessment matched my own observations, both of our children and of the reports we'd received about their new adversary. "They'll need guidance," I said. "Not just in combat techniques, but in strategy, in teamwork."

"They have us," Billy replied simply. "All of us. The most experienced Rangers Earth has ever produced, ready to support them however they need."

There was truth in his words, a reassurance that our children wouldn't face these challenges alone. Unlike our own beginnings as Rangers—thrust into battle with only Zordon and Alpha's guidance—they had an entire community of veterans to draw upon.

"I should get back," I said reluctantly, glancing at the time. "Harley's lunch with Rocky should be over by now, and I want to check in with her."

Billy's expression shifted to concern. "How do you think that went?"

"Honestly? Probably not well," I admitted, rising from the sofa. "Rocky still can't accept that Harley has chosen her path, and it doesn't include him in the way he wants. Hunter and Blake went with her for support, but..."

"But it's still going to be difficult," Billy finished, understanding in his eyes. "Give her my best. And if any of you need anything—"

"I know where to find you," I assured him with a warm smile. "Thanks for the coffee. And the perspective."

As Billy walked me to the door, I found myself grateful for this moment of quiet reflection amid the chaos of our Thanksgiving visit. Between family dynamics, new Ranger teams, and the lingering shadow of Tommy's absence, there had been precious little time for processing the rapid changes unfolding around us.

With a final wave, I headed toward my car.

I hadn't even managed to pull out of the driveway when my phone chimed. Glancing at my smartwatch, I saw Rocky's name flash across the screen. He wanted to talk to me at his dojo. Alone.

I sighed, my hand hovering over the ignition. Hunter would be furious if I went to meet Rocky by myself, especially after whatever had transpired at lunch with Harley. But sometimes it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Something about the terseness of Rocky's message suggested this wasn't a conversation I should avoid, regardless of how unpleasant it might be.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled out of Billy's driveway and headed for the Blue Dragon.

Rocky's dojo stood in downtown Angel Grove. A "Closed for Holiday" sign hung on the door, and the training floor was eerily empty as I pushed my way inside. The familiar scent—a mixture of sweat, cleaning products, and incense—brought back memories I'd rather have left buried.

Rocky was waiting in the center of the training floor, his posture rigid with barely contained fury. The moment the door closed behind me, he turned, his eyes dark with an anger I recognized all too well.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?" he spat, not bothering with any greeting. "You and that husband of yours, turning my daughter against me."

I kept my distance, instinctively assessing the space around me—old habits from years of Ranger training. "Hello to you too, Rocky," I replied, my voice deliberately calm. "I take it lunch didn't go well."

"Don't play innocent," he snarled, taking a step toward me. "Harley threatened a restraining order. A restraining order! What the hell have you been telling her?"

"Nothing that isn't true," I replied, standing my ground despite the tension crackling in the air between us. "Hunter and I have always encouraged her relationship with you. You're the one who pulled away when you found out Hunter was her biological father."

Rocky's laugh was harsh, bitter. "Right. Saint Michelle, always the victim, never the villain. You lied to me for years, Michelle. Years! Let me raise a child that wasn't mine, and now you act surprised that there are consequences?"

"I've never denied my responsibility in that," I countered, keeping my voice steady despite the familiar guilt his words stirred. "I made a terrible mistake. I've apologized for it, repeatedly. But don't



pretend your actions since then have been about Harley's wellbeing. You've been trying to punish me through her since the moment you found out the truth."

"Punish you?" His voice rose, echoing in the empty dojo. "I was trying to protect her from you! From your instability, your selfishness, your pathological need for attention and drama!"

The accusations stung, hitting old insecurities that I'd spent years working through. "That's not true and you know it," I replied, feeling my own anger beginning to rise. "I've been a good mother to Harley. I've supported her, loved her, put her needs first—"

"By dragging her into your celebrity lifestyle? By exposing her to the media circus that follows you everywhere? By letting her develop a crush on a man twice her age?" Each question was delivered like a physical blow, his voice growing louder with each accusation.

"None of that has anything to do with why Harley wants distance from you," I shot back, refusing to be derailed by his attempts to shift blame. "She's hurt because you prioritized your new family over her. She's angry because you tried to keep her from me when the truth came out. She feels replaced, Rocky. That's on you, not me."

His expression darkened further, a vein pulsing at his temple. "You turned her against me. You and Hunter, filling her head with your version of events, making me the villain in your little family drama."

"We didn't have to," I replied, my patience wearing thin. "Your actions spoke for themselves. Missing her tournaments for Tamara's recitals. Adopting Tamara while never even discussing the possibility with Harley. Pulling away emotionally the moment you found out she wasn't biologically yours."

"That's not—" he started, then stopped, his fists clenching at his sides. "You have no idea what it was like, Michelle. Finding out that the child I'd raised for eight years, loved as my own, wasn't mine. That you'd been lying to me our entire marriage."

"I do know," I countered, holding his gaze. "I know it was devastating. I know it shattered your trust. I know it changed how you saw our entire relationship. But Harley was innocent in all of that, Rocky. She didn't ask for any of it. And she's the one who's suffered the most from your reaction."

"Don't you dare lecture me about Harley's suffering," he snarled, taking another step toward me. "You're the one who created this entire mess with your lies. You're the one who broke our family apart."

"Our marriage was already broken," I reminded him, refusing to back away despite his advancing position. "We both know that. The truth about Harley's paternity was just the final blow to something that was already dying."

His expression twisted with a mixture of pain and rage. "And you wasted no time moving on, did you? Right back to Hunter's bed before our divorce was even final. Was he waiting in the wings the whole time, Michelle? Were you running to him every time we fought?"

The insinuation made my blood boil. "That's not what happened and you know it. Yeah, I cheated with Hunter at the start of our marriage, never again after that."

"But you never stopped loving him, did you?" Rocky pressed, his voice dripping with bitterness.

"Even while you were married to me, even while I was raising his child, he was always there in the back of your mind. The great love you never got over."

There was enough truth in his accusation to sting, but I refused to be baited into a fight about ancient history. "This isn't about Hunter and me. This is about Harley and what she needs right now. And what she needs is for you to respect her boundaries."

"What she needs is for you to stop poisoning her against me!" Rocky shouted, his control finally snapping. "What she needs is for Hunter to stop playing the hero, swooping in to save the day after I did all the hard work of raising her!"

"Hunter has never tried to replace you," I shot back, my own temper flaring. "He's been respectful of your role in her life from the beginning. He's the one who insisted we continue co-parenting with you even after you tried to keep Harley from me!"

Rocky scoffed, the sound ugly with derision. "Right. The great Hunter Bradley, so noble, so perfect. Does he know you're here? Or did you sneak away to meet your ex-husband behind his back?"

The implication made me want to slap him. "I'm here because you asked to talk. Because despite everything, I still believed you might actually care about what's best for Harley. Clearly, I was wrong."

"What's best for Harley is getting her away from your toxic influence," Rocky snapped. "Away from the cameras, the spotlight, the constant drama that follows you everywhere. Away from a mother who lies as easily as she breathes."

The accusation hit its mark. "I've made mistakes," I acknowledged, my voice tight with controlled anger. "But I've spent years working to be better, to be worthy of my daughters' trust. Can you say the same, Rocky? Have you ever once looked at your own behavior and asked if you could do better by Harley?"

His expression darkened further, a dangerous edge entering his voice. "Don't turn this around on me. You're the one who destroyed our family with your lies. You're the one who cheated and got pregnant with another man's child. You're the one who let me believe she was mine for eight years!"

"And I've apologized for that, repeatedly," I countered, refusing to be cowed by his anger. "I can't change the past, Rocky. None of us can. All we can do is try to move forward in a way that doesn't hurt Harley any more than she's already been hurt."

"It's too late for that," he said, his voice suddenly cold, controlled in a way that was more unsettling than his previous shouting. "She's made her choice. She wants nothing to do with me. Threatens legal action if I try to contact her. My own daughter."

"She's not—" I stopped myself, realizing the futility of this argument. "Rocky, she's hurting. She feels abandoned, replaced. If you want any chance of rebuilding a relationship with her, you need to respect her boundaries now. Give her space. Let her come to terms with everything on her own timeline."

"And in the meantime, you and Hunter get to play happy families," he said bitterly. "The perfect little family unit you always wanted. Was that the plan all along, Michelle? Use me to raise your child until Hunter was ready to step up?"

The accusation was so far from reality, so twisted by his pain and anger, that I almost laughed. "There was no plan, Rocky. Life is messy. People make mistakes. Relationships end. New ones begin. None of this was some grand scheme to hurt you."

"But you did hurt me," he said, his voice dropping dangerously. "You and Hunter both. And now you've taken my daughter from me too."

I sighed, exhaustion suddenly weighing on me. This conversation was going nowhere, just circling the same wounded territory we'd been traversing for years. "We didn't take Harley from you. Your own actions pushed her away. And until you can acknowledge that, nothing is going to change."

Rocky's expression hardened, something cold and resolute settling in his eyes. "This isn't over, Michelle. Not by a long shot."

The implied threat sent a chill down my spine, but I refused to show any fear. "Yes, it is," I replied firmly. "Whatever grievances you have with me, with Hunter, keep them between us. Leave Harley out of it. She deserves better than to be used as a weapon in your vendetta against us."

"Like you left her out of it?" he countered. "When you lied about her paternity for eight years? When you destroyed her sense of identity with your selfishness?"

"I made a terrible mistake," I acknowledged, my voice steady despite the familiar guilt his words stirred. "One I'll regret for the rest of my life. But I've spent every day since trying to make amends, trying to be the mother Harley deserves. Can you say the same about your role as her father?"

The question hung in the air between us, unanswered. Rocky's jaw worked silently, rage and pain warring in his expression.

"I'm leaving," I said finally, turning toward the door. "This conversation isn't productive for either of us. If you want to talk about Harley's wellbeing, about finding a way forward that respects her wishes while leaving the door open for eventual reconciliation, I'm willing to have that conversation. But I won't stand here and be your emotional punching bag anymore."

"Run away, like always," Rocky called after me, his voice laced with contempt. "It's what you do best, isn't it? When things get tough, when people hold you accountable, you just disappear."

I paused at the door, turning to face him one last time. "I'm not running, Rocky. I'm choosing not to engage with your anger anymore. It hasn't helped any of us—not you, not me, and certainly not Harley."

"Tell Hunter to watch his back," Rocky said, the words carrying a menace I'd never heard from him before. "This isn't over between us."

The threat, however vague, made my blood run cold. I knew Rocky was unlikely to actually try anything physical against Hunter—my husband's Thunder ninja training made him a formidable opponent even without his Ranger powers—but the hatred in Rocky's voice was disturbing nonetheless.

Something snapped inside me. In an instant, I closed the distance between us, purple lightning crackling around my fingertips as I got directly in his face. The familiar surge of power—purple energy that had been part of me since I was thirteen—responded to my anger, dancing across my skin in warning sparks.

"Do not threaten my family, you bastard," I hissed, my voice dropping to a dangerous register that few people had ever heard. "I know I hurt you. I'm sorry. I did what I thought was best for Harley when I told you she was yours. I was wrong, and I'm sorry I was wrong."

The purple energy intensified around me, reflecting my mounting fury. I could feel my eyes beginning to glow with the same purple light—a sign I was dangerously close to losing control of my power.

"Hunter didn't do any of this," I continued, forcing myself to maintain some semblance of control. "Leave him out of it and respect Harley's boundaries. If you have an issue with me, take it up with me, or you will be the one who has to watch your back."

Rocky took a step backward, genuine alarm flashing across his face. Despite our years together, he'd rarely seen this side of me.

But there was no ignoring it now, with purple energy crackling around us and my eyes glowing with barely contained power. This wasn't just Michelle his ex-wife standing before him—this was the Purple Ranger, the Queen of Saturn, a woman who had faced far more dangerous adversaries than an angry ex-husband.

I took a deep breath, forcing the energy back under control with practiced discipline. The lightning receded, though my eyes likely still held traces of that unnatural glow.

"Goodbye, Rocky," I said quietly as I turned to walk away, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through my system.

As I walked to my car, my hands were shaking slightly—with anger, with residual adrenaline, with the emotional toll of confronting years of accumulated resentment and pain. I leaned against the driver's side door for a moment, taking deep breaths to center myself before driving.

Hunter would be furious when he found out I'd met with Rocky alone. He'd worry, he'd lecture, he'd point out all the ways the situation could have escalated. And he wouldn't be wrong—the meeting had been riskier than I'd anticipated, Rocky's anger more volatile than I'd remembered.

But beneath the inevitable conflict with Hunter lay a deeper concern: Rocky's parting threat. I didn't believe he would physically harm Hunter, but his anger had clearly festered into something dangerous, something unpredictable. And unpredictability, in my experience, rarely led anywhere good.

As I started the car, I resolved to be completely transparent with Hunter about the encounter—about Rocky's accusations, his anger, and especially his threat. We would need to be vigilant, not just for our own sake but for Harley's. The last thing she needed was to be caught in the crossfire of more adult conflict.

The drive back to Zachary's house gave me time to compose myself, to process the confrontation and prepare for the conversation ahead. By the time I pulled into the driveway, I had regained my equilibrium, my resolve strengthened by the clarity that often followed emotional storms.

I killed the engine and went inside. Zachary, Blake, and Hunter were in the living room drinking beers. The TV had motocross on, but the sound was muted. Their relaxed postures suggested they were enjoying a rare moment of quiet amid the holiday chaos—a moment I was about to disrupt.

"Babe, we need to talk. Now," I said, appearing in the doorway.

Hunter froze and looked at me, his expression immediately shifting from casual relaxation to alert concern. He knew something had happened—could probably read it in my posture, in the lingering tension around my eyes, in the subtle residual energy that always clung to me after I'd nearly lost control of my powers.

Without a word, he set his beer down and followed me outside to the backyard. The evening air had cooled considerably, carrying the particular crispness of California autumn—so different from the damp chill of Irish November we'd grown accustomed to.

Once we were safely out of earshot from the house, Hunter turned to me, his expression a careful mask that didn't quite hide his concern. "What happened?" he asked, his voice low and controlled.

"Rocky asked to see me," I said, deciding direct honesty was the only approach worth taking.

Hunter's expression immediately darkened, his jaw tightening. "And you went? Of course you did. Mich..."

"Don't," I cut him off, unwilling to navigate a lecture about my decision. "I knew you wouldn't like it, but I needed to hear him out."

He took a deep breath, visibly reining in his initial reaction. Years of marriage had taught us both when to push and when to pivot. "What happened?" he asked instead, focusing on the more immediate concern.

"We argued," I explained, crossing my arms against the evening chill—or perhaps against the lingering tension from the confrontation. "He yelled at me again and told me how awful I am and how we turned Harley against him and all that same stuff..." I paused, steeling myself for Hunter's reaction to the next part. "Then he threatened you."

"Excuse me?" Hunter's voice dropped dangerously, that particular quiet tone that was far more concerning than any shouting.

"He said for you to watch your back," I continued, watching Hunter's expression shift from concern to cold fury. "And I snapped. I nearly lost control of my powers. I felt the eye glow thing."

The fact that I'd reached that point spoke volumes about how intense the confrontation had become.

"That fucking bastard!" Hunter's control slipped, crimson energy briefly crackling around his clenched fists before he mastered it. "Does he really want this to turn into Ranger on Ranger violence? Because I'm pretty sure the Thunder Powers are stronger than the Zeo Powers. And I know for damn sure I'm stronger than him unmorphed."

The deadly certainty in his voice wasn't bravado—it was simple fact. Hunter's Thunder ninja training, combined with his natural strength and years of additional combat experience, would give him a significant advantage over Rocky in any physical confrontation.

"Babe, no," I said firmly, placing my hand on his arm. "No Ranger on Ranger violence. But I do think we need to be ready to take legal action if he doesn't back off."

Hunter's eyes met mine, a glint of dark humor briefly replacing the anger. "Or we invite him to Ireland and take him to the cliffs?"

"Tempting as that is, no," I replied, a reluctant smile tugging at my lips despite the seriousness of the situation. "And you've clearly been spending too much time with Trev."

Trevor had a particular fondness for suggesting the nearby cliffs as a solution to various problems. What had started as a joke had become something of a running gag in our household.

Hunter sighed, his expression growing serious again. "He better not come near you or Harley again, or I will end him."

The simple declaration wasn't a threat so much as a promise—a line drawn that Hunter would enforce without hesitation if Rocky crossed it. It should have concerned me, this capacity for cold fury in the man I loved, but instead I found it oddly comforting. Not because I wanted violence, but because I knew with absolute certainty that Hunter would protect our family at any cost.

"I don't think he will," I said, trying to be realistic despite my lingering concerns. "He was angry, lashing out. But he's not stupid. He knows what we're capable of."

Hunter's expression remained skeptical. "People do stupid things when they're driven by resentment and wounded pride. And Rocky has plenty of both where we're concerned."

He wasn't wrong. Rocky's anger had festered for years, transforming from the initial shock and betrayal of learning the truth about Harley's paternity into something darker, more entrenched. The kind of anger that could drive someone to make irrational choices.

"We'll be vigilant," I agreed, leaning slightly against Hunter's solid presence. "But we're leaving in a few days anyway."

Hunter's arm slipped around my waist, drawing me closer. "And if he tries to contact Harley again? More calls, more texts?"

"Then we look into that restraining order she mentioned," I said firmly. "We support whatever boundaries she wants to set."

Hunter nodded, his expression thoughtful. "We should talk to Tori about it. She'll know the legal options, especially with the international complications."

The suggestion was practical, sensible—exactly what I needed after the emotional intensity of the confrontation with Rocky. It was one of the things I'd always valued about Hunter: his ability to move from protective fury to strategic planning in the space of a breath.

"Good idea," I agreed, then hesitated before adding, "How did lunch go? With Harley and Rocky?"

Hunter's expression darkened again. "About as well as your meeting, from the sound of it. Harley was incredible though—stood her ground, made her boundaries clear. I was proud of her."

"She gets that from you," I said softly, reaching up to touch his face. "That quiet strength, that certainty in her convictions."

He caught my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. "She gets it from both of us. Your fire, my steadiness—it's a powerful combination."

The simple acknowledgment warmed me, pushing back some of the residual chill from the confrontation with Rocky.

"We should go back inside," I said reluctantly. "The others will wonder what's happening."

Hunter nodded, though his arm remained firmly around my waist.

As we turned to head back inside, Hunter paused, his eyes searching mine. "You okay? Really?"

The question was simple but loaded with understanding—he knew how confrontations like this affected me, how they stirred up old insecurities and painful memories. How they made me question myself, my choices, my worthiness as a mother and partner.

"I'm okay," I assured him, and meant it. "Rocky's anger isn't my burden to carry anymore. I've apologized for my mistakes, I've worked to make amends, I've built a life I'm proud of. If he can't move forward, that's on him, not me."

Hunter's smile held a mixture of pride and love that still made my heart skip even after all these years. "That's my girl," he said softly, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

We walked back toward the house, arms around each other, united as we always were in the face of external threats.



## "Ghosts of Angel Grove"

The air crackled with energy as I dodged another blast, rolling behind an overturned car for momentary cover. My Violet Thunder powers hummed beneath my skin, ready to be channeled through my next attack. Through the visor of my helmet, I caught sight of Viper—Cobra X's son and heir apparent—directing his forces with the casual arrogance of someone who'd never known defeat.

"Thunder Staff!" I called, the familiar weapon materializing in my hands as I vaulted over my makeshift shelter.

For a thirteen-year-old, Viper was terrifyingly competent—tall for his age, with reptilian features that betrayed his alien heritage, and combat skills that suggested years of intensive training. The fact that someone my own age commanded an army of Scalekins should have seemed absurd, but there was nothing childlike about the calculated precision of his attacks.

"Genesis Rangers, flank left!" JJ's voice carried through our comms, the White Ranger's natural leadership evident even in the chaos of battle. "Thunder Rangers, maintain the center!"

Arisa's crimson blur streaked past me as she engaged a cluster of Scalekins, her Thunder powers creating a devastating arc of energy that sent several of the reptilian foot soldiers flying. My sister had taken to her Ranger duties with the same methodical excellence she applied to everything—each move precise, each strategy carefully considered.

"Harley, behind you!" Lindsey's warning came just in time.

I spun, bringing my staff up to block a Scalekin's clawed strike. My younger cousin might be the newest Thunder Ranger, but her battlefield awareness was already impressive. The Navy Thunder power suited her perfectly—quick, adaptable, and surprisingly powerful for someone so young.

"Thanks!" I called, dispatching the creature with a violet-enhanced sweep of my staff. "Anyone got eyes on Viper?"

"Northeast corner, by the fountain," Arion's voice replied, his accent carefully modulated even through the mask he wore to conceal his identity. As the only non-Ranger in our group, he relied on his Saturnian combat training and a specialized battle suit Billy had developed that could withstand the energies we generated in combat.

I pivoted, spotting Viper exactly where Arion had indicated. The young general was engaged in combat with Melody and Kimber, the Pink and Orange Genesis Rangers working in tandem to keep him on the defensive. But even against two experienced fighters, Viper was holding his own, his movements fluid and unnervingly precise.

"Addy, Logan, with me!" I called, recognizing an opportunity to surround Viper while he was distracted. The Purple and Red Rangers acknowledged with quick nods, breaking away from their own skirmishes to converge on our target.

As I raced toward the fountain, violet energy crackling around my Thunder Staff, I caught glimpses of the other Rangers maintaining the perimeter—Aaron and Ally (Blue and Green) creating a barrier to prevent civilian casualties, while Minh's Yellow Griffin powers provided air support, her experience evident in how efficiently she coordinated with both teams despite the chaos.

"You're persistent, I'll give you that," Viper called out as he spotted our approach, his voice carrying that strange dual-toned quality that marked him as Cobra X's offspring. "But persistence won't save your planet."

"Yeah, we've heard that before," I shot back, channeling more energy into my staff. "From better villains than you."

His reptilian features contorted in what might have been a smile—all teeth and cold calculation. "My father sends his regards, Thunder Ranger. He's particularly interested in your family's... unique energy signatures."

The comment sent an involuntary chill down my spine. Cobra X's interest in Thunder energy was something Billy had warned us about—particularly the hybrid energy created when Thunder and Saturnian powers interacted. The fact that Viper was mentioning it now suggested they knew more than we'd realized.

"Less talking, more fighting," Logan called out, his Red Dragon Sword slicing through the air as he launched himself at Viper.

The young general sidestepped with inhuman speed, catching Logan's arm and using his momentum to send him crashing into a nearby bench. Before any of us could react, Viper had already turned to counter Addy's attack, blocking her Purple Pegasus Staff with a forearm guard that seemed to absorb the energy she channeled through it.

"You'll need to do better than that," Viper taunted, his eyes fixed on Addy with particular interest. "The Purple power is wasted on you, human."

I saw Addy falter slightly at his words—a momentary hesitation that Viper immediately exploited, landing a kick to her midsection that sent her stumbling backward. Something protective surged through me at the sight.

"Hey, scale-face!" I shouted, drawing his attention. "Try this on for size!"

I channeled every ounce of Violet Thunder energy I could muster into my staff, the weapon glowing with intensifying power as I brought it down in a sweeping arc. Viper raised his arm to block, but the sheer force of the impact sent him skidding backward, his boots leaving furrows in the concrete.

For the first time, his confident expression faltered.

"Impressive," he acknowledged, a calculating look entering his eyes. "You've been practicing, Harlyn."

The use of my full name sent another chill through me. How did he know that? How much information did Cobra X have on us?

"Coordinated strike, now!" Melody called out, the Pink Ranger's tactical mind recognizing our momentary advantage.

In perfect synchronization, Kimber and Melody attacked from the left, while Addy and Logan—recovered from his earlier fall—converged from the right. I charged straight ahead, my Thunder Staff crackling with renewed energy. Caught in our pincer movement, even Viper's enhanced reflexes couldn't defend against attacks from all sides simultaneously.

Our combined strike landed with devastating effect, the merged energies of our different power sources creating a shockwave that threw Viper several yards backward into the fountain. Water exploded upward with the impact, raining down on the surrounding area as the young general struggled to regain his footing.

"Fall back!" he snarled to his remaining Scalekins, his composed demeanor finally cracking. "This isn't over, Rangers!"

"It never is," I replied, the familiar post-battle adrenaline coursing through my system as Viper and his forces retreated through a dimensional portal that appeared behind them.

As the portal closed and the immediate threat disappeared, I allowed my stance to relax slightly, though I maintained my morph. Around me, the other Rangers were already checking for civilian casualties and assessing damage to the surrounding area—the responsibilities that came after the fighting ended.

"Everyone okay?" JJ asked, the White Ranger moving to check on his sister first, then scanning the rest of us for signs of injury.

"All good here," Arissa confirmed, her Crimson Thunder powers still humming faintly around her as she demorphed. "Though that was a closer call than usual."

I nodded in agreement, releasing my own morph and feeling the familiar rush of vulnerability as the protective armor disappeared. "Viper's getting stronger. And he knew my name—my full name."

"That's concerning," Arion said, removing his mask now that civilians had cleared the area. His expression was troubled, the strategic mind I'd come to respect already analyzing implications. "If Cobra X is gathering intelligence on us individually..."

"It means we need to be more careful," Minh concluded, the experienced Yellow Ranger's voice carrying the weight of someone who had faced similar situations before. "And we need to figure out what he wants with Thunder energy."

I exchanged glances with Arissa and Lindsey, the three Thunder Rangers sharing a moment of silent concern. Our powers had always been somewhat different from the others—more elemental, more

directly connected to natural forces. If Cobra X had specific interest in those abilities, it couldn't be for anything good.

"Billy will want a full debrief," Melody said, already tapping her communicator to contact her mentor. "Especially about the intelligence gathering."

As the Genesis Rangers coordinated with Billy, I found myself staring at the spot where Viper had disappeared. The young general was unlike any opponent I'd faced before—not just because of his age, but because of the calculated intelligence behind his attacks. He wasn't just fighting; he was studying us, learning our patterns, identifying weaknesses.

"You okay?" Addy asked, appearing beside me with a concerned expression..

"Yeah," I assured her, though my mind was still racing. "Just thinking about what Viper said to you. About the Purple power being wasted on humans."

Addy's expression darkened slightly. "Yeah, that was... unsettling."

"He was trying to get in your head," I said firmly. "The power chose you, Addy. It knows what it's doing."

She nodded, though uncertainty lingered in her eyes. "I just hope I'm worthy of it."

"You are," I replied without hesitation. "I've seen you in action, remember? You're a natural."

A small smile tugged at her lips, gratitude replacing some of the doubt in her expression. "Thanks, Har. That means a lot, especially coming from you."

Before I could respond, JJ called us over to where the team was gathering for teleportation back to the Command Center. As we joined the others, I caught Arissa exchanging a meaningful look with Arion—the kind of silent communication they'd perfected despite the interplanetary nature of their relationship.

"What?" I asked, recognizing the concern in my sister's expression.

"We need to tell Mom and Dad about Viper knowing your name," she replied quietly. "And about his interest in Thunder energy."

I nodded, understanding her concern. Our parents had faced enough Ranger threats over the years to recognize when a situation was escalating beyond routine battles. "After the debrief with Billy."

As the teleportation sequence engaged, transforming us into streams of colored light, I couldn't shake the feeling that today's battle marked a turning point. Viper wasn't just another alien general following orders—he was calculating, adaptable, and now, apparently, gathering intelligence on us personally.

The game was changing, and we needed to change with it if we wanted to stay one step ahead.

After the debrief, Arion and Arissa went to talk to Mom and Dad. I needed some time alone. The lake in Angel Grove Park had always been my thinking spot, even before we moved to Ireland. Something about the way the light played across the water's surface had a calming effect that I desperately needed right now.

I found my favorite bench—slightly secluded but with a clear view of the water—and sank down, my body still aching from the battle despite the accelerated healing that came with Ranger powers. How was this my life? My sister was dating our future head guard, the guy I loved was an adult who was married, I was a Saturn princess who would be Queen someday, and I was a Power Ranger. To say nothing of being the daughter of the famous Michelle Morris and becoming a celebrity in my own right. What even was my life?

Most thirteen-year-olds worried about homework and crushes, not about alien generals who knew their full names or the responsibilities of protecting an entire planet—two planets, in my case. Sometimes the weight of it all felt suffocating, like trying to breathe underwater.

I was pulled from my thoughts by a familiar voice.

"You ok, Har?"

I looked up to see Aaron standing a few feet away, concern evident in his expression. The Blue Genesis Ranger had always been perceptive, even back when we were just kids running around Angel Grove together.

"Oh, hey," I said, straightening slightly. "Yeah, fine. Just questioning all my life choices."

"Can I join you?" he asked, gesturing to the empty space beside me.

"Sure," I replied, making room on the bench. As he sat down, I found myself really looking at Aaron for the first time in ages. When I'd lived in Angel Grove, he was just my awkward and weird childhood friend—all gangly limbs and nervous energy, forever taking things apart to see how they worked.

But looking at him now... he had grown into a handsome boy. His features had begun to settle into something more defined, the awkwardness giving way to a quiet confidence that suited him. It was hard to ignore the change. But he was still Aaron—still had that thoughtful look in his eyes, still fidgeted with his hands when he was thinking.

"Viper freaked you out back there, huh?" he asked, getting straight to the heart of the matter.

I sighed, pulling my knees up to my chest. "Yeah, he knows me as Harlyn and seems to be interested in my powers." I turned to face him. "What if Saturn is on their radar?"

"Then we stop them here so they never get there," Aaron said with surprising confidence, his voice carrying none of the uncertainty that had characterized him when we were younger.

The simple declaration—so matter-of-fact, so assured—caught me off guard. This was a side of Aaron I wasn't familiar with, a steadiness that seemed to have developed during my time away from Angel Grove.

"Just like that, huh?" I couldn't help the slight smile that tugged at my lips.

"Just like that," he confirmed, bumping his shoulder gently against mine. "That's what Rangers do, right? We protect people—whether they're on Earth or Saturn or anywhere else."

I studied his profile for a moment, struck by how the Blue Ranger powers seemed to suit him perfectly—not just the color, but the underlying qualities the power recognized. Aaron had always been smart, analytical, the one who could solve complex problems while the rest of us were still trying to understand them. But now there was a confidence to him that transformed those qualities from merely intellectual into something more.

"When did you get so wise?" I asked, only half-joking.

He laughed, the sound warming something inside me. "Probably around the same time you got so serious," he teased back. "Remember when we used to sneak into the scrapyard to find parts for my inventions? You were always the one pushing us to take bigger risks."

The memory brought a genuine smile to my face. "And you were always the one calculating exactly how likely we were to get caught."

"Thirty-seven percent chance, if we went during Mr. Bulkmeier's lunch break," he recalled with perfect clarity, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You told me to stop being such a nerd and boost you over the fence anyway."

I laughed, the tension of the day finally beginning to ease. "We were a good team."

"We still are," Aaron said, his expression growing more serious. "That's what I wanted to tell you, actually. You're not alone in this, Har. None of us are. That's the whole point of being a team."

I nodded, appreciating the reminder even as I struggled with the instinct to handle everything myself—a trait I'd definitely inherited from both my parents.

"I know," I acknowledged. "It's just... complicated. The Saturn stuff, especially. Most of you have normal lives outside of being Rangers. I have... well, an entire planet that will be my responsibility someday."

Aaron was quiet for a moment, seeming to weigh his response carefully. "Can I tell you something?" he finally asked, his voice dropping slightly. "Something I haven't really talked about with the others?"

"Of course," I replied, curious about his sudden shift in tone.

"Being the Blue Ranger... it feels like coming home," he said, staring out at the lake. "Like this was always what I was meant to do. And when I'm morphed, when I'm fighting alongside all of you... it's the first time in my life I've felt like I truly belong somewhere."

The vulnerability in his admission caught me by surprise. Aaron had always been part of our friend group, but there had been a certain distance to him—as if he was observing from slightly outside the circle rather than fully within it.

"I get that," I said softly, understanding exactly what he meant. "It's like... everything clicks into place."

He nodded, relief evident in his expression. "Exactly. So when you talk about your responsibilities to Saturn, about being a princess and eventually a queen... I might not understand exactly what that feels like, but I do understand what it's like to find your purpose. To know where you belong."

His insight surprised me. Most people—even my closest friends—tended to focus on the glamorous aspects of my royal heritage, not understanding the weight of responsibility that came with it.

"Thanks, Aaron," I said, genuinely touched by his perspective. "That... actually helps."

We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, watching the late afternoon sun cast golden reflections across the lake's surface. It was peaceful in a way that felt increasingly rare in our Ranger lives—a moment of quiet between the storms.

"So," Aaron said eventually, a hint of his old awkwardness returning as he changed the subject. "I heard from Melody that you've been working on new music. Any chance we'll get to hear it while you're in town?"

I smiled, grateful for the shift to more normal teenage conversation. "Maybe. I've got a couple of new tracks I've been developing. Nothing finished yet, but..."

"But knowing you, they're probably already better than half the stuff on the radio," he finished with a grin.

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn't help feeling pleased by his confidence in my abilities. "We'll see. The new stuff is different—more personal, I guess."

"Different how?" he asked, genuine interest in his expression.

I hesitated, not sure how to explain the evolution my music had undergone in the past year. "More acoustic, more raw. Mom says it's me finding my voice, whatever that means."

"I'd like to hear it sometime," Aaron said, his tone casual but sincere. "If you want to share, I mean."

The offer was tempting. Aaron had always been one of my most honest critics—supportive but not afraid to tell me when something wasn't working. And lately, I'd been feeling stuck in my creative process, unsure if the new direction I was exploring was the right one.

"Maybe tomorrow?" I suggested. "After training?"

His face lit up with a smile that transformed his features, making him look younger and more carefree than I'd seen him since our reunion. "Definitely. It's a date."

As soon as the words left his mouth, his eyes widened slightly, a flush creeping up his neck. "I mean, not a date-date," he clarified hastily. "Just a... you know... a thing. A plan."

I laughed, finding his sudden fluster endearing. "I know what you meant, Aaron."

He rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassment giving way to a self-deprecating smile. "Good. Because that would be weird, right? Us on a date?"

The question hung in the air between us, carrying more weight than his casual tone suggested. For a moment, I found myself actually considering it—Aaron and me, on a real date. The idea wasn't as strange as it might have been a year ago, before I'd noticed how he'd changed, before we'd fought side by side as Rangers.

"I don't know," I said finally, surprising myself with my honesty. "Maybe not that weird."

His eyes met mine, a flash of something—surprise? hope?—visible in their depths before he quickly looked away, focusing on the lake again. "Yeah, maybe not," he agreed softly.

The moment stretched between us, charged with possibilities neither of us seemed quite ready to explore further. I was saved from having to respond by the chime of my communicator—the distinctive tone that indicated a message from my parents rather than a Ranger alert.

"I should probably head back," I said, checking the text from Mom asking where I was. "Family dinner tonight."

Aaron nodded, standing when I did. "Need company on the walk back?"

"Sure," I agreed, finding that I genuinely wanted his company for a little longer. "Just let me tell Mom I'm on my way."

As we started back toward Uncle Zack's house, our conversation shifted to lighter topics—training techniques, school projects, the latest upgrades Billy had made to our communicators. But underneath the casual exchange ran a new current of awareness, a recognition that something had shifted between us during those quiet moments by the lake.

I wasn't sure what it meant yet, or if it meant anything at all. But for the first time since returning to Angel Grove, I felt a flicker of excitement about something completely unrelated to Ranger duties—something normal, something teenage, something just for me.

The pleasant feeling lasted exactly until we rounded the corner near the park's main entrance.



Kimber and Melody were sitting on a picnic table, laughing with someone else. As we got closer, I realized who that *someone else* was.

Tamara. My non-sister.

My mood darkened instantly. I felt my jaw clench as we approached, a familiar anger rising in my chest.

"I didn't realize the 'Replace Harley' club was having a meeting today," I snarked, coming to a stop in front of them. "Is it private, or can anyone join?"

Kimber sighed, her Venusian grace evident even in her exasperation. "Tam is our friend too, Har. Uncle Rocky and Aunt Aisha are my dad's best friends. You can't expect me to ignore her."

I shifted my glare to Melody. "And what about you, traitor?"

Mel looked down, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. "I'm sorry, Har, but I'm not going to be mean to her just for existing."

"Your other friends do that enough already," Tam shot back, her voice carrying the edge that always seemed to emerge when we were forced into the same space.

"Oh? Do tell," I challenged, crossing my arms.

Tamara stood up. At eleven, she was tall for her age, while I'd always been on the shorter side. The fact that she was almost my height despite being two years younger only irritated me further.

"Logan makes fun of me, Ally calls me a 'bad knock-off of you,' your cousins won't even make eye contact with me, and even Aaron," she gestured toward him, "pretends I don't exist."

"Good. They're *my* friends, not yours," I replied, the childishness of my response registering somewhere in the back of my mind, but the hurt was too raw to care.

"We're all Ranger kids," Tam countered, her expression defiant.

"You aren't a Ranger. And your mom betrayed her Ranger ideals when she joined SPD," I replied, hitting below the belt with practiced precision.

"Kimber's dad is in SPD too," Tam said, her logic annoyingly sound.

I rolled my eyes, unwilling to acknowledge the point. "Yes, it's sad, but Aunt Mina is a Sailor Soldier, so she has that at least."

"Harley, we should be sisters," Tam said, her voice softening slightly. "My dad still loves you. He sees you as a daughter still."

The statement hit a nerve so raw I almost flinched.

"Yeah, well, I don't see him as a dad. He picked you over me; now he can live with it," I seethed.

"You know, your mom forced her own daughter into SPD, so it can't be that bad," Tam said, her tone deliberately provocative.

I felt my blood boil at the mention of Savannah, the daughter Mom had given up for adoption before I was born. It was a complicated part of our family history, one that still carried emotional weight.

"Leave Savannah out of this," I snapped, my hands clenching into fists at my sides. "My mom did what had to be done at the time. She always does. Because she knows real Rangers have to make the hard choices. They can't be slaves to rules and regulations like SPD. If SPD had taken on the Death Ranger, he would have won. The bad guys don't play by the book, so we have to be flexible."

"Your mom gave Savannah up for adoption and lied about it for years. Uncle Conner didn't even know she was his biological daughter till she was eighteen!" Tam countered, her voice rising to match mine. "And add that to the lies to Dad about you. Your mom has a loose relationship with the truth and integrity."

I was livid, purple energy crackling faintly around my fingertips as my control slipped.

"My mom isn't perfect, but she always does what she thinks is right. She has more integrity than most people can even conceive of. Do not ever talk about my mom again. You don't know her. You know nothing about her or my family."

"And you know nothing about my mom," Tam shot back, her own anger evident in her flushed cheeks. "But I do know your mom tried to ruin Dad's life."

"She did not! And your mom is a sellout," I said, the insult landing with a childish thud.

"Okay, guys, come on, that's enough," Mel interjected, her normally gentle voice firm as she stepped between us.

"For real, Har, just leave her alone," Kimber added, her hand on Tam's shoulder in a gesture of support that felt like another betrayal.

"Whose side are you two on?" I demanded, hurt making my voice sharper than intended.

"No one's. We're friends with you both," Kimber replied.

I felt Aaron's hand on my back, the gentle pressure grounding me slightly despite my anger.

"Come on, Har, she's not worth getting worked up over. Let's go," he said quietly, his voice close to my ear.

The rational part of my brain recognized he was right—this confrontation wasn't going anywhere productive. But letting Tam have the last word felt like conceding defeat.

"Fine," I relented, though I kept my glare fixed on Tam like a target lock. "But I'm telling you, Tam—stay away from me and my friends."

Aaron didn't say a word. He just reached out and gently took my hand, leading me away from the toxicity before I could say something I might actually regret.

His palm was warm against mine, his grip steady and grounding. It was a simple gesture—one that wouldn't have made me think twice a few years ago before we moved away from Angel Grove. But now? It sent a weird jolt through me that had nothing to do with adrenaline.

*What was this?*

I pushed the thought away, shaking my head as if to clear the static. I couldn't deal with boy confusion right now; I had bigger problems.

We made our way back to Uncle Zack's house, bypassing the chaos of the kitchen to head straight for the backyard. I knew my parents would be there—it was the designated "strategy zone" away from civilian ears. Sure enough, we found them huddled in a low-voiced conversation with Arissa and Arion.

"Harley, come here," Mom called the second she saw me, her tone sharp with maternal alert.

Aaron kept pace beside me as we walked over, though he dropped my hand as we reached the family circle.

"Arissa said Viper appeared to be targeting you specifically during the fight," Mom said, cutting straight to the chase. "Is that true?"

"Maybe? I don't know," I admitted, crossing my arms defensively as the memory of the battle replayed. "But... he knew my name. He called me Harlyn."

Dad's expression darkened instantly, a flash of genuine concern crossing his face. "Harlyn? How? No one really calls you that, except in cases of needing your legal name or involving royal protocol."

I nodded, feeling the chill of it again. “Yeah. Caught me off guard too. He said it like... like he knew me.”

“I found it concerning as well,” Arion chimed in, his posture stiffening into Royal Guard mode. “If they have intelligence on the Royal Family's specific nomenclature... do you think, perhaps, Cobra X and Viper mean to attack Saturn next?”

The question hung in the air, heavy and dangerous.

“It’s certainly possible,” Mom said, her jaw setting in that way that meant she was shifting from Mother to Queen. “I’ll contact your father immediately and alert him to the potential. We’ll be ready, just in case.”

“Why is this happening now? We leave for my first tour in like, a week. I don’t have time for alien warlords,” I sighed, kicking at a tuft of grass.

“Whose tour?” Mom asked, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

“Well, *your* tour,” I conceded, rolling my eyes. “But it’s *my* first tour opening. It’s a big deal! You know what I mean.”

Mom chuckled, the tension in her shoulders relaxing slightly. “I do.”

“It’s my first tour too, but we’ll get through it, Har. I’ve got your back,” Arissa said, putting a reassuring hand on my shoulder. Her touch was grounding—a reminder that I wasn’t doing this alone.

I nodded, looking back toward the park where the Genesis team was still gathered. “I just hope the Genesis Rangers will be okay. All but one of them are new to this, and this is their town now, not ours.”

Aaron stepped into my line of sight, his expression steady and surprisingly confident.

“We got this, Har,” he said, and for the first time, he sounded less like my mechanic friend and more like the Blue Ranger. “Don’t worry about us. You go rock the tour, then go back to your quiet life in Ireland. We can protect Angel Grove.”

I blinked at him. “Quiet life in Ireland? Yeah, not really.”

“I mean, sort of,” Arissa countered. “Compared to this? Since we defeated the Death Ranger, it’s been pretty quiet.”

“I guess,” I muttered. “Except for Kora and I arguing every other day.”

"Whose fault is that?" Arissa shot back, her sisterly patience wearing thin. "You're the one that won't shut up about Jake."

I glared at her. "Like you won't shut up about Arion?"

"That's different! Arion is my boyfriend. And he's our age," Arissa argued, her logic irritatingly sound. "Jake is a married man."

"Yeah, well, the internet seems to think we'd make a cute couple!" I argued, clinging to the only validation I had.

Dad dropped his head into his hands, letting out a groan that sounded like it came from the depths of his soul.

"The internet is dumb," Arissa stated flatly. "He is a grown-up and you're a teenager."

I felt cornered, so I pulled the only card I had left—the one I knew would sting.

"Mom was younger than me when she started dating Jon, and he was Jake's age," I said, crossing my arms.

The silence that followed was heavy. I knew it was a poor argument—Mom had told me explicitly how messed up that situation was—but in the heat of the moment, it felt like a valid precedent.

"We've discussed this, Harley," Mom said, her voice dropping to a warning tone. "That was different. And it wasn't right."

"I don't see how," I lied, looking away.

Even though I did.

The awkward silence that followed my lie was thick enough to choke on. Dad was rubbing his temples like he had a migraine coming on, and Mom was giving me that specific look that meant *we will discuss this later, and you will not enjoy it*.

Aaron, to his credit, didn't look at me like I was a brat. He just looked... understanding.

"I should probably get going," he said, breaking the tension and saving me from further parental lectures. "I need to check in with Billy about the sensor data from the park. See if we can track where Viper went."

"Good idea," Dad said, sounding relieved to have a distraction. "Let us know what you find."

Aaron turned to me. "I'll text you later? About the... you know. The tech stuff."

"Yeah," I said, my voice softer now that the adrenaline was fading. "Thanks for walking me back."

"Anytime, Princess," he said with a small smile. He gave a polite nod to my parents and Arion before jogging down the driveway, heading toward the Command Center.

I watched him go, feeling a weird twinge in my chest. He had seen me at my worst—snarky to Tam, disrespectful to my parents, obsessing over a guy I knew deep down was wrong for me—and he hadn't flinched.

The sliding glass door opened, and Uncle Zack stepped out into the backyard. He was wearing an apron that said *Grill Master* and holding a spatula like a scepter.

"Hey," he called out, his voice low enough not to carry back into the house. "Are we done saving the universe out here? Because Kelly is asking why the burgers aren't on yet, and I'm running out of excuses for why my entire family is huddled by the fence."

"We're coming, Zachary," Mom said, her voice shifting instantly from *Queen/Commander* to *Big Sister*. "Just handling a minor crisis."

"Minor crisis involving alien warlords or teenage hormones?" Uncle Zack asked, looking between me and Dad. He knew about the Rangers—he was the only one in the non-Ranger family who did—which made him our one safe harbor in this house. But it also meant he had to constantly lie to Aunt Kelly and Grandma, which I knew stressed him out.

"Both," Dad muttered.

"Fantastic," Uncle Zack grinned, though his eyes were tired. "Well, stash the morphers and fix your faces. Arion, you survived the interrogation yesterday, so just keep doing whatever you were doing. Mom thinks you're charming, if a little stiff."

"I will continue to execute the 'Ukrainian Exchange Student' protocol," Arion said, straightening his posture. "I have prepared additional conversational topics regarding... soccer."

"Perfect. Stick with that," Uncle Zack clapped him on the shoulder. "And Harley? Fix the face. You look like you want to punch someone."

"I *do* want to punch someone," I grumbled, thinking of Tamara.

"Well, don't punch your cousins," Uncle Zack said. "Dekker and Lachlyn are excited to hang out. And please, for the love of everything holy, do not mention space, aliens, or Zords in front of Kelly. She thinks you guys are just exhausted from the travel."

"We got it, Zachary," Mom promised, smoothing down her shirt. "Game faces, everyone."

"Oh, and Harley?" Dad caught my arm as I tried to follow Uncle Zack inside.

"Yeah?"

"You fought well today," he said quietly, a small smile touching his lips. "Good job protecting the perimeter. I'm proud of you."

I beamed, the praise warming me more than the morpher ever did. "Thanks, Dad."

"Now go pretend you're a normal teenager who cares about homework and boys," he added, releasing me. "And if I catch you texting Jake at the dinner table, I'm throwing your phone in the potato salad."

"Love you too, Dad," I replied sweetly.

As I moved further into the house, the wall of noise hit us. The smell of barbecue sauce and charcoal, the sound of the football game on TV, and the chatter of Aunt Kelly and Grandma in the kitchen. It was jarring—five minutes ago we were discussing assassination plots; now we were in the middle of a chaotic American family BBQ.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I pulled it out, shielding the screen from Dad's line of sight.

It wasn't Jake.

**Aaron:** *Just so you know, I think your mom is right about the integrity thing. But you were right about the loyalty.*

I smiled, a real one this time, and shoved the phone back in my pocket. Maybe surviving this dinner wouldn't be so bad after all.

Michelle

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It felt like the universe had a personal vendetta against my retirement plans. Every time I thought Rangering was behind us—every time I let myself believe we could just be a normal, somewhat eccentric family—something came up and we were called back to action.

Only this time, it wasn't just me and Hunter on the line. Now, two of my daughters were out there fighting.

I took a deep breath, shaking off the lingering adrenaline from the Command Center, and stepped into the kitchen. The air smelled of vinegar and mayonnaise—Kelly's famous potato salad—and the warm, domestic chatter was a jarring shift from the tactical debrief we'd just left.

Mom was standing by the counter, bouncing Tomi on her hip while chatting with Kelly.

"Oh, there she is," Mom smiled, turning to me. "We were wondering if you guys got lost in the backyard."

"Just catching up with the kids," I lied smoothly, reaching out for my youngest. "Here, let me take her. You relax, Mom."

"She's been an angel," Mom cooed, handing Tomi over. "Though she keeps trying to steal the celery."

I settled Tomi against my hip, pressing a kiss to her soft cheek. She smelled like baby shampoo and sunscreen, a grounding scent that helped slow my racing heart. *She's safe*, I reminded myself. *They're all safe*.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, a harsh vibration against my thigh.

I shifted Tomi to my other arm and pulled the phone out, expecting a status update from Billy or maybe a check-in from Aaron.

The name on the screen made my stomach turn. Rocky.

I unlocked it, my jaw tightening as I read the message.

Rocky: *It's not bad enough that you've turned Harley against me, you've made her a bully too? Tam just came home upset because Harley verbally attacked her at the park. This has gone too far, Michelle. It stops now.*

I stared at the words, feeling a headache bloom behind my eyes. I had just fought an army of lizard creatures commanded by an alien warlord, and *this* was what I had to deal with? Rocky's inability to accept consequences?

I sighed, a long, weary sound that made Kelly look over.

"Everything okay, Mich?"

"Fine," I said quickly, forcing a smile. "Just... spam."

I looked back at the phone. If Rocky wanted to play the victim, I wasn't going to give him the audience.

Me: *We can add Tam to the restraining order too. Then neither of you can come near Harley.*

The response came almost instantly.

Rocky: *Fuck you. I can't believe what you've turned Harley into. She went from being a sweet kid to a teenage bully.*

I actually laughed out loud—a short, sharp bark of amusement that had nothing to do with humor and everything to do with disbelief.

Me: *LMAO! Seriously? Do you even remember raising Harley? She's always been headstrong, outspoken, and blunt. This is the same kid that once told her 2nd grade teacher that her dress made her look like a "poo blob."*

I hit send with a vicious amount of satisfaction.

Me: *She hasn't changed, Rocky. She just stopped protecting your feelings.*

I shoved the phone back into my pocket, my hands shaking slightly. He wanted to rewrite history? Fine. But I wasn't going to let him rewrite our daughter. Harley wasn't a bully; she was a girl who had been pushed into a corner by the adults who were supposed to protect her. And if she bit back? Well, she came by that honestly.

"What's wrong?" Hunter asked, appearing in the doorway with two beers.

I looked up at him, seeing the question in his eyes. He knew the look on my face.

"Nothing," I said, taking one of the beers from him and taking a long sip. "Just reminding someone of history."

Hunter glanced at my pocket where the phone was hidden, then at me. He didn't push. He just rested his hand on the small of my back, a silent show of support.

"Dinner's almost ready," Kelly announced, oblivious to the war I was fighting in my pocket. "Zachary says the burgers are resting."

"Great," I said, bouncing Tomi. "We're starving."

And we were. Saving the world always worked up an appetite, but defending my daughter? That required sustenance.

The next several days passed in a blur of family meet-ups, Ranger battles, and avoiding telephoto lenses.

Harley was dealing with the exact double-edged sword I had grown up with. As the TikTok buzz around her and Jake continued to explode, the media became ravenous for new photos of "The Country Princess and the Rock Prince." She was balancing the exhausting reality of a secret identity while trying to dodge paparazzi who camped out at the end of the driveway.

This was the opposite of the quiet, protected life I wanted for her, but to her credit, she was handling the pressure with a grit that reminded me of Hunter.

The downside? The public narrative was starting to bleed into her personal reality. The more the internet "shipped" Harley and Jake, the more Harley convinced herself that a romance was actually possible. To Jake's credit, he was ignoring the noise completely, focusing on his wife and kid. But Harley was thirteen. It's hard to see reality when millions of strangers are validating your fantasy.

It didn't affect her sense of duty—she was a fierce Ranger, always ready to fight when Viper's forces tested us—but in the quiet moments, she wasn't just a soldier. She was a teenager adjusting to being a main character in the media circus, rather than just "Michelle Morris's Daughter."

The day before we were set to leave for the tour, I escaped the chaos to visit Jason and Kim.

Jason and I had dated for about five minutes in high school—a lifetime ago—but in the decades since, he'd become a big brother of sorts. And Kim... she had been my first real friend when I moved to Angel Grove at thirteen. Despite time and distance, she remained the sister of my heart.

We sat in their living room, the atmosphere warm and lived-in, watching through the glass doors as their ten-year-old son, Ollie, played in the backyard with Tomi. He was gentle with her, patient in a way that spoke to his being an only child who perhaps wished for siblings.

Jason and Kim knew about Billy's decision to mobilize the Genesis team. Unlike the initial panic from the others, their reaction was different.

"I'm not going to lie," Kim said, curling her legs under her on the sofa. "I understand why the others are scared. But... Mich, it is nice not to be the sole protectors of Angel Grove anymore. We needed a new active team. We're tired."

Jason nodded, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. "It was time. I think we all realized that when Minh inherited Trini's Morpher. It's been clear for a while that the torch needed to pass. We can't do this forever."

"They're good," I said, thinking of the battle in the park. "Rough around the edges, but really good. It's like they were born for this."

"Well, I mean, they kinda were, Mich," Jason said with a knowing smile. "They have it in their blood."

"Minh seems to be a natural as well," I noted. "She adapted quickly to the responsibility?"

Kim nodded. "She really did. She had us, of course. And she's close friends with Savan—" Kim cut herself off abruptly, her eyes widening as she realized the slip. "Oh. I'm sorry, Mich."

The name hung in the air like smoke. *Savannah*. My firstborn. The daughter I gave up to protect, who now wore the SPD Purple uniform and hated me for it.

I shook my head, forcing a smile that I hoped looked genuine. "It's okay, Kim. Really. I'm glad Savannah has connections in the Ranger community, even if I'm not one of them."

I took a sip of my tea, grounding myself. "I'll always love her. And I'll always stand by the fact that everything I did concerning her... I did it believing it was the best thing at the time. I may have been wrong—Conner certainly thinks so—but I can't change it now. I've learned to live with the fact that Savannah hates me."

"Still," Kim said softly, reaching out to squeeze my hand. "It can't be easy."

"It's not what I'd prefer," I admitted, my gaze drifting back to Tomi playing in the yard—the daughter I *did* get to keep. "But again, I can't change it. Savannah is an adult now. She has a relationship with Conner, and she has two parents in Hayley and Ethan who adore her and gave her a good life. That's all I ever wanted for her. If the price for her happiness is my absence... I'll pay it."

In truth, the regret about Savannah was a constant, dull ache in my chest. I wished to God I could go back to that specific moment in time—freshly reunited with Hunter after our first breakup—and just *tell* him. I had hidden the pregnancy out of fear, terrified that the messiness of it would drive him away again.

But in hindsight, with the clarity of twenty years, I knew I had been wrong. Hunter wouldn't have run. He would have looked me in the eye and said she was *his*—he would have claimed her instantly to protect Conner's future and to keep us together. We could have raised her. If I had one redo in this lifetime, that would be it. But unfortunately, even with all the magic in the universe at my fingertips, rewriting history was the one power I didn't possess.

“And a Purple Ranger that isn’t your daughter,” Jason pressed gently, pulling me back to the present. “How does that actually sit with you? And Harley?”

I shrugged, trying to keep my expression light. “It’s literally what I fought for. Breaking that bloodlock was about giving Harley a choice I never had. And the fact that the power went to Addy... it feels right. It stayed in the family, just... the other side of the family. I think Harley was a little thrown at first—it’s weird seeing someone else in ‘Mom’s color’—but she loves being a Thunder Ranger. It worked out the way it was supposed to.”

“And Ireland?” Kim asked, tilting her head in that perceptive way she’d had since we were teenagers. “Is it really home?”

I laughed, a little breathlessly. “I’m hardly ever there! Between filming in Nashville and this tour, I’m basically a resident of the sky. But... for the kids? It’s perfect. Hunter has a real support system with Jeremy and the chosen family we’ve built. It provides the stability my family needs.”

“Stability that bores *you*,” Jason corrected, cutting right through the PR answer with the precision of a Red Ranger.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted, picking at a loose thread on the throw pillow. “I mean, I love it. Jeremy is my best friend, and Hunter finally has a brother of his own in Trevor. We have so many wonderful people that we call family there...”

“But you get bored. You don’t do ‘normal,’ Mich,” Kim said, not unkindly. It was just a statement of fact.

I sighed, leaning back against the sofa cushions. “I want to. I really do. But I’ve been working pretty much since I was eight years old. And the one time I almost had a normal teenage life at thirteen, Zordon handed me a morpher. I don’t do normal. I don’t know how. Silence makes me nervous.”

Jason reached over and squeezed my knee. “That’s why you have Hunter. He’s your anchor.”

“He is,” I agreed, a genuine smile touching my lips. “He’s the only reason I haven’t floated off into space permanently.”

“Speaking of floating off,” Kim glanced at the clock. “You guys leave tomorrow, right? The big Christmas tour?”

“Yeah,” I groaned, standing up and stretching. “Three weeks of buses, sound checks, and trying to keep Harley from adopting any stray animals or musicians.”

“Or Jake,” Jason added with a smirk.

"Don't even start," I warned him, though I was laughing. "Hunter is already at DEFCON 1 over that. If I have to hear one more speech about 'boundaries' and 'appropriate age gaps'..."

"He's a dad," Jason said, watching Ollie chase Tomi in the yard. "It's our job to be terrifying."

I walked to the sliding glass door to call Tomi in. "Well, he's excelling at it. Come on, baby girl! Time to go!"

Tomi toddled over, dirt on her knees and a giant smile on her face, Ollie following close behind to make sure she didn't trip.

"Thanks for letting us crash," I said, hoisting my daughter onto my hip. "It helps... talking to people who actually know the whole story."

"Always," Kim stood and hugged me tightly. "Be safe out there, Mich. And keep an eye on those kids. If Billy is right about Cobra X..."

"I know," I said, the familiar weight of responsibility settling back onto my shoulders. "I will. We're Rangers. It's what we do."

As I walked to the car, strapping Tomi in, I took a moment to look at the quiet suburban street. It was so peaceful. So normal.

I envied Jason and Kim that peace, even as I knew I wasn't built for it.

"Ready for the chaos?" I whispered to Tomi, who just clapped her hands.

"Ready!" she chirped.

"That makes two of us," I muttered, starting the engine.

It was time to go pick up the rest of the family and get this show—literally and figuratively—on the road. The tour bus was waiting, and with it, three weeks of close quarters with my husband, my daughters, an alien boyfriend, and enough teenage drama to fuel a small star.

Let the games begin.

"Pie and Peace"

The house was finally, mercifully quiet.

It had taken two hours, three bedtime stories, and a very firm negotiation regarding Rose's fairy wings—which she insisted were "fancy dress" for tomorrow's Thanksgiving dinner—but the twins were finally asleep.

Downstairs, J had crashed on the sofa, exhausted from a day of refereeing toddler disputes and helping me prep dishes for tomorrow. Since Kara was hosting the big American holiday for all of us expats and confused locals, J had spent the afternoon trying to explain to Rose why we couldn't put glitter in the mashed potatoes.

I was alone in my office with a cold cup of tea and the digital headache Billy had sent over.

"Bloody hell, Billy," I muttered, rubbing my eyes. "What have you got me into?"

I needed to finish this tonight. I refused to be the person checking Ranger schematics under the table while Kara tried to serve turkey.

He wasn't kidding about the incompatibility. The standard Ranger protocols—the code that ran the Morphin Grid tech—were rigid, structural. They looked like architecture: clean lines, sharp angles, mathematical precision.

But the Celtic data... it was a mess.

It didn't scroll; it *undulated*. On my screen, the patterns Billy had captured from the Riordans' magic looked less like code and more like a weather system. It flowed like water, ignoring the boundaries of the interface, trying to seep into the gaps of the Ranger tech rather than connecting with it.

Every time I tried to write a bridge protocol to connect the two, the Celtic code would surge and swallow my command lines whole.

"It's organic," I realized, leaning closer. "It's not executing commands; it's reacting to them."

I typed in a new sequence, trying to create a containment field for the raw data so I could analyze the syntax.

Error. Containment breached.

The code on the screen flared green, pulsing with a rhythm that felt uncomfortably like a heartbeat. My speakers, which were supposed to be muted, let out a low, resonant *thrum* that vibrated the desk.

"Okay," I whispered, typing faster. "You don't like cages. Got it. Let's try a filtration system instead."

I was so focused on the screen, trying to weave my own security protocols through the chaotic magic data, that I didn't hear the door creak open.

"Mummy?"

I jumped, spinning my chair around. Killy was standing in the doorway, clutching his koala with his good arm. His red, glitter-resistant cast was stark against his white pajamas, and his hair was mussed from sleep.

"Killy, love," I breathed, my heart rate spiking from the surprise. I quickly minimized the window with the magic code, hiding it behind a spreadsheet. "What are you doing up? Is your arm hurting?"

"Thirsty," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

But he didn't look at me. He was looking past me, staring intently at my computer monitors.

"Killy?"

He took a step into the room, his gaze locked on the screen where the minimized window was still running in the background.

"The lines are angry," he said softly.

I froze. "What lines, love?"

"The green ones," he pointed with his good hand. "They don't like the boxes. The boxes hurt them."

A chill that had nothing to do with the drafty Irish weather ran down my spine. The "boxes" were the containment protocols I'd been trying to use. The "green lines" were the Celtic magic.

I had minimized the window. He shouldn't be able to see anything but a boring spreadsheet.

"There are no lines, Killy. Just Mummy's work. Boring numbers."

"They're singing," he insisted, walking closer, his eyes wide and unblinking. "Can't you hear them? They want to go out."

The speakers let out another low *thrum*, louder this time.

I stood up immediately, moving between him and the computer. "Okay, that's enough. We're getting you some water and going back to bed. We have a big day at Auntie Kara's tomorrow."

"But Mummy, the blue line is trying to help," Killy said, trying to peer around me. "But the green line is scared."

The blue line. The Ranger Grid tech.

Billy's words echoed in my head: *We need someone who can see patterns that shouldn't be visible to regular humans.*

"Killy, look at me," I said, crouching down and gently turning his face toward mine. "No more looking at the screens. They're just... computer tricks. Okay?"

He looked at me, his expression solemn. "They're not tricks, Mummy. They're alive."

"Right," I said, my voice trembling slightly. "Let's get that water."

I scooped him up, careful of his cast, and carried him out of the office, kicking the door shut behind me firmly.

As I carried him to the kitchen, my mind was racing. It wasn't just a fluke with the encryption before. My son—my quiet, careful, two-year-old son—could see the code. He could *feel* the intent behind it.

I got him his water, settled him back into bed, and waited until his breathing evened out into sleep. I kissed his forehead, whispering a promise that I would keep this world away from him.

Then I marched back downstairs, walked past my office, and found J on the sofa. He was snoring softly, one arm hanging off the edge.

"Wake up," I said, shaking his shoulder.

"Wha—? Did Rose find the glitter again?" J sat up, blinking groggily, panic in his eyes.

"No," I said, pacing the rug. "But I need you to listen to me very carefully. Killy just walked into my office and told me the code I'm working on is 'scared' and 'angry.'"

J rubbed his face, trying to wake up. "He's two, Liv. He probably had a dream. Or he saw a screensaver."

"He knew the colors, J," I said, stopping in front of him. "He knew I was trying to put the code in 'boxes'—my containment protocols. He said the blue line was trying to help. He *saw* the interaction between the Grid and the Magic. Even though the window was minimized."

J was fully awake now. "You think... you think he has it? The sight? Like the Riordans?"

"I don't know," I admitted, hugging my arms around myself. "But Billy was right. And that scares the absolute shite out of me."

"We keep him away," J said firmly, standing up to hold me. "We agreed. He's a baby. He doesn't do Ranger stuff."

"I know," I whispered into his chest. "But what if the Ranger stuff comes for him?"

From my office down the hall, the computer speakers gave a sudden, sharp screech of feedback, followed by silence.

"I'm unplugging that damn machine," J said, moving toward the office.

"Don't," I grabbed his arm. "If you unplug it while the bridge is unstable, it might backlash. Or worse, it might alert Billy that something is wrong."

"Liv..."

"I have to finish the code. Tonight," I said, determination hardening my voice. "I'm fixing this bridge, I'm sending it to Billy, and then I am scrubbing my hard drive. I want this done before we go to Kara's tomorrow. No more alien code near my son."

"I'll make coffee," J said, understanding the mission. "You code. I'll guard the door. No one gets in. Especially not Killy."

I nodded and walked back into the office. The green lines were pulsing on the screen again, chaotic and wild.

"Alright," I muttered, sitting down and cracking my knuckles. "You don't like boxes? Fine. Killy said the blue line wanted to help. Let's try a weave."

I deleted the entire containment sequence I'd spent three hours building. The screen flashed red, then returned to the chaotic, swirling green data stream of the Celtic magic. It looked like a storm front moving across a radar, wild and untamable.

Billy's Morphin Grid tech was structured. Rigid. It was architecture. This magic was biology.

"If I can't box it," I muttered, my fingers hovering over the keys, "I have to support it. Like a garden trellis."

I started coding again, but this time, instead of trying to overwrite the Celtic frequency, I stripped the Ranger protocols down to their skeleton. I removed the firewalls and the encryption blocks that were acting as barriers. Instead, I wrote a new algorithm that mirrored the rhythm of the magic.

If Green pulses High, Blue shifts Low. If Green flows Left, Blue creates a Channel.

It was less like coding a security system and more like composing a harmony. I remembered what Billy had said about Michelle blending her Sailor and Ranger energies. It wasn't about one

dominating the other; it was about finding the resonance where they didn't cancel each other out.

"Come on," I whispered, typing a new command string. "Don't fight it. Just... climb."

On the screen, the blue stream of Ranger data approached the green storm of Celtic magic. Usually, this was the moment the system crashed.

Instead, the blue line curved. It wrapped around the green pulse, stabilizing it without stopping it.

I held my breath, watching the data streams intertwine.

"That's it," I breathed. "Killy was right. The blue line just wanted to help."

I input the final coordinates Billy had provided for the Ord na Toirín base ruins. The data stream shuddered. The speakers let out a low hum—not the angry feedback from before, but a steady, resonant tone that felt almost peaceful.

I hit the final execute command.

Bridging Protocol: Active. Connection Established. Security Handshake: Complete.

The chaotic swirling on the screen smoothed out into a stable, pulsing stream of data. Text began to scroll in the dialogue box: *Remote Link to Tower Ops Online.*

My phone buzzed on the desk, making me jump. It was a text from Billy.

Billy: *Did you just do what I think you did? The monitors at the Command Center just lit up green. We have a stable feed from the Celtic Academy.*

I let out a breath I felt like I'd been holding for six hours, slumping back in my chair. "It's done."

I picked up my phone and typed back.

Me: *It's a weave protocol. Don't try to put it in a container or you'll crash it again. And Billy? I'm sending you the source code now.*

Billy: *Receiving. This is brilliant, Livvie. The syntax is... almost musical.*

Me: *Just make sure it works. I'm scrubbing my drive.*

I hit send on the file transfer. As soon as the progress bar hit 100%, I initiated the wipe sequence for the project folder.

"And stay out," I muttered, watching the files vanish one by one. I emptied the trash and ran a secure scrub on the free space for good measure. Killy had seen it once; he was never seeing it again.

"Liv?"

I spun around. J was standing in the doorway, rubbing his eyes, his hair sticking up in every direction.

"Did it work?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep. "Or did the computer explode? I heard a hum."

"It worked," I said, the tension finally draining out of my shoulders. "And now it's gone. Scrubbed. It's Billy's problem now."

J smiled, a sleepy, relieved expression that made my heart squeeze. He walked over and pulled me out of the chair into a hug. "You're brilliant, you know that? Clever Livvie."

"I'm exhausted Livvie," I mumbled into his shoulder, breathing in the scent of him. "What time is it?"

"Just past one," J said. "Technically Thanksgiving. Or at least, the day we're pretending is Thanksgiving for Kara's sake."

"Oh god," I pulled back, panic flaring. "We have to be at Kara's by two tomorrow. I haven't made anything."

J laughed, smoothing my hair. "Love, do you really think I was going to let you cook for Thanksgiving? Do you not remember the Noodle Incident, among others?"

"That wasn't my fault," I protested weakly. "The pot was defective."

"The pot was fine, you just forgot water," he teased, kissing my forehead. "Don't worry. I prepped the stuffing and the sides while you were saving the digital world. All you have to do is show up and look pretty."

"And bring wine?"

"And bring wine. Lots of it."

"You're the best husband in the world," I sighed, leaning against him. "Have I mentioned that lately?"

"Not in the last hour," he grinned. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

"Rose will be up at six," I reminded him as we walked out of the office, leaving the dark screens behind us.

"Then I'll be up at six," J promised. "You sleep. I'll handle the fairy princess."

I paused at the top of the stairs, looking toward Killy's room. The door was ajar. I walked over quietly and peeked in. He was fast asleep, the red glitter-resistant cast resting on top of his duvet, the koala tucked under his chin.

He looked so small. So normal. The eerie knowledge of "angry lines" seemed miles away from this sleeping boy.

"No more magic," I whispered to the darkness. "I promise."

J squeezed my hand, guiding me away from the door. "Come on, Love. He's fine. They're both fine."

I let him lead me to our room, leaving the world of Rangers and magic behind. Tomorrow was just turkey, family, and absolutely no cooking for me.

So much for sleeping in.

The sun had barely cleared the horizon when the screaming started, shattering the peaceful silence I had promised myself only hours ago.

"RO RO! NO!"

"KI KI! SHUT UP!"

"DA!"

"KI KI, STOP!"

I groaned, pulling the pillow over my head for a fleeting second before realizing that it sounded like J was actually in distress. I rolled out of bed, my body protesting the lack of sleep, and shuffled into the hallway.

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the situation was clear. Rose was rattling the handle of J's salon door with violent determination, while J stood behind her, holding a very confused Killy and trying to herd Rose away from the deadbolt.

"It's locked, Róisín," J said, looking like he hadn't had nearly enough coffee for this. "You know the rules. We added the extra lock for a reason. No salon without Da."

"Need dryer!" Rose stated simply, banging on the wood.

"Why?" I asked, stepping into the fray.

Rose looked up at me, beaming with the innocent creativity that usually preceded a property damage claim. "Blow glitter. Make wall pretty."

My blood ran cold.

"Ro Ro watch 5 Minute Crafts," Killy explained helpfully from J's arm, clutching his koala. "On the TV."

I stared at them. "I specifically banned personal screens for this exact reason. How are you watching YouTube?"

"Smart TV," J sighed, scooping Rose up before she could try to pick the lock with a hair clip—something she had come disturbingly close to figuring out last week. "They figured out how to use the voice remote."

I rubbed my temples. I could hack alien encryption. I could bridge Celtic magic with the Morphin Grid. But apparently, I couldn't stop my two-year-olds from finding DIY glitter tutorials on the living room television.

"Okay," I said, taking the remote from the coffee table and removing the batteries. "No more 5 Minute Crafts. And definitely no blow-drying glitter onto the walls. Do you want to be grounded again?"

"No grounded!" Rose wailed, her artistic vision crushed. "I make Thanksgiving pretty!"

"Thanksgiving is pretty enough without glitter in the drywall," J said firmly, carrying her into the kitchen. "How about we make pancakes instead? No glitter. Just syrup."

"Syrup sticky," Killy noted approvingly.

"Exactly. Sticky is better than sparkly," J said, setting Rose in her high chair before she could protest.

While J started on breakfast—expertly navigating the kitchen with the efficiency of a man who knew his wife was a liability near a stove—I leaned against the counter, watching them.

"Did you sleep?" J asked, flipping a pancake.

"A bit," I lied. I checked the time. "We have to be at Kara's by two. What time do we need to start the sides?"

J turned to me, spatula in hand, with a look of loving concern. "We? Love, remember the agreement. You are responsible for the wine, the children's outfits, and looking gorgeous. I am responsible for everything that involves heat or knives."

I sat. Honestly, I was too tired to argue, and J's cooking was one of the few things in life I trusted implicitly.

The next few hours were a blur of domestic logistics. Getting Rose into her "fancy dress" (which involved a long negotiation about why fairy wings didn't go with a sweater), helping Killy navigate a shirt sleeve over his red cast, and packing enough snacks to survive the afternoon.

By one o'clock, J had prepared a casserole, a salad, and heated some rolls. I had gathered the twins and three bottles of wine.

"Ready?" J asked, balancing the pie carefully.

"As ready as I'll ever be for an American holiday in Ireland," I said. "At least Kara knows what she's doing."

"Trevor might disagree," J grinned. "He was texting me this morning asking if he should intervene with the turkey."

"Tell him to stand down," I laughed.

"Sounds like a trap," J muttered, but he smiled.

We headed out the front door and walked across the lawn to Kara and Hal's place next door. It was strange not having the driveway jammed with Hunter's massive truck or Michelle's SUV—they were back in California with their families, leaving the Irish contingent to celebrate on our own.

"It's going to be quiet without Mich and Hunter," J noted as we walked up the path.

"Quiet is good," I said, though I knew I'd miss them. "Quiet means no Ranger emergencies. No paparazzi. Just us and the family."

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Rose shouted as we reached the door, trying to ring the bell.

The door swung open before she could reach it.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Kara Jordan beamed, wearing an apron that looked far too clean for someone who had supposedly been cooking a turkey for six hours.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Rose shouted, running inside. "I brought sparkles!"

"No she didn't!" I yelled quickly, chasing after her. "Kara, check her pockets!"

We spilled into the hallway, the warmth of the house hitting us instantly. It smelled of sage and roasting meat, a heavy, comforting scent that brought me right back to our years in Texas.

"Come in, come in," Kara ushered us through. "Hal's already got the game on."

"Is that American football?" J asked, perking up as we walked toward the living room. "The one with all the commercials?"

"The very one," Hal Jordan called from the sofa, where Tiffy was already setting up a board game. "Come on, J. Let me explain the concept of a 'first down' to you again."

"I understand it perfectly," J argued, handing me the food to take to the kitchen before joining Hal. "It's just rugby with more armor and less running."

I walked into the kitchen to find a full house. Amber was perched on the counter, supervising a very stressed-looking Trevor who was hovering over Kara's oven.

"It needs basting, Kara," Trevor was saying, his Michelin-star chef anxiety on full display. "It's going to be dry."

"Step away from the bird, Trevor," Amber commanded, sipping her wine. "Let the woman cook. It's Thanksgiving, not a health inspection."

"Happy Thanksgiving!" I announced, setting down the pie.

"Livvie!" Abby turned from the sink where she was washing grapes. "You made it. Where are the twins?"

"Terrorizing Hal in the living room," I said, hugging her. "Where's Sosaidh?"

"Right here!" J's little sister breezed in from the back patio, carrying a massive dish of macaroni and cheese. "I made the mac and cheese! American style!"

Trevor looked at the dish, which appeared to be a mess of cheese. "Sosaidh... what cheese is that?"

"Um....just whatever I had in my fridge. I just used it all!" she announced proudly. "It's uthentic!"

Trevor looked physically pained. "I offered to make a béchamel with Gruyère..."

"No," Amber pointed a finger at him. "Sosaidah's looks great. You will eat it, Chef."

I laughed, taking the glass of wine Kara handed me. "This is going to be a disaster. I love it."

"Speaking of disaster," Kenzie walked in, hand-in-hand with Shay. "Shay just tried to explain candied yams to her aunt in the UK and she hung up on us."

"It's a vegetable covered in marshmallows," Shay shrugged, grinning at J who had wandered in for a beer. "It defies logic. You know this."

"I miss Texas," J admitted, grabbing a Shiner Bock that Hal must have imported specially. It was the only American beer J actually liked. "Where sugar is a food group."

I leaned against the counter, watching the chaos. Trevor trying to fix the gravy while Kara wasn't looking, Sosaidh defending her pasta, Kenzie and Shay stealing rolls, and Abby laughing at all of them.

From the living room, I heard Killy's voice. "Mummy! Da said no beans in the pie!"

"It's pecan pie, love!" I called back. "No beans!"

I took a long drink of wine. The anxiety of the night before faded. The angry green code, Killy's eerie voice, the threat of the Ranger world—it all felt miles away.

Yeah. I could do this. Just a normal, chaotic family holiday with the neighbors and the extended clan.

As long as no one mentioned magic, aliens, or glitter, we were going to be fine.

Amber

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I grabbed a fresh beer with one hand and my husband's arm with the other, exerting just enough pressure to stop him from attempting a culinary coup.

"Mi corazón, enough," I said firmly. "We discussed this. Thanksgiving is Kara's day. Step away from the oven."

I pulled him out of the kitchen before he could attempt to "fix" the gravy again.

"But the turkey," Trevor protested, looking back at the stove with genuine distress. "She hasn't basted it in twenty minutes. It's going to be dry as a bone, Amber. You don't want dry turkey."

"Love, Kara's turkey has never been dry. She is a wonderful cook," I insisted, steering him toward the living room. "Let's go check on Rachel. Or watch the football game. Anything that doesn't involve you insulting our hostess."

Trevor sighed, defeated. "She's fine out in the garden with my mam."

"Then let's watch the game"

We settled into the living room, which was a comfortable chaos of noise and family. Kora was on the floor, patiently helping Tiffy and Rose navigate a board game that seemed to involve a lot of shouting. Killy was sitting on the sofa, his red cast propped up on a pillow, staring at the TV with intense focus as if he were analyzing the defensive line.

And Kira was perched in the armchair by the window, compact in hand, touching up her lipstick.

“Hey Kira,” I said, leaning against the armrest. I had always had a soft spot for Kara’s oldest—she had an eye for aesthetics that reminded me of myself at her age, minus the con artist baggage.

“Hi Aunt Amber!” Kira brightened immediately, snapping the compact shut. “I got the new palette you sent over. I love it. I can’t wait until you launch it so I can share my thoughts on the channel.”

“I’m glad you liked it,” I smiled, taking a sip of my beer. It was always gratifying to see the products land with the right audience.

“It’s a beautiful color story,” she continued enthusiastically. “So unique for a spring palette—the lilacs mixed with the bronze? It shouldn’t work, but it does!”

“That’s the secret,” I winked. “Contrast creates interest.”

I paused, an idea forming that had been simmering in the back of my mind for weeks.

“I was actually thinking,” I said, keeping my voice casual but watching her reaction closely. “With the Thara campaign blissfully behind us—and thank god for that, because cat hair is not a spring trend—maybe we go a new way with the marketing for this collection. It’s young, it’s fresh...”

I let the thought hang for a second. “Would you and Arissa be interested in being our spokesmodels for the spring launch?”

Kira’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? Yes! Oh my god, yes!”

“What? Model? Wait a second,” Hal’s head snapped around from the TV, his “Dad Radar” pinging instantly. “Who’s modeling what?”

I held up a hand to forestall the panic. “It is, of course, up to your parents. And Arissa’s. It would be a proper campaign—contracts, supervision, very tasteful. Just showcasing the new line.”

“Oh come on, Dad, please,” Kira begged, turning her high-beam eyes on him. “It’s Aunt Amber’s company! You know it’s safe!”

“We will discuss it with your mom later,” Hal said, using his pilot voice—calm, authoritative, and non-negotiable. “After Thanksgiving. And I’ll want to see the contract.”

Kira sighed, slumping back in her chair, but I caught the gleam of excitement still in her eyes. “Fine. But I really want to do it.”

“Noted,” I agreed. “We’ll talk to your parents. And Hunter and Michelle, obviously. Though I suspect Michelle will have *opinions* about the styling.”

"She always does," Trevor muttered from the sofa, finally resigning himself to watching the game instead of the turkey.

I smiled, settling onto the arm of his chair. It was a good day. No cameras, no sister drama, just family, football, and business deals made over beer.

And if the turkey was dry? Well, that's what the gravy was for.

Once I was certain Trevor was safely engaged in a debate with Jeremy and Hal about the merits of zone defense versus man-to-man, I slipped out the back door to check on the other most important person in my life.

Niamh was sitting on a plaid blanket spread across the grass, letting Rachel practice her tummy time. It was a rare, crisp day—cool but dry, the kind of Irish autumn afternoon that felt like a gift.

I smiled, walking over to sit beside her. "Hey, Mam. How's it going out here?"

Niamh sighed, smoothing the blanket where Rachel was happily chewing on a soft block. "I feel useless, love. Kara insists she doesn't need help in the kitchen, and I don't know the first thing about American Thanksgiving protocols. The only other one I've experienced was the dinner Trevor made for you last year."

She looked down at her hands, her expression wistful. "And with Lea in California with Michelle and Hunter... well. It feels a bit empty without my partner in crime."

"Oh, Niamh." I put my arm around her, leaning my head on her shoulder. I knew how much she missed Lea—they had become inseparable. "You're never useless. You being here makes our family complete. It wouldn't be a holiday without you."

I watched Rachel roll over, babbling at the sky. My seven-month-old was getting so big, so fast.

"Besides," I added, an idea forming. "Kara is a Texan, which means she's polite, but she's also drowning in starch. I bet she could use an expert hand with the mash. No one understands potatoes like an Irish mam."

Niamh perked up slightly, but hesitated. "I don't want to step on any toes. It's her kitchen."

"You won't," I promised, standing up and offering her a hand. "Come on. Let's go rescue the side dishes."

Niamh nodded, her purpose restored. She carefully picked up Rachel, cooing at her, and we headed back inside. The warmth of the kitchen hit us immediately, smelling of sage and butter.

"Kara?" I called out over the din of clattering pans. "I found a volunteer. Niamh is feeling underutilized, and I realized we have a crisis."

Kara looked up from the oven, wiping her hands on her apron. "A crisis?"

"The potatoes," I said solemnly. "They need the Irish touch. Niamh is available for consultation and mashing duties."

Kara looked at Niamh's hopeful face and smiled warmly. "Oh, thank goodness. I was just staring at five pounds of russets wondering if I had the arm strength. There is absolutely no one better for the job."

Niamh beamed, her shoulders relaxing. "Well, I do have a specific technique for the cream..."

"You're hired," Kara laughed.

I reached out and took Rachel from Niamh's arms. "See? Perfect. You help in here. I'll take this little wiggle worm to see her cousins. I think Rose is building a fort that needs inspecting."

"Go on then," Niamh shooed me away, already reaching for a peeler. "Leave the real cooking to us."

I walked back toward the living room, bouncing Rachel on my hip. Crisis averted. Trevor was contained, Niamh was employed, and I had a baby to snuggle.

Now, if I could just keep Sosaidh from putting any more cheese in the mac, we might actually survive dinner.

"LIVVIE! OUT!"

The command came in perfect unison from the kitchen—Kara and Abby harmonizing in the key of panic.

On the sofa, Jeremy flinched like he'd heard a gunshot. "Oh god," he muttered, abandoning his beer and scrambling up. "She's near the heat source. I have to extract her before she accidentally sets the salad on fire."

He bolted toward the kitchen, presumably to physically remove his wife from the premises.

I settled into the armchair, adjusting Rachel on my lap as I watched the rescue mission unfold. "Why does she even try?" I sighed, smoothing Rachel's dress. "I love Liv, but she is literally more of a disaster in the kitchen than Sosaidh. And that is a high bar to clear."

Trevor groaned beside me, rubbing his temples. "Don't remind me. I rue the day I gave Sosaidh that pink chef's hat. It was meant to be ironic."

"Irony doesn't pay the bills, Trev," I reminded him with a smirk. "But 'Cooking Disasters' apparently does. If Sosaidh can monetize that hat on her channel, she's going to wear it to bed."

"BABY RAY!"

A blur of pink tulle and mismatched wings shot across the rug. Rose skidded to a halt inches from my knees, vibrating with energy.

Rachel jerked in my arms, her little face crumpling in alarm at the sudden intrusion of the fairy kingdom.

"I sorry," Rose whispered, hunching her shoulders up to her ears and shrinking down until she looked like a remorseful mushroom in tulle. Her wings drooped dramatically.

I smiled, softening my tone. "It's okay, sweetie. Just remember, she's tiny and you're a big girl. Big girls have to be careful with the littles."

"Ro Ro go to Da's work for dryer," Killy announced suddenly from the sofa, his eyes wide and serious as he clutched his koala against his cast.

I blinked, looking from the boy to his sister. "What? Why did she need a dryer?"

Before Rose could explain her artistic vision, Jeremy marched back into the living room, firmly guiding Livvie by the shoulders like he was escorting a VIP away from a crime scene.

"I have retrieved the asset," J announced, depositing his wife on the arm of the sofa. "She was attempting to 'help' verify the oven temperature. It was a close call."

"I was just checking the bird!" Livvie protested, accepting the glass of wine Kara had handed her earlier. She looked at me and sighed. "And to answer your question—Killy means Rose saw a hack on *5-Minute Crafts* this morning. She tried to break into J's salon to steal a blow dryer so she could spray glitter onto the hallway walls."

"Ingenious," I admitted, fighting a laugh. "Terrifying, but ingenious."

"Of course," I said, turning back to Rose. "Everything needs glitter."

Rose nodded happily, her earlier remorse vanishing instantly. She looked at me with pure validation, as if I had just agreed with the most fundamental law of physics.

"See?" she told Killy triumphantly. "Auntie Amber knows."

"Dinner is served!" Kenzie appeared in the archway, wiping her hands on a towel, looking every bit the professional pastry chef she was training to be. "And before anyone asks, yes, there are marshmallows on the yams. Shay insisted."

"As she should," I said, standing up and settling Rachel on my hip. "It's not Thanksgiving without a diabetic coma."

The migration to the dining room was a logistical feat. Between the toddlers, the teenagers, and the adults, it felt less like a family dinner and more like a strategic troop movement.

Hal took the head of the table, looking every inch the proud patriarch of this chaotic clan. Kara began bringing out the platters, and I watched my husband's eyes track the turkey with the intensity of a bomb disposal expert.

"Well?" I whispered to Trevor as we took our seats. "Verdict?"

He watched Kara carve the bird. Juice ran onto the platter.

"It's... actually perfectly cooked," he admitted, sounding both relieved and slightly disappointed that he hadn't needed to intervene. "She must have brined it."

"Or she just knows how to cook, babe. Accept it."

"I made the mac and cheese!" Sosaidh announced, crashing into the dining room with a casserole dish that was dangerously full. She set it down with a heavy *thud*, wiping her hands on her apron. "American style! Just like the video said."

Trevor leaned over the dish, his nose twitching. The surface was a bubbling, uneven landscape of orange oil and white lumps. "Sosaidh... why is it separating?"

"Well," Sosaidh began, gesturing enthusiastically. "The lady in the video said you need flour for a 'roux,' but I didn't have any flour. So I just boiled the cream and butter together until it looked... thick-ish. Then I just blobbed the cheese in. Sanitation be damned, you know?"

Trevor looked like he was going to cry. "You 'blobbed' it in? Without a binding agent?"

"Measuring is for cowards, Trev," she scoffed, grabbing a serving spoon. "I used everything I had. Cheddar, Gouda, Havarti... I think there was some Halloumi? And then I put the slices on top because you can never have too much cheese."

"Is that..." I squinted at a white, fluffy patch in the corner of the dish. "Sosaidh, is that a marshmallow?"

"Oh! Yes!" She beamed. "The video said marshmallows go in the Thanksgiving casserole. I got confused about which casserole, so I put a few in the mac and cheese just to be safe. But then I realized they meant the yams, so I stopped. But a few might have melted."

"You put... marshmallows... in the cheese sauce?" Trevor whispered, looking at me with wide, terrified eyes.

"Sweet and savory!" Sosaidh insisted. "Plus, I added a splash of Jack Daniels. For the culture."

"There is whiskey in the pasta?" Hal asked, looking intrigued.

"Just a spoonful!" she promised. "It makes the medicine go down. Or the cheese. Anyway, dig in! It looks fucking yummy, if I do say so myself."

Trevor stared at the neon orange, oil-slicked, whiskey-infused, marshmallow-tainted pasta. He looked at me.

"Eat it," I whispered, kicking him under the table. "She tried."

"It's a crime against culinary arts," he hissed back.

"It's tradition," I corrected. "Eat the whiskey cheese, Chef."

With the grim determination of a man walking to the gallows, Trevor took a scoop. The cheese stretched—and stretched—and refused to break, forcing him to use his fork like a saw. He put it in his mouth, chewed, and turned a shade of pale green.

"Interesting," he managed, reaching for his wine. "Very... complex profile."

"See?" Sosaidh beamed, slapping him on the back. "I knew I nailed it!"

We passed plates, filled glasses, and managed to get Rose situated between J and Livvie without any major glitter incidents—though I noticed she was eyeing the cranberry sauce with a suspicious level of creative interest.

"No painting with the sauce, Fairy Girl," J warned her, catching her hand just as a finger dipped toward the bowl.

"Make pretty?" Rose asked hopefully.

"It's pretty enough," Livvie said, handing her a roll. "Eat."

Once everyone was served, Hal tapped his glass.

"Alright," he said, looking around the table. "I know we're missing a few faces today—Michelle and Hunter are in California, James and the others couldn't make it—but I'm grateful for everyone here."

"Here here," Niamh said, raising her glass. "It's good to have the house full."

"We usually do the whole 'what we're thankful for' thing," Kara said, smiling at Hal. "But I think we can keep it short this year since the food is hot."

"I'm thankful for the marshmallows!" Shay called out from the end of the table.

"I'm thankful for sparkly nails!" Rose added loudly.

"I'm thankful the turkey isn't dry," Trevor muttered into his wine glass, earning a laugh from Livvie.

"I'm thankful for this family," I said, looking around the table. "Chosen and otherwise."

"To family," Hal toasted.

"To family!" we echoed.

Livvie

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We ended up spending the rest of the afternoon at the Jordan house, letting the food coma settle in. Rose and Killy, exhausted from their early morning wakeup call and the excitement of the day, eventually crashed in Tiffany's room, curled up like puppies on the duvet.

With the men occupied by the football game and the kids asleep, I escaped to the back garden with Amber and Abby. The Irish weather was holding steady—crisp but dry—making it perfect for sitting outside.

We settled in with our drinks—Amber nursing a glass of red wine, Abby with a gin and tonic, and me with a cold beer.

"Thank you guys for doing this," Amber said, looking out over the garden. She swirled her wine, looking unusually sentimental. "I know Thanksgiving isn't exactly an Australian tradition, but it means a lot to me that you guys celebrate it."

I reached over and squeezed her hand. "We're family. That's what we do. Abs and I might not have grown up with pilgrims and turkeys, but we have American family now. You, the Jordans, the Bradleys... we celebrate what you celebrate."

Amber rolled her eyes at the mention of the last name, her sentimental mood vanishing instantly. "Speaking of the Bradleys... how insufferable do you think Michelle will be when she gets back from this tour?"

I took a sip of my beer, doing the math. "Approximately four times as much as normal?"

"Add to that the fact that her show is crushing the ratings and is already practically greenlit for a second season?" Abs chimed in, taking a drink. "I'd say seven times. Minimum. She's going to be unbearable."

Amber sighed, leaning her head back against the chair cushion. "Just what we need. Another reason for her to think she's the center of the universe. How long is she back for this time? Do we know?"

"She told J she'd be around for a few weeks before she has to go back to Nashville," I said. "So basically, she's here for Christmas and New Year, then she's gone again. She has more filming to do, then another tour in the spring."

"Well, good," Amber said, raising her glass in a mock toast. "The less Mich is around, the better for my blood pressure."

Abs shook her head, laughing. "It has to be so weird for you. Niamh and Lea are best friends. Trevor and Hunter are best mates. Rachel and Tomi are inseparable. And yet you and Michelle are frenemies at best."

"We deal with each other when we have to," Amber shrugged. "For the sake of the greater good. And because our husbands would cry if we actually killed each other."

"Oh come on, Amber," I nudged her leg with my foot. "You know Michelle is an important part of this family. She drives us all absolutely mad—me included—but we love her."

"Speak for yourself," Amber countered, though there was no real heat in it.

"Speaking of best mates," Abs asked, turning to Amber. "Have you heard from Mia? How is she?"

"She's good," Amber said. "Planning a world tour for next year. But for the holidays... she went to Ocean Bluff. To spend it with RJ and his daughters."

I sat up straighter. "Spending the holidays together? In Ocean Bluff? Wow. So are they officially a thing now?"

Amber laughed, shaking her head. "Not according to Mia. She insists they are simply 'appreciating each other's companionship.' That's the official line."

"Is she staying with him?" I asked. "In his apartment? With his kids?"

Amber nodded.

"Right," I said dryly. "She can call it whatever she wants. She walks red carpets with him, she spends Christmas with him, she fucks him... they are a thing. They're just stubborn."

"And last I heard, Michelle hates it," Abs said, a mischievous glint in her eye. "She hates RJ for the past, she hates that Mia doesn't hate him, and she hates even more that they're intimate. It drives her crazy that Mia is sleeping with her ex-husband."

Amber laughed, a genuine, delighted sound. "And honestly? That is the best part of the whole thing. Besides Mia being happy, of course. Knowing that Michelle is seething about it is just the icing on the cake."

"We should probably go rescue the men," I said, draining the last of my beer. "Before Trevor tries to reorganize Kara's spice rack or J tries to explain the rules of hurling to Hal again."

"Hal is a lost cause on hurling," Abby laughed, standing up and brushing grass from her jeans. "He still thinks it's just 'violent hockey.'"

"To be fair," Amber noted, finishing her wine, "he's not wrong."

We headed back inside, the warmth of the house wrapping around us like a blanket. The living room was a scene of comfortable devastation. The football game was still playing, though the volume was low. Hal and J were slumped on the sofa in a food coma, while Trevor was pacing near the television, critiquing the quarterback's decision-making with the same intensity he usually reserved for a sous-chef.

"Where are the kids?" I asked, scanning the room.

"Still napping," J mumbled, not opening his eyes. "Killy woke up once for water, then went back down. Tiffany and Rose are out cold."

"Miraculous," I whispered.

"Dessert?" Kenzie appeared from the kitchen, carrying the pecan pie. "It's cooled enough to slice."

"Oh, thank god," J sat up instantly, his energy restored by the promise of sugar. "And remember—no beans."

"No beans," Kenzie promised, cutting a generous slice.

We gathered around the coffee table, plates balanced on knees, passing forks and napkins. Trevor took a bite of the pie, chewing thoughtfully while Amber watched him with an amused smirk.

"Well?" Kara asked, brave enough to solicit the opinion.

"The crust is... rustic," Trevor said diplomatically. "But the filling set perfectly. Good job, Kenzie."

"High praise," Amber laughed, taking a bite of her own.

As we ate, the sun began to dip lower, casting long shadows across the room. It was one of those rare, perfect afternoons where nobody was rushing to leave, nobody was checking their phone for work emails (or Ranger emergencies), and the biggest crisis was who got the last piece of pie.

I looked around the room—at my husband with whipped cream on his nose, at my sister Abby laughing with Sosaidh, at Amber and Trevor sharing a plate. We were a motley crew of expats, locals, and strays, bound together by choice rather than blood.

"You know," J said, leaning back and patting his stomach. "This American Thanksgiving thing isn't half bad. We should do it again next year."

"We do it every year, J," I reminded him.

"Aye, but next year I'm making the mac and cheese," Trevor muttered. "Properly."

"Over my dead body!" Sosaidh called from the kitchen, where she was scraping the neon orange remnants of her dish. "My dish was a hit!"

I laughed, settling back against the sofa cushion. In a few weeks, Michelle would be back with her whirlwind energy. The tour would be over. The Ranger tech might flare up again.

But for now? It was just pie and peace.

"Happy Thanksgiving," I whispered to J, resting my head on his shoulder.

He kissed my hair, his arm tightening around me. "Happy Thanksgiving, Love."

"Rising Obsession"

I looked in the mirror and barely recognized myself. My blonde hair was iron straight, falling like a golden curtain down my back instead of its usual wild waves. I had on fitted jeans and a purple tank top embellished with subtle Saturnian symbols along the hem—my heritage discretely on display. The clothes would have been fine on their own, but the makeup transformed me: dark eyeliner rimmed my eyes, making the blue irises pop against earth-toned shadow, and a hint of pink gloss made my lips look fuller, more mature.

I looked like a rock star. I guess that was fitting since I was Michelle Morris's daughter—the Princess of Saturn moonlighting as the newest voice in the Morris family dynasty.

"Okay Harley, two minutes," a stagehand called through the door, his voice carrying the practiced calm of someone used to herding celebrities.

My heart hammered against my ribs. This wasn't just another performance in Mom's shadow. This was *my* debut. My first time performing my own songs on stage. How many kids started their career at a sold-out arena? Perks of having a mom who's one of the most famous singers on the planet, I guess.

My phone chimed with a text notification. I glanced down to see Aaron's name on the screen.

"Good luck tonight, Princess. I know you're going to be great."

A smile tugged at my lips. Aaron—steady, reliable Aaron—always knew exactly when I needed encouragement. I was about to reply when the dressing room door opened with a soft whoosh.

Mom walked in, radiant in her pre-show outfit—a simple black jumpsuit that somehow looked more elegant on her than most people's formal wear. Her presence filled the small space, bringing with it the familiar scent of her signature perfume and that indefinable energy that made Michelle Morris a superstar.

"You ready, baby girl?" she asked, her voice gentle as she ran her hands over my hair, smoothing invisible flyaways with the tender precision of a mother rather than a global icon.

I nodded, swallowing against the dryness in my throat. "As much as I can be."

"You'll be great," Mom assured me, her eyes—a deeper blue than my own—radiating absolute confidence. "Your songs are awesome and you're so talented. Just sing like you do in the studio and you'll be fine."

I laughed, the sound a touch higher than normal. "There aren't thousands of people in the studio."

Mom's hands came to rest on my shoulders, grounding me with their familiar weight. "Forget about them. Just you and the music. That's all that matters."

The simplicity of her advice cut through my anxiety. Just me and the music—the same approach that had carried her through decades of stardom.

I nodded, drawing strength from her certainty. "Me and the music."

"Har! It's go time!" Arissa's voice called from the hallway. My sister, already in her performance gear—a crimson skater dress that highlighted her striking presence—appeared in the doorway. She would be going on after me, each of us doing five-song sets to open for Mom. Three original songs, two Christmas classics, a perfect seasonal blend for the tour.

"You got this," Mom said, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead—careful not to smudge my makeup—as I stood up.

I smoothed my hands down my jeans, took a deep breath, and headed out of the dressing room toward the stage. The distant roar of the crowd grew louder with each step, a wall of sound waiting to either embrace or reject me.

This was it. The moment I'd been preparing for my entire life, even if I hadn't realized it. The moment when Harlyn, Princess of Saturn, would step aside and Harley Bradley would take center stage.

Now or never.

The lights in the arena dimmed to near darkness, leaving only the ghostly blue glow of floor markers to guide my path. Stagehands with headsets gave me the signal—five seconds, then I was on. I gripped my guitar, the smooth finish of the custom purple Fender beneath my fingers providing a strange comfort.

One deep breath. Two. Then I stepped into the void.

The roar hit me first—thousands of people, their collective energy a physical force that pushed against my chest as I walked to center stage. The opening notes of "Why" drifted from the band behind me, each chord progression exactly as we'd rehearsed, yet somehow more alive now with the weight of all these expectant ears.

I approached the microphone, closed my eyes, and let my fingers find their positions on the fretboard.

Just me and the music.

Just me and the music.

Mom's advice echoed in my mind, becoming my mantra as I began to sing. My voice felt tentative at first, sounding strange and distant in my ear monitor—was it too soft? Too sharp? But as the first verse progressed, something shifted. The nervous energy transformed into something electric, something powerful.

This wasn't just bearable. This was *fun*.

I opened my eyes, and the sea of faces came into focus—not a faceless mass, but individual people swaying, smiling, some already mouthing along to lyrics they'd clearly learned from streaming my singles. They weren't just tolerating the opening act; they were *engaged*.

I kept playing, confidence building with each chord change. My voice found its strength, climbing into the chorus with a conviction that surprised even me. The band tightened around my performance, and for three perfect minutes, everything else fell away—no royal duties, no Ranger responsibilities, no Viper leaving creepy gifts. Just music and connection.

As the final notes of "Why" faded into the arena's vastness, the response was immediate—a wave of cheers and applause that washed over me, more intoxicating than I'd imagined. I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face, wide and genuine.

"Thank you, New Jersey!" I called into the mic, the words tumbling out with breathless excitement. "I'm Harley Bradley. You probably knew that though." I adjusted my guitar strap, finding my rhythm in this new role—performer, not just princess or Ranger. "I mean, you are here to see my mom. And, ya know, TMZ seems to love me these days."

The crowd laughed—not the polite chuckle of obligation, but the warm response of people connecting with my authenticity. The sound bolstered my confidence further.

"So, while my mom is getting ready to give you an amazing show, I have a couple other songs I'd like to share if that's okay with you."

The answering cheer was all the permission I needed. I nodded to the drummer, who counted us in.

"I wrote this one because sometimes it's just easier to write lyrics than to say things out loud," I explained, my fingers already finding the opening riff of "Things I'll Never Say."

The crowd response swelled as they recognized the song from streaming platforms—some even singing along to the first verse. The realization that strangers knew my words, felt my emotions, had made my music part of their lives—it was overwhelming in the best possible way.

As I leaned into the chorus, I caught sight of Arissa in the wings, watching with undisguised pride. Behind her, partially hidden by a curtain, stood Arion—ever vigilant, scanning the crowd rather than watching me. Dad's orders to increase security suddenly felt less like overprotection and more like necessary caution.

But for now, in this moment, I wasn't Princess Harlyn of Saturn or the Violet Thunder Ranger. I was just Harley Bradley, songwriter, finding her voice in front of thousands who seemed, miraculously, to want to hear it.

I ended my set with one more original song and two of my favorite Christmas songs. As the final notes faded, the applause washed over me like a wave.

"Thank you, New Jersey!" I called, still riding the high of performance. "But don't go anywhere! Michelle Morris is still coming up, but first—" I gestured toward the wings with a flourish, "—my amazing sister, Arissa Bradley. You won't want to miss it!"

The lights dimmed, plunging the stage into momentary darkness as I made my exit. The transition from the roaring arena to the relative quiet of backstage was jarring, like stepping through a portal between worlds.

Dad was waiting just offstage, his face lit with a pride I rarely saw so openly displayed. "You were amazing, Harley!" he said, pulling me into a tight embrace that smelled of his familiar cologne.

Arissa stood nearby, in her arms, Tomi squirmed happily, her tiny hands reaching for me despite the oversized baby ear protectors that made her look like a miniature DJ.

"You did really great!" Arissa said, her eyes bright with genuine excitement. "How was it?"

"So fun!" The words tumbled out, inadequate to describe the electric connection I'd felt with the audience. "I can't wait to do it again tomorrow! Did Mom see?"

"She did," Arissa confirmed, adjusting Tomi on her hip, "but as soon as you finished your last song, she had to go finish getting ready so she can watch my set too."

"That was most impressive, Prin—" Arion caught himself, remembering we were surrounded by crew members who weren't privy to our royal heritage, "—Harley." His formal demeanor softened into a rare smile.

"Thanks, Arion," I replied, noticing how his eyes never stopped scanning our surroundings despite the conversation.

Despite the post-performance euphoria still coursing through me, my thoughts kept drifting to my dressing room—specifically, to my phone. I wanted to text Aaron, to share this moment with someone who would understand both the music and the complexity of balancing a normal teenage life with extraordinary responsibilities.

Arissa handed Tomi to me, the toddler's weight warm and solid in my arms. "Your turn to take the Marshmallow. My turn to rock the stage."

I adjusted my grip on my baby sister, who immediately reached for my hair with surprising strength for someone so tiny. "Hey, kid."

"Har-ree," Tomi babbled, her version of my name still a work in progress.

"Okay, wish me luck," Arissa said, rolling her shoulders to release tension. She glanced at Arion, her expression softening. "Arion, I hope you like the songs I wrote. You kinda inspired them."

A faint blush colored Arion's normally stoic features. "I'm sure they will be wonderful. I cannot wait to hear them," he replied, stealing a quick kiss when Dad's attention was momentarily elsewhere.

"Good luck," I told her, recognizing the mixture of nerves and excitement I'd felt myself moments ago. "You got this."

"You do," Dad agreed, his voice carrying the steady confidence that had guided both our musical and Ranger training. "We'll be here when you finish."

We watched as Arissa took the stage, the crowd's roar swelling as the lights revealed her. The opening notes of her first song—heavier, more rock-influenced than my acoustic set—reverberated through the backstage area. I could see it in her posture, the moment she connected with the audience, the instant she felt what I had just experienced.

I bounced Tomi gently in my arms, watching my sister command the stage with the same confidence she brought to piloting the Violet Thunder Zord. In that moment, despite Viper's threats and the weight of our various responsibilities, I felt a surge of something powerful and rare—pure, uncomplicated happiness.

Arissa

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I looked out at the sea of faces, the moment suspended in perfect clarity. This is exactly what I'd been yearning for ever since Mia introduced me to music for the first time on Nemesis. I still remember that day—the way the melody had wrapped around me, how the harmonies had opened something inside my chest that I hadn't known was closed. The moment I heard a song for the first time, it completely enchanted me. I knew then I wanted to create something just as beautiful and share it with the universe.

The band behind me struck the opening notes of "Watching the Rain," the familiar progression we'd rehearsed countless times now amplified by the energy of thousands. I felt the weight of my electric guitar against me, an extension of myself as natural as breathing. When I began to sing, my voice filled the arena—strong, clear, and unmistakably mine.

It was everything I had hoped it would be and so much more. This was what I was meant to do. This is what Aunt Aria had kept from me when she tried to groom me to be a weapon. I wasn't a war machine crafted for conquest. I was a musician, and my songs—born from pain, joy, love, and discovery—were being shared with this beautiful world I'd adopted as my home.

The crowd erupted as the final chord of "Watching the Rain" reverberated through the space, their energy feeding mine in a perfect circuit of connection.

"Thank you, New Jersey!" I called into the microphone, unable to contain my smile. "I'm Arissa Bradley, and I am beyond excited to share my music with you tonight!" The words tumbled out, charged with genuine emotion. "I know you all are here to have a good time and listen to music, but you're also making my dream come true, so thank you!"



I adjusted my guitar strap, the crimson leather matching my jacket—a subtle nod to my Ranger color that only those closest to me would recognize.

"Thank you for supporting me online! You've downloaded my songs even though they're just tracks I recorded at home and put online. You've watched and subscribed to my YouTube beauty channel, A&K Beauty, that I love sharing with my best friend Kira." The faces before me were no longer an anonymous mass but individuals—people who had, in their own way, helped me find my place on this planet. "You have supported me from afar for so long. I am so happy I can finally say thank you in person!"

I glanced toward the wings where I knew Arion was watching, his stoic guardian persona momentarily softened by pride. Even from this distance, I could feel the intensity of his gaze.

"Now, I want to share a song I wrote for my amazing boyfriend, Arion," I announced, my heart fluttering at saying it so publicly. "This one is called 'I Like.'"

As I launched into the next song, my fingers found the chords without conscious thought. The lyrics—about finding unexpected connection, about someone seeing past the surface to who you truly are—took on new meaning with thousands of witnesses. What had begun as a private expression of feelings for a fellow warrior from my home system was now a shared experience, resonating with anyone who had ever found love in an unexpected place.

From there, my set flowed seamlessly—one more original that spoke of finding home in unfamiliar places, followed by two Christmas songs I'd come to love since arriving on Earth from TK-91. I'd chosen arrangements that blended traditional Earth holiday elements with subtle musical structures from my home system—a fusion that represented my own journey.

As I played the final notes of "Silent Night," reimagined with a bridge that echoed Nemesian lullabies, I was struck by a profound realization: Until now, I thought the biggest thrill of my life was when I received my Crimson Thunder Morpher, the moment I officially became part of the legacy my father had begun. But this—this connection through music, this ability to transform emotion into sound and have it reflected back by thousands—was possibly even more exciting.

Being a Ranger was about protection, about fighting against darkness. But this—this was about creation. About bringing light rather than merely defending against shadow.

As the crowd's applause washed over me, I caught sight of my father in the wings, Tomi in his arms, Harley beside them. Their faces shone with pride and something else—understanding. They knew, perhaps better than anyone, what this moment meant to me.

I was Arissa Bradley—daughter of Michelle Morris and Hunter Bradley, sister to Harley and Tomi, girlfriend to Arion, Crimson Thunder Ranger, Princess of TK-91, Saturn, and Nemesis, and now, undeniably, a musician in my own right.

And for tonight, at least, that last identity felt like the most important one of all.

When the show ended, I thanked the crowd one more time, my voice nearly drowned by their continuing applause. I took a final bow before running backstage, adrenaline still coursing through my veins like electricity.

Arion was waiting just beyond the curtain, his usually stoic expression replaced by unguarded joy. I didn't slow down—I simply launched myself into his arms with complete trust that he would catch me. He did, wrapping me in a powerful embrace and spinning me in a circle, my feet leaving the ground entirely. It was a rare moment when he actually let himself get lost in the moment with me, the disciplined Saturnian royal guard temporarily forgotten.

"You were amazing," Arion said, his voice low and intimate as he set me down and pressed his lips to mine. The kiss was brief but intense, conveying everything words couldn't.

After a few moments, Dad cleared his throat with deliberate volume.

Arion released me immediately, his military training reasserting itself as he straightened to attention. "Sorry, sir."

"I'm sure," Dad replied dryly, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward. "He is right, though. You were amazing."

"You both were," Mom added as she approached, already in full Michelle Morris mode—hair styled in her signature waves, makeup perfect, wearing the shimmering blue jumpsuit that would catch the light spectacularly under the stage lights. Despite preparing for her own performance, she radiated maternal pride.

Harley bounced on her toes beside them, still riding her own post-performance high. "You're such a natural, Riss. You didn't look nervous at all."

"Once I got up there, I just enjoyed the moment," I said, unable to stop smiling. The nerves that had plagued me during rehearsals had evaporated the instant I connected with the audience.

"You ready, Mich?" Dad asked, his hand finding its familiar place at the small of Mom's back—a gesture I'd seen thousands of times, a silent communication of support that had endured through intergalactic wars, royal duties, and decades of touring.

Mom nodded, her eyes sparkling with that pre-performance energy I recognized from my own reflection. "Oh, am I? I missed this. It's go time." She moved through our little family circle, pressing quick kisses to my head, then Harley's, then Tomi's chubby cheek, before reaching Dad for a more lingering kiss. "Catch ya on the flip side!" she called over her shoulder as she strode toward the stage, every inch the superstar.

The arena erupted as she appeared, the roar somehow even louder than what Harley and I had received. Mom owned the stage from the first note, her presence magnetic in a way that couldn't be taught or imitated.

Watching Mom perform never got old. She was like magic—her voice shifting effortlessly between powerful belting and intimate vulnerability, her lyrics painting vivid emotional landscapes, her movements both graceful and commanding. The way she exuded confidence on stage was unrivaled, yet she maintained a connection with the audience that made each person feel seen. I always loved watching her perform, studying the subtle techniques that made her a legend.

"Wow, she is phenomenal," Arion said beside me, his voice tinged with awe. He had never seen Mom in this role before. He was used to seeing her as Queen Michelle on Saturn, regal and composed during diplomatic functions. Seeing Michelle Morris on stage—this other, equally authentic version of her—was clearly a revelation. His expression mirrored the same awestruck wonder I still felt watching her, even after all these years.

"She certainly is," Dad agreed, his voice soft with pride and something deeper—the same love that had sustained them through multiple galaxies and lifetimes of adventure. He cradled Tomi against his chest, the toddler's eyes wide as she watched the colorful spectacle of her mother commanding thousands.

"Ma Ma," Tomi babbled, pointing a chubby finger toward the stage.

I laughed, gently squeezing her tiny hand. "Yes, Marshmallow. Ma Ma."

As Mom launched into one of her classic hits, I felt Arion's arm slip around my waist, his touch grounding me in this perfect moment—my family together, our music shared, our joy complete. Whatever dangers lurked beyond tonight's performance, whatever responsibilities awaited us as Rangers and royalty, right now we were simply musicians and family, reveling in the pure connection of art and audience.

Michelle

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I had been performing since I was six years old. Now, almost forty years later, the excitement of being on stage never faltered. It was always like coming home. I loved being on set and acting—that had its own kind of thrill—but my music was always where I felt most alive. To have sustained a career spanning decades and albums at only forty-five... it was nothing short of miraculous. Some child stars didn't survive the transition. Some didn't have an adult career at all. I was lucky. I had fans who had literally grown up with me and were now bringing their own children to my shows.

I never lost sight of that gift. No matter how passionate I was about my art, without my fans, my career wouldn't exist. Every face in the crowd represented someone who had chosen to spend their evening with me, who had connected with my music enough to make it part of their lives.

I moved through a two-hour set list comprised of both my biggest hits and Christmas classics reimagined. My recently released album—"Greatest Hits: Christmas"—was a collection of holiday songs I'd recorded throughout my career, each one holding special memories. My Christmas tour

had become one of the highlights of my year, a tradition both for me and for families who returned season after season. To share the stage with two of my daughters this year made it that much more special.

As I approached the end of my set, I took a moment to catch my breath, surveying the arena filled with glowing phone lights swaying like stars.

"Thank you so much for coming out tonight," I said, my voice carrying through the perfect acoustics. "I think you all know how much Christmas means to me and how dear this Christmas tour is to my heart." The audience's response was immediate and warm—they did know, many having followed my career long enough to understand the significance of family traditions in my life.

"I'm so excited to have a new 'Greatest Hits: Christmas' album out now," I continued, "and I'm even more excited that this year, I got to share my two oldest daughters with you." The crowd cheered, having embraced both Harley and Arissa with enthusiasm that made my heart swell. "And now, before we end, I'd like to bring them back out to sing a song that's really special to our family. Harley, Arissa, come on out."

My daughters walked onto the stage, both still radiating the afterglow of their own performances. Harley, with her blonde hair and blue eyes so like mine, carried herself with a quiet confidence that reminded me of myself at her age. Arissa, taller and with Hunter's coloring, moved with the graceful precision that came from years of combat training before she discovered music. Both of them, extraordinary in their own ways, standing in the spotlight not because of who their parents were, but because of their own talents.

"You two did amazing tonight. Didn't they?" I asked the crowd, who responded with enthusiastic cheers. The pride that surged through me was different from any professional accomplishment—deeper, more visceral. "I couldn't be more proud. You know this is their first show? I'm just in awe of their talent." I turned to them, extending a hand to each. "Girls, you want to help me close the show?"

"Absolutely!" Harley replied, her smile bright and genuine.

Arissa nodded, the slight nervousness from earlier completely gone. "Let's do it."

The band began the opening notes of "You and Me and Christmas," a song I'd recorded years ago for a Hallmark movie. In the film, I had performed it with my young co-star—a bittersweet moment of connection between characters. Now, singing it with my daughters, the lyrics took on new meaning. The harmonies we created—my voice blending with Harley's clear soprano and Arissa's rich alto—felt like a perfect musical representation of our family: distinct individuals creating something beautiful together.

As we moved through the chorus, I caught Hunter's eye in the wings, Tomi cradled against his chest. The expression on his face—a mixture of pride, love, and something like wonder—mirrored exactly what I was feeling. After all we had been through—intergalactic wars, royal responsibilities, the

constant balance of public and private lives—this moment felt like a reward. A reminder of what we had built together.

The song drew to a close, our three voices holding the final note in perfect harmony. The arena erupted, the applause washing over us like a physical force.

"Thank you, New Jersey!" I called, taking my daughters' hands and raising them in a triumphant gesture. "Happy holidays to you all!"

We took our final bows as the crowd roared their appreciation. The stage lights dimmed gradually, and we made our exit, the energy of thousands still humming through our veins as we stepped backstage.

"Wonderful show!" Hunter smiled, tossing me a towel with the practiced ease of someone who had been doing this for decades. His eyes held that same look of admiration they'd had when we were younger—a constancy that had anchored me.

"It was fabulous," I agreed, dabbing at my forehead. Despite the advanced cooling systems in modern arenas, performing under stage lights was still intensely physical work. "I need some water. Dressing room," I said, leading my family down the corridor toward the private sanctuary where we could decompress away from the public eye.

As we walked, I draped an arm around each of my daughters' shoulders, drawing them close. On stage, we were Michelle Morris and her talented offspring. But in moments like these—sweaty, tired, exhilarated—we were simply a family, celebrating something we had created together.

When we made it back to my dressing room, I sank gratefully into a chair while Hunter handed me a cold water bottle. I took a long drink, the chill soothing my throat after two hours of performing.

"So, how did it feel?" I asked my daughters, watching their faces still glowing with post-performance euphoria—a feeling I knew intimately.

Arissa's smile was radiant, unguarded in a way that had been rare during her early days on Earth. "Everything I hoped and more. I want to do this forever."

I laughed, recognizing the sentiment that had shaped my own life's path. "I know exactly what you mean, Riss. It is unlike anything else."

"It was awesome... but..." Harley's voice trailed off, her expression shifting from excitement to something more wistful.

"What?" I prompted gently.

She sighed, twisting a strand of blonde hair around her finger—a habit she'd had since childhood whenever she was working up to asking for something. "It's kinda not fair. Riss wrote songs for Arion, and he gets to hear them every night. I wrote songs for Jake, and you won't even let me invite him to one show."

"Oh my god, Har, so not the same thing," Arissa countered immediately, rolling her eyes. "Arion is my boyfriend. Jake is a married man that you have a crush on."

I exchanged a look with Hunter, the silent communication of parents who've navigated this particular minefield before. I was too tired to have this argument again, especially after the high of the performance.

"Please," Harley persisted, her blue eyes—so like mine—widening with practiced appeal. "We're going to be in New York on Sunday. Can I please just invite him?"

I found myself softening, remembering my own teenage infatuations. "It's not like they will be alone. Jake doesn't even see her that way, and he'll probably bring Millie."

Hunter sighed, running a hand through his blonde hair. "The press is already writing stories about them. The optics of him being at her show..."

"Will be amazing if he has his wife with him," I countered pragmatically. "It will show everyone he sees her as a little sister type and nothing more."

Hunter studied me for a moment, then relented. "Fine. You can invite him, but the invite has to be for both him and Millie. And he can't be in your dressing room."

"Really?! Thanks, Dad!" Harley launched herself at Hunter, wrapping him in an enthusiastic hug that nearly knocked him off balance.

Arissa rolled her eyes again, this time with the exasperated affection of an older sister watching her sibling get away with something.

From Hunter's arms, Tomi reached out toward me, her tiny face lighting up. "Mama."

I smiled, taking my youngest daughter into my lap. Her solid weight and baby-sweet scent grounded me, a reminder of the real world beyond spotlights and applause. "Hey, baby girl. Did you like all the music?"

Tomi nodded enthusiastically, a stream of half-formed words tumbling out as she tried to express her excitement.

"She was bouncing along the whole time," Hunter said, his expression softening as he watched us. "Not sure how much longer we'll be able to get her to willingly wear those ear protectors."

"I'm not surprised," I laughed, pressing a kiss to Tomi's curls. "She may be a Bradley, but she's half Morris too."

The comfortable rhythm of family banter continued as we decompressed from the show. Harley perched on the arm of my chair, while Arissa settled on the small sofa with Arion, their hands naturally finding each other's.

"Mom, are we sleeping on the bus tonight?" Harley asked, already reaching for her phone—no doubt eager to text Jake with the invitation.

"No, tomorrow is an off day, then we have shows Saturday and Sunday. We actually get a hotel tonight," I explained, shifting Tomi to a more comfortable position. "The bus is outside to take us there, though."

I turned my attention to Arion, who had been quietly observing our family dynamics with the careful attention of someone still learning the patterns. "Arion, what did you think of the show? Be honest, it's just our family in here."

He straightened slightly, still maintaining a touch of formality despite months of being with us. "Honestly, you were amazing, Queen Miche—" he caught himself, still adjusting to Earth contexts, "—I mean, Ms. Bradley. I loved your music, and you look very comfortable on stage." His expression brightened with genuine enthusiasm. "You should perform for your people on Saturn. I think they would love it."

The suggestion caught me by surprise. Despite my dual life as both Michelle Morris and Queen Michelle of Saturn, I'd never thought to bring those worlds together so directly. "A concert on Saturn? Why have I never thought of that? That's a really good idea!"

Arion smiled, pleased with my reaction. "I'm glad you think so."

We lingered in the dressing room a while longer, the conversation flowing easily as we came down from the performance high. Hunter helped me gather my things while the girls packed up their own belongings, the practiced routine of a touring family falling into place naturally.

As we finally headed out to the waiting bus, I felt the familiar blend of exhaustion and satisfaction that came after a good show. The prospect of a real bed tonight was especially appealing—bus nights were manageable, but there was nothing like stretching out in a hotel room after giving everything on stage.

With Tomi now dozing against my shoulder and my older daughters walking ahead, deep in their own conversation, I felt Hunter's arm slip around my waist.

"Proud of you," he said quietly, for my ears alone. "All of you."

I leaned into him slightly, drawing strength from his solid presence. "We did good, didn't we? With them, I mean."

His answer was a kiss pressed to my temple—simple, familiar, and more reassuring than any words could be.

Harley

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As soon as I got on the bus, I pulled out my phone and opened my messages to Jake. My heart did that stupid little flutter it always did when I saw our text thread—the one I had to force myself not to check every five minutes.

"Show in NY on Sunday, would love it if you and Mills could come," I typed, adding a casual music note emoji to keep it light. I didn't really want Millie there—the thought of watching them together, her hand casually in his, the way she could lean against him without anyone raising an eyebrow—but since it was all Dad would allow, I would take it. At least I'd get to see Jake.

I pressed send and headed toward my bunk at the back of the bus, already planning what songs I'd perform if Jake was actually in the audience. Maybe I'd switch out "Daydream" for something less obviously about him. Or maybe I'd keep it in, let him hear the lyrics and wonder...

I was so lost in my thoughts that I almost missed it. I pulled back the curtain to my bunk, ready to collapse and scroll through social media until we reached the hotel, when something on my pillow caught my eye.

A folded piece of paper—heavy, expensive-looking stationery with a slight shimmer to it.

I picked it up, assuming it was a congratulatory note from Mom or Dad. But as I unfolded it, the elegant, flowing script inside was nothing like either of my parents' handwriting:

*'Harlyn, Your voice is magnificent, but your lyrics are tragically wasted. That pathetic human could never be worthy of the fire you possess. You are a Warrior Princess who needs a Prince. Soon you will see that you already have one. V.'*

V? As in Viper? It had to be... but how had he gotten on the bus? To my bunk? A chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the bus's air conditioning.

I glanced around quickly, suddenly feeling exposed despite being surrounded by my family just compartments away. The thought of Viper—of those cold, reptilian eyes—looking at my private space, touching my things, leaving this note where I sleep... it made my skin crawl.

I refolded the note quickly and shoved it into my pocket. This guy was turning into a full-on stalker.

I couldn't tell my parents—they would absolutely flip out. Dad would probably cancel the rest of the tour, insisting we all return to Ireland. Mom would be furious that someone had violated our security so completely. And Arion... Arion might actually hunt Viper down himself, which would only escalate everything.

No, I needed advice from someone who would understand the gravity of the situation without overreacting. Someone who could help me figure out what to do without triggering a family meltdown or an interplanetary incident.



I'd call Aaron when we got to the hotel and get his advice. Aaron would know what to do—he always did. Plus, he wouldn't tell anyone unless I wanted him to. That was the thing about Aaron; he respected boundaries in a way most people didn't.

I climbed into my bunk, suddenly hyperaware of every shadow, every sound on the bus. My phone buzzed with a notification, making me jump. It was just Jake responding:

"Sounds great! Millie has a shoot that day but I'll be there. Can't wait to hear you sing! Proud of you, kid."

The message that would have made me giddy moments ago now barely registered. *Kid*. That's all I was to him anyway—a kid with a crush. Maybe Viper was right about one thing—my lyrics were wasted on Jake. But the rest? The idea that I needed some self-proclaimed "prince" who left creepy notes on my pillow? That was delusional.

I put my phone on silent and stared at the ceiling of my bunk, the note burning a hole in my pocket. How had Viper gotten past our security? The implications were unsettling—this wasn't just about creepy notes. This was about a security breach that put my entire family at risk.

The bus engine rumbled to life beneath us, and I felt the familiar lurch as we pulled away from the venue. Usually, the gentle swaying motion of the bus lulled me to sleep, but tonight, I knew rest would be impossible.

I needed to talk to Aaron. I needed a plan. Because whatever game Viper was playing, I wasn't about to let him win.

We arrived at the hotel just after midnight, the bus pulling into the private entrance reserved for performers and VIPs. I went through the motions of grabbing my overnight bag and following my family through the lobby, forcing a smile when Mom commented on how quiet I was being.

"Just tired," I said, which wasn't entirely a lie. The adrenaline crash after performing was real, but the note burning a hole in my pocket was weighing on me far more heavily.

Dad distributed the key cards in the elevator—Mom and Dad sharing a suite with Tomi, Arissa and me in connecting rooms, and Arion in a room directly across the hall, positioned to monitor the elevator and stairwell access.

"Get some rest, everyone," Mom said as we reached our floor. "Tomorrow's our free day, so sleep in if you want."

I hugged my parents goodnight, the routine so normal it felt surreal given what had happened. How could everything seem so ordinary when someone had been in my private space, leaving threats disguised as admiration?

Once inside my room, I double-checked the lock, then dragged a chair in front of the door for good measure. I waited until I heard Arissa settle into her room next door before pulling out my phone and Aaron's number, hitting call without further hesitation.

He answered on the second ring.

"Hey Har," Aaron's voice came through.

"Hey Aar..." I replied, already feeling some of the tension ease just hearing his voice—steady, familiar, safe.

"How was the show?" he asked, and I could picture him in his room, probably surrounded by tech parts even at this hour.

"Amazing..." I started, wanting to share the exhilaration of the performance, to tell him how it felt to hear people singing along to my songs. But the note in my pocket seemed to grow heavier, more insistent. "But um... something happened after the show..."

His tone shifted immediately, concern evident. "What kind of something?"

I pulled the note from my pocket, staring at the elegant script. "I found a note on my pillow. In my bunk. On the tour bus."

"A note?" Aaron asked, immediately alert. "From who?"

"It's signed 'V'," I said quietly. "I think... I think it's from Viper."

"Viper?" The alarm in his voice was clear now. "What did it say?"

I read the note word for word, my voice dropping to a whisper when I reached the parts about Jake being "pathetic" and me needing a "prince."

"Har, this is serious," Aaron said after a moment of silence. "You need to tell your parents, or at least Arion."

"No," I replied firmly. "That's exactly why I called you instead. Dad would cancel the tour. Mom would freak out. And Arion would go into full royal guard mode and ruin everything. This tour is important to all of us."

"But—"

"Aaron, please," I cut him off. "I'm not telling them. I just... I needed to tell someone, and you're the only one I trust not to overreact."

I heard him sigh on the other end. "Harley, someone got onto your secure tour bus and left a note on your pillow. That's not something to take lightly."

"I'm not taking it lightly," I insisted. "But it's just a note. Creepy, yeah, but it's not like he attacked me or anything. I just... I need to know I'm not crazy for being freaked out, but I also don't want to blow this out of proportion."

"You're not crazy," Aaron assured me. "It is concerning. But if you're not going to tell your family, at least promise me you'll be extra careful. Don't go anywhere alone, keep your communicator on at all times."

"I promise," I said, relieved he wasn't pushing harder. "And Aaron? You have to promise not to tell anyone either. This stays between us."

There was a pause, and I could almost hear him weighing his options. "I don't like keeping secrets, Har."

"Please," I said again. "I just need time to figure this out. If anything else happens, I'll reconsider. But for now, I need your word."

Another sigh. "Fine. You have my word. But Harley, if anything else happens—anything at all—you have to tell your parents. Deal?"

"Deal," I agreed, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders. "Thanks, Aar. I knew I could count on you."

"Always," he replied, his voice softening. "So, other than creepy notes, how was performing? Everything you hoped?"

I allowed myself to smile, grateful for the change in subject. "It was incredible. When people were singing along to my songs... I can't even describe it."

"I bet you were amazing," Aaron said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "Is Jake still coming to the New York show?"

"Yeah," I confirmed, the thought of seeing Jake bringing a flutter of excitement despite everything.

"Dad said he could come as long as he brings Millie, but Jake just texted that she has a photoshoot that day."

"So he's coming alone?" Aaron asked, something unreadable in his tone.

"Yep. Just him." I couldn't keep the happiness out of my voice. "I might change the setlist a bit, include more of the songs he inspired."

"I'm sure he'll love that," Aaron said, though his enthusiasm seemed slightly dimmed.

We talked for a while longer about lighter topics—the tour, my songwriting, his latest tech project—until my yawns became too frequent to ignore.

"You should get some sleep," Aaron said finally.

"Yeah," I agreed reluctantly. "Thanks for listening, Aar. And for keeping my secret."

"Just be careful, Har. And call me anytime, day or night."

After we hung up, I sat in the silent hotel room, feeling both relieved and unsettled. Telling Aaron had helped—had made the note seem less terrifying somehow—but the fact remained: Viper had gotten past our security. Had been in my private space.

I tucked the note deep into my suitcase, determined not to think about it anymore tonight. Tomorrow was our free day, a chance to explore and shop and just be normal for a while. I wasn't going to let Viper's mind games ruin that.

As I finally crawled into bed, my phone buzzed with a text from Jake:

"Can't wait for Sunday! Might bring my guitar, we could jam backstage if you're up for it?"

I smiled, typing back quickly: "Definitely up for it. See you Sunday! 💖"

Viper could leave all the notes he wanted. I wasn't a "warrior princess" who needed a "prince." I was Harley Bradley—musician, Ranger, and perfectly capable of deciding for myself who was worthy of my attention.

And right now, that person was definitely not Viper.

Michelle

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The next morning, I woke to the sound of baby babble filtering through the hotel suite. Tomi was awake, her cheerful morning chatter growing increasingly insistent. I blinked at the unfamiliar ceiling, momentarily disoriented before remembering we were in the hotel, not on the bus or at home.

"Babe, your daughter is awake," I grumbled, nudging Hunter's shoulder. His only response was to burrow deeper into the pillows.

I felt Thara shift on my pillow, clearly annoyed about her slumber being disturbed. The small cat gave a disgruntled meow before tucking her nose under her tail.

"So go get her," Hunter mumbled back, his voice thick with sleep. Even after all these years of parenting, our morning negotiations remained the same.

I sighed and rolled out of bed, wincing slightly as my feet hit the plush carpet. No matter how many decades I'd spent performing, the day after a show always brought familiar aches—a physical reminder of how completely I gave myself to the music.

Tomi's babbling grew more animated as I approached her portable crib in the adjoining room of our suite. Her face lit up when she saw me, pudgy arms reaching upward with absolute certainty that they would be met.

"Hi, baby girl," I said softly, lifting her into my arms and pressing a kiss to her curls. They were still sleep-mussed, forming a perfect halo around her cherubic face. Despite my body's protests for more rest, it was impossible not to smile at her unrestrained morning joy.

I carried her to the changing table we'd set up on the dresser, expertly navigating the diaper change despite Tomi's newfound conviction that staying still was entirely optional. "You're getting too wiggly," I told her, tickling her belly and delighting in her giggles.

Motherhood with Tomi was different from my experience with the girls. With Harley, I'd been balancing my music career and the complexities of our unusual family situation. But with Tomi—my surprise baby, my unexpected blessing—I found myself savoring every moment, aware of how quickly these early years would pass.

"There we go, all clean," I said, lifting her back into my arms. She immediately reached for my hair, a favorite morning game.

"Ma-ma," she said, patting my cheek with surprising gentleness.

"That's right, sweet girl. Mama's got you." I carried her back toward the main bedroom, where Hunter was now sitting up, scrolling through his phone with one hand.

"Good morning, my loves," he said, looking up with a smile that still, after all these years, made my heart skip. His hair was rumpled from sleep, the lines around his eyes more pronounced in the morning light—evidence of years of laughter and occasional worry.

"Say 'good morning, Daddy,'" I prompted Tomi, who responded by lunging toward Hunter with such enthusiasm I nearly lost my grip on her.

"Whoa there, Princess," Hunter laughed, setting his phone aside to receive our daughter.

"Someone's energetic this morning."

"She slept well," I observed, sliding back into bed beside them. Thara immediately reclaimed her spot on my lap, purring contentedly as I stroked her fur. "Must be all the excitement from the show."

"Or she's just happy to be in a real bed instead of the bus," Hunter suggested, bouncing Tomi on his knee.

I leaned against the headboard, watching my husband and youngest daughter together—his large hands steady and sure as they supported her, her complete trust in his hold. These quiet morning moments were precious, especially on tour when our days were typically scheduled down to the minute.

"What's on the agenda for our day off?" Hunter asked, glancing over at me.

I reached for my own phone, checking the time. "Nothing until noon. I promised the girls we could do some shopping, maybe hit that vintage record store Arissa was reading about."

"Sounds perfect," Hunter agreed. "Low-key, normal family day."

I smiled at the notion of "normal"—a relative term for our family. But these stolen moments of ordinary life were what kept us grounded, what reminded us that beneath the titles and responsibilities, we were simply a family who loved each other.

As if summoned by our conversation, a soft knock sounded at the door connecting our suite to the girls' rooms.

"Mom? Dad? You guys up?" Harley's voice called through the door. "Arisa and I were thinking about getting breakfast downstairs."

"Come in," I called back, gently relocating Thara to a sunny spot on the windowsill.

As the door opened and my daughters entered—Arisa already dressed for the day, Harley still in pajamas with her hair pulled into a messy bun—I felt that familiar swell of gratitude that had become the backdrop of my life. For all the complications, for all the dangers and responsibilities that came with our unusual existence, moments like these made everything worthwhile.

Today was ours—no performances, no royal duties, no Ranger emergencies (hopefully). Just my family, together, in a hotel room in New Jersey, planning a day of entirely ordinary adventures.

Once everyone was ready, we headed down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. Despite being a celebrity family, we managed to secure a relatively private corner table, partly thanks to Hunter's quiet word with the *maître d'*.

It was a delightfully normal family meal. The girls couldn't stop talking about their performances, their eyes still bright with the lingering excitement of the stage.

"I still can't believe people knew the words to 'Daydream,'" Harley said, stirring her orange juice with a straw. "Like, I wrote that in my bedroom, and now strangers are singing it back to me."

"Wait until they start making fan videos," I told her, remembering my own early days of fame. "That's when it really hits you."

Arisa nodded enthusiastically. "The energy was incredible. It's so different from the studio recordings—you can feel the music differently when there are people responding to it."

Hunter smiled across the table at them, pride evident in his expression. "You both were naturals up there."

"It's all those years of watching Mom from backstage," Harley suggested, reaching for another piece of toast.

Meanwhile, Tomi was creating what could only be described as an abstract expressionist masterpiece with her scrambled eggs. I was certain more ended up in her hair than her mouth, but her delighted giggles made the inevitable clean-up worthwhile.

Even Arion seemed more relaxed than usual, his rigid royal guard posture softening slightly as he engaged in conversation. He was finally starting to talk almost like an Earth teenager—almost. There were still those moments when his formal Saturnian phrasing slipped through, but the effort was endearing.

"The audience's reception of your performances was most gratifying," he said to the girls, then caught himself and added, "I mean... it was totally awesome."

We all laughed at his attempt at Earth slang, and even Arion cracked a smile.

As for Thara? My faithful feline companion was curled up in her specialized travel backpack beneath the table, into which I occasionally snuck pieces of bacon when the waiter wasn't looking. She purred her appreciation, the sound barely audible over the restaurant's ambient noise.

After breakfast, we spent the early afternoon shopping and wandering around the city. It was the kind of ordinary family outing that became extraordinary simply because of how rare it was in our busy lives. Harley found a vintage record shop where she spent nearly an hour digging through crates of vinyl. Arissa discovered a small boutique that carried handmade jewelry, selecting pieces that complemented both her fashion sense.

A few fans stopped us for photos, which we graciously accommodated. I heard the distinctive click of paparazzi cameras once or twice, but overall, it wasn't bad. Years of fame had taught me which battles to fight and which to ignore—a few long-lens photos of us shopping was hardly worth the energy of confrontation.

By mid-afternoon, Tomi was rubbing her eyes and getting cranky—clear signs she needed her nap. We headed back to the hotel, Hunter carrying our sleepy toddler against his shoulder. Once we were back in our suite and Tomi was peacefully asleep in her portable crib, I finally had a moment to check in with Jeremy.

I settled onto the small sofa by the window, curling my feet beneath me as I texted my best friend and stylist back in Ireland.

"I miss you!" I typed, knowing the time difference meant he was likely still up.

Seconds later, his reply appeared: "I miss you too. How bad is your hair?"

I rolled my eyes, smiling despite myself. Of course that was his first concern. "Not bad. It's fine. I'm sure you will still want to 'fix' it when I get home though. I know how possessive you are of MY hair."

"Everyone knows you're my best friend and top client. I have a reputation to uphold."

"Fair enough," I typed back. "Well, the tour is off to a great start. Thanks for asking."

"No worries. You know I care. How did the girls do?"

"AMAZING! So proud of them. They loved it. How are the twins? Killy get the cast off yet?" I asked, thinking of Jeremy's rambunctious two-year-old twins.

"No, week and a half so it'll be gone before Christmas. Rose found 5-minute crafts. Livvie wiped all the apps on the TV except Disney."

I winced sympathetically. "Oof... is your house still standing?"

"For now. Until Rose finds a new way to find ideas to 'make pretty'."

I hesitated before asking my next question. "How is Liv?" Jeremy's wife had been understandably frustrated with me lately.

"Um, well... you may want to give Livvie some space for a bit."

"Oh? What did I do now?"

"Not you exactly, but you know, that secret you and Billy keep? Yeah, well she is over it."

I frowned, immediately concerned. "What happened? Did she figure out how to connect Billy's system to the Riordians?" I typed carefully, making sure we kept our Ranger-related conversation appropriately coded.

"Well, yes... but with Killy's help. Again. He said the code was talking to him... Mich, it was weird and a bit scary. Livvie finished integrating the systems, got the codes to Billy, and wiped her hard drive. It really scared her. She said she is done with that."

My stomach tightened. If Killy "heard" the power, there was definitely something happening. Was it the Celtic power or the Morphin Grid itself? I couldn't dig too much—Livvie would lose it if she knew I was still pursuing this line of inquiry after her clear boundaries.

"I'm sorry Jeremy... tell Livvie I'm sorry too and I'll give her as much space as she needs."

"What the hell?!" Hunter's voice suddenly erupted from the bedroom, followed by the sound of his phone hitting the mattress.

"Gotta run, talk later," I quickly typed to Jeremy before setting my phone aside and rushing to Hunter's side.

"What is it?" I asked, alarmed by the rare display of anger from my typically composed husband.

Hunter's face was tight with controlled fury, his jaw clenched. "Addy just called me."

"Addy? Our niece? Why?" I asked, confusion momentarily overriding concern.

"Evidently Viper is stalking Harley, and she just failed to mention it," Hunter said, his voice dangerously quiet.

"Stalking?" The word hit me like a physical blow, maternal instinct immediately flaring.

"He left a note in her bunk on the bus that she found after last night's show," Hunter explained, running a hand through his hair—a gesture I recognized as his attempt to maintain control when he was deeply upset.

The implications washed over me in a cold wave. Someone—Viper—had been on our bus. Near my daughter. In her private space. And somehow, none of us had known.

"What did the note say?" I asked, my mind already racing through security protocols, contingency plans, the logistics of whether we needed to cancel the tour.

Hunter picked up his phone again, reading from what must have been Addy's message. "Something about Harley's voice being magnificent but her lyrics being wasted on a 'pathetic human.' Called her

a 'Warrior Princess who needs a Prince.' Said she'd see that she 'already has one.' Signed with a 'V'."

My blood ran cold. The possessive tone, the presumption, the invasion of privacy—it was all deeply unsettling. But what disturbed me most was that Harley hadn't told us.

"Why would she keep this from us?" I asked, though I already knew the answer. Harley, like me at her age, hated to be the reason plans changed or people worried. She would rather handle things herself than risk disrupting the tour or causing family conflict.

"I don't know," Hunter said, though his expression suggested he was thinking the same thing. "But I'm going to find out. And then I'm going to find Viper and remind him why threatening a Bradley is a very, very bad idea."

The protective fury in his voice matched my own rising anger. We had faced many enemies over the years, but this felt different—more personal, more invasive. This wasn't just about Ranger business or royal politics. This was about our daughter.

"We need to talk to her," I said, already moving toward the door connecting our suite to the girls' rooms. "Now."

Whatever Viper's game was, he had just made a critical mistake. He might be targeting a princess, a Ranger, a young musician finding her voice in the world.

But what he'd actually done was threaten the daughter of Michelle Morris and Hunter Bradley.

And that was something neither of us would tolerate.

I texted Harley to come to our room immediately. The response was quick—a simple "On my way"—and within moments, there was a soft knock at the door.

Harley entered, her expression curious but unconcerned. She was dressed casually in jeans and one of her oversized hoodies, her blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun—looking every bit the normal teenage girl, not someone being stalked by an alien warlord.

"What's up?" she asked, glancing between Hunter and me, clearly trying to read our expressions.

"Sit," I said firmly, pointing to the edge of the bed.

Her brow furrowed, wariness replacing curiosity as she perched on the mattress. "What did I do?"

Hunter crossed his arms, his stance reminiscent of his days as a Thunder Ranger—solid, immovable. "Were you going to tell us Viper left you a love note?"

Shock flashed across Harley's face, followed immediately by a practiced neutral expression that couldn't quite hide her dismay. "Aaron told you?" The betrayal in her voice was palpable.

"No, it wasn't Aaron," I said, watching her carefully. "It was your cousin. Addy told us."

"She was worried, so she called me," Hunter added, his voice tight with controlled anger—not at Harley, but at the situation, at Viper, at the threat to our daughter.

Harley's shoulders relaxed slightly, relieved that her confidence with Aaron hadn't been broken. "It's not a big deal. Seriously. Viper is a creep. I can handle him," she said with a dismissive wave that reminded me so much of myself at her age that it was almost painful.

"We don't know how dangerous Viper is, but we do know he managed to get to your bunk," Hunter pointed out, his tone making it clear he considered this fact anything but trivial.

Harley rolled her eyes with the particular brand of teenage exasperation that suggested we were being hopelessly overprotective. "Yeah, when no one was on the bus. So scary." She held up her wrist, where her Thunder Morpher sat disguised as a stylish bracelet. "I got this, Dad."

"I'm not taking any chances," Hunter said, his voice leaving no room for argument. "For the rest of this tour, Arion is your personal security."

"What?" Harley's indignation was immediate. "He's on vacation, and I can handle it!"

"Clearly not, if we can't even trust you to come tell us about threats," Hunter replied, already texting Arissa to bring Arion to our room.

I watched Harley's face cycle through emotions—anger, frustration, embarrassment, and finally resignation. She knew that particular tone in her father's voice. It was the same one he used when training new Rangers, when addressing the Saturnian Council, when making decisions that wouldn't be overturned.

Within minutes, Arion entered with Arissa, both looking confused about the sudden summons. Arion immediately straightened when he saw Hunter's expression, years of royal guard training kicking in.

"Yes, sir?" he asked, already on alert.

"Arion, Harley got a threatening note from Viper left in her bunk," Hunter explained without preamble. "For the rest of this tour, you are to guard her constantly, understood?"

Arion bowed slightly, the gesture automatic and formal. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"You cannot be serious!" Arissa's objection was immediate and passionate. "He's here for me, not to work!"

"Then the three of you will be spending a lot of time together," I said, my tone gentle but firm. I understood her frustration—this was supposed to be a special tour for both girls, a chance for Arissa to have Arion experience her world. But safety had to come first.

"What good is a Morpher if I can't protect myself?" Harley demanded, her voice rising with frustration.

"Exactly! How do I get any time with my boyfriend if he has to babysit Harley?" Arissa added, her arms crossed in a mirror image of her father's stance.

"This isn't a negotiation," Hunter stated with finality, the subtle shift in his posture signaling that the discussion was over.

"This is so unfair!" Arissa's parting shot was delivered with all the dramatic flair of someone who had inherited both her parents' theatrical tendencies. She turned and stormed out, Arion following with an apologetic glance back at us.

Harley lingered for a moment, her expression a complex mix of emotions. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want to ruin this for everyone," she said quietly. "This tour means everything to Arissa. To you, Mom. I just thought I could handle it myself."

The vulnerability in her voice softened something in me. I moved to sit beside her on the bed, taking her hand in mine. "I understand wanting to protect the people you love, Harley. But keeping secrets about threats isn't protection—it's putting yourself at risk. And that's not something Dad and I can accept."

She nodded, though the resignation in her posture suggested she wasn't entirely convinced.

"We'll talk more about this later," Hunter said, his tone gentler now. "For now, just... stay close to Arion, okay? For our peace of mind, if nothing else."

"Fine," Harley agreed reluctantly, standing to leave. "But for the record, I still think this is overkill."

As the door closed behind her, I turned to Hunter, the façade of parental certainty dropping away now that we were alone.

"You think this is the right call?" I asked quietly.

Hunter sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I don't know. But until we understand what Viper wants with her, I'm not taking any chances. Not with our daughter."

I nodded, moving to embrace him, drawing strength from his solid presence as I had for decades.

"We should call Andros and Ashley," I said against his shoulder. "Let them know what's happening. And Billy—he needs to analyze that note, see if there are any clues about Viper's intentions."

"Already on it," Hunter assured me, his arms tightening around me briefly before releasing me to reach for his phone. "And Michelle? We're going to find this creep. No one threatens our family and gets away with it."

The fierce protectiveness in his voice matched the feeling in my own heart—a reminder that beneath the pop star and the motocross champion, beneath the queen and the consort, we were still Rangers at our core. And Rangers protected their own.

Especially when "their own" was our daughter.

“Longing and Love”

It had been two days since my parents made Arion my full-time bodyguard. I hated it. Unless I was in the bathroom or changing, I was never alone. Dad had even moved him to the bunk across from mine so he could guard me while we slept. It was ridiculous and suffocating—like having a Saturnian shadow programmed to follow my every move.

After last night's show, I'd found a black and purple rose waiting for me in my dressing room. No note this time, just a card that said "-V". Arion had immediately gone into high alert mode, scanning the room with military precision and questioning every stagehand who'd had access to the area. His intensity only made the whole situation more stressful.

But none of that mattered today. The saving grace was that tonight was the New York show, and Jake had promised he would be there. Nothing could ruin my mood—not Viper's creepy gifts, not Arion's hovering, not even Arissa's occasional glares when Arion's attention was diverted to my security instead of her.

I was sprawled across the sofa of the tour bus, my legs dangling over the armrest as I texted Aaron. The familiar rhythm of our conversation was comforting amid all the chaos.

"You're saying he mentioned me in battle?" I typed back, still processing what Aaron had told me about Viper's appearance in Angel Grove.

"Yes, he is psycho Har. He left a black and purple rose behind that he said was for you," Aaron replied immediately, as if he'd been waiting for my response.

"Creeper. He left me one in my dressing room last night!" I sent back, adding an eye-roll emoji for emphasis.

Aaron's response came quickly: "Har, be careful! I think he is legit obsessed with you. I'm worried for you."

I rolled my eyes as I typed back, "Don't be. I'm fine. I can take care of myself and I have Arion on guard dog duty 24/7." I glanced across the bus where Arion stood by the window, his posture rigid as he scanned the passing scenery for potential threats.

"I wish I could be there to protect you," Aaron replied.

I felt my heart do a strange little flip at his words. I'd been texting Aaron constantly since we left Angel Grove, finding myself checking for his messages more often than I'd like to admit. Every time we talked, I had this weird feeling I couldn't quite explain—warm and fluttery, like butterflies but more intense. I'd known Aaron since we were babies. He was just Aaron—quiet, brilliant, dependable Aaron. This feeling was definitely new, and I wasn't entirely sure what to do with it.

"I'm fine Aaron. Seriously. Don't worry," I insisted, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

"You know I worry. If Viper hurts you..."

The unfinished threat was so unlike Aaron's usual measured responses that it caught me off guard. I quickly changed the subject to safer territory.

"He won't. He's a wimp. Anyway, I have bigger concerns. Like Jake is coming to tonight's show!"

There was a longer pause before Aaron's next message appeared: "Oh, right. I know you're excited about that."

Was it my imagination, or did his enthusiasm seem forced? I pushed the thought aside, focusing on my excitement about Jake's visit.

"I am! It will be the first time he will hear the songs I wrote about him."

"You know there is going to be a media frenzy right? The JaLey TikTok stans are going to lose their minds."

I grinned at the thought. The fan speculation about Jake and me had been building. The hashtag #JaLey had started trending, with fans creating elaborate theories about our "secret relationship." It was ridiculous—Jake was married and saw me as nothing more than his friend's kid sister—but the attention was flattering nonetheless.

"I know! I can't wait!" I replied, adding several exclamation points to convey my excitement.

I set my phone down for a moment, staring out the window as New York City appeared on the horizon. Tonight would be perfect. Jake would hear my songs, finally understand how I felt, and maybe—just maybe—see me differently. Not as Michelle and Hunter's daughter, not as a kid with a crush, but as a musician in my own right. Someone worth noticing.

The fact that it might also make Viper jealous was just an added bonus. Let him leave all the creepy roses he wanted—I knew whose attention really mattered to me.

Or at least, I thought I did.

I glanced back at my phone, where Aaron's contact photo smiled up at me. For some reason, I found myself wondering what he would think of my performance tonight, whether he would watch the inevitable fan videos that would flood social media.

With a shake of my head, I dismissed the thought. Tonight was about Jake. About finally being seen by him the way I'd always wanted to be seen.

As we pulled up to the arena, I pressed my face against the bus window, taking in the scene outside. The crowd was massive, stretching around the block in a sea of excited faces and homemade signs. I knew most of them were Mom's fans—she'd been filling venues like this for decades. A few were probably Dad's—the motocross and Ranger communities had always been loyal. But now, scattered among them, I spotted signs with my name and Arissa's. Some fans were even wearing purple and crimson, our signature colors. It was surreal to think that some of these people had come specifically to see us.

We disembarked from the bus, a wall of screams greeting us as we stepped onto the pavement. Mom waved with practiced ease, her smile genuine despite having done this thousands of times. Dad kept one arm protectively around Tomi, who was wide-eyed at the commotion. Arissa moved with natural confidence, stopping to sign a few autographs along the way.

I followed their lead, pausing to take selfies with a group of teenage girls who shouted my name. The entire time, Arion maintained his position exactly two steps behind me, his eyes constantly scanning the crowd for threats. His presence was like a physical weight, a constant reminder of Viper's notes and my parents' fear.

Inside the arena, we were escorted to our separate dressing rooms. The moment I was alone (with Arion positioned right outside my door like a Saturnian statue), I turned my attention to the wardrobe rack. Tonight wasn't just another show—it was the night Jake would finally see me perform. Everything had to be perfect.

I rifled through the outfits I'd brought, suddenly dissatisfied with all of them. They were fine for a normal show, but tonight I needed something different. I couldn't look 13 tonight. I needed to look older, more sophisticated, so Jake would see me and not just some "kid sister" he'd known since I was in diapers. I needed him to see me as someone he might actually want to be with.

I know, I know. Jake is twice my age... but Jon was twice Mom's age when they got together. And Mom always says that was a different time, but so what? Love is love. Age is just a number when you've found your soulmate. At least, that's what I'd convinced myself.

After trying on and discarding several options, I finally settled on some worn jeans and a fitted purple halter top with a black leather jacket. It was really more the type of thing Arissa would usually wear—edgier, more mature than my usual style—but for tonight, I would make it work. I just needed to make sure my makeup was on point.

If anyone could help me with that, it was my sister. Arissa had become something of a beauty guru over the past year, her YouTube tutorials gaining a following separate from her music. She knew every trick for making someone look older, more polished.

I left my dressing room, nodding to Arion who immediately fell into step behind me as I walked down the hall to Arissa's room. I knocked on her door, mentally preparing myself for the gloating I was about to endure.

"Come in," she called.

I pushed open the door to find Arissa already in full pre-show mode, her makeup station organized with military precision, various outfits laid out across the sofa for consideration. She raised an eyebrow when she saw me standing awkwardly in the doorway.

"I need your help," I admitted, the words practically painful to say.

"With what?" she asked, though the gleam in her eye suggested she already knew.

I sighed. She was going to enjoy this far too much. "My makeup."

Her eyes lit up with triumph and genuine excitement. "For real? Like for real, for real? You're going to let me do your makeup? Finally!"

The sisterly gloating was inevitable, but I endured it for the greater cause. "Jake is coming tonight," I explained, as if that justified everything. "It has to be perfect."

Arissa nodded, a knowing smile playing at her lips. "You don't wanna look 13. OK, got it." She studied my outfit with an appraising eye. "I still think you're insane to think you have a shot with him, but yes, I will totally make your makeup perfect." She pointed to the chair at her vanity. "Sit."

I sighed and sat down, already feeling a twinge of regret. Giving Arissa this kind of power over me was dangerous, but desperate times called for desperate measures. As she began laying out brushes, palettes, and products I couldn't even name, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror.

The girl staring back at me looked both familiar and strange—caught between childhood and something else, wearing clothes that didn't quite feel like mine, about to put on a face that wasn't quite me either. All for the chance that Jake might finally see me differently.

A tiny voice in the back of my mind whispered that maybe I was trying too hard, that maybe if Jake could only see me when I was pretending to be someone else, he wasn't worth all this effort. The voice sounded suspiciously like Aaron.

I pushed the thought away as Arissa approached with a foundation brush and a determined expression.

"Close your eyes," she instructed, her voice taking on the confident tone she used in her tutorials. "And trust me."

I closed my eyes, surrendering to my sister's expertise and to the fantasy that tonight would change everything. That Jake would hear my songs, see the real me beneath the makeup and borrowed style, and realize what had been in front of him all along.

It was a beautiful dream, even if part of me knew that's all it might ever be.

Michelle

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"Hunter, my god, stop pacing," I said from my vanity chair as Edward worked on my hair. He wasn't Jeremy, and I knew Jeremy would hate Edward's work when he saw the photos, but my best friend wouldn't set foot in the States again, so that was on him.

Hunter was moving back and forth across our dressing room like a caged tiger, Tomi balanced on his hip. Our youngest seemed unfazed by her father's agitation, happily playing with the collar of his



shirt, but his tension was palpable. Between Jake's impending arrival and Viper's continued threats, my husband was about one minor inconvenience away from a full meltdown.

"I'm fine," Hunter insisted, not slowing his methodical path across the carpet.

I rolled my eyes and glanced at Thara, who was sprawled across the back of the sofa, her tail twitching in irritation as she glared at Hunter for disturbing what was clearly meant to be her pre-show nap.

"Look, even Thara is annoyed," I pointed out, hoping the observation might break his spiral.

"When isn't Thara annoyed?" Hunter countered, though he did pause briefly to look at the cat, who narrowed her eyes in response.

"You're going to leave track marks in the carpet," I said, wincing slightly as Edward tugged at a section of my hair. "Hunter, what is wrong? Really?"

"Oh, nothing," he replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Just the twenty-three-year-old man coming to see our daughter perform and the fact she has a stalker. Totally normal Sunday night."

"Harley has a stalker?" Edward asked, his hands pausing mid-styling.

"Online," I lied smoothly, giving Edward a reassuring smile in the mirror. "She's getting a fan base already. You know how intense social media can be these days." I waited until Edward resumed his work before addressing Hunter again, lowering my voice. "Hunter, Jake is a good guy. He sees Har as a kid."

"Good, she is," Hunter said firmly, bouncing Tomi slightly as if to emphasize the point—our youngest daughter a living reminder of just how young our middle child still was.

I sighed, recognizing the protective father mode that had fully engaged. Hunter had always been intensely protective of the girls, but the situation with Viper had amplified his concerns to new levels. Add Jake's visit to the mix, and he was practically vibrating with paternal anxiety.

"She's thirteen, not three," I reminded him gently. "And Jake is married. He's coming to support her music because he's a good friend, not because he has any inappropriate interest."

"I know that," Hunter admitted, his pacing finally slowing. "Logically, I know that. But have you seen the way she talks about him? The songs she's written? She's setting herself up for heartbreak, and there's nothing we can do about it."

I understood his concern. Harley's crush on Jake had been obvious for months, growing from a mild infatuation to something that bordered on obsession. The songs she'd written made her feelings painfully clear—at least to anyone who knew what to listen for.

"First crushes are always intense," I said. "Especially when they're on someone unattainable. She'll get through it. We all do."

"I just don't want her to embarrass herself," Hunter said, his voice softening. "Or get hurt."

"Sometimes getting hurt is part of growing up," I replied, meeting his eyes in the mirror. "We can't protect her from everything, as much as we might want to."

"We can protect her from her stalker," Hunter countered, his jaw tightening at the mention of the real threat.

"Yes, we can," I agreed. "And we will. Arion hasn't left her side, and we've got additional security throughout the venue. She's safe, Hunter."

He nodded, though the tension in his shoulders didn't fully dissipate. Tomi chose that moment to grab his face with both hands, demanding his attention with the imperiousness only a toddler can muster. Hunter's expression softened immediately as he focused on our youngest.

"What is it, Princess?" he asked, his voice gentling.

"Down," Tomi declared, wriggling in his arms. "Down, Daddy."

"Not right now, sweetheart. Daddy needs to hold you so he doesn't wear a hole in the carpet," he replied, earning a small smile from me.

"There," Edward announced, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "Perfect."

I examined my reflection critically. The style was elegant but practical, designed to hold up through two hours of performing while still looking camera-ready. It wasn't Jeremy's work—no one could replicate his particular magic—but it would do.

"Thank you, Edward. It looks great."

As Edward packed up his supplies, I stood and crossed to Hunter, taking Tomi from his arms. "Why don't you go check on the girls? Make sure they're ready, see if they need anything. It might help to feel useful."

Hunter recognized the suggestion for what it was—a constructive channel for his nervous energy.

"Good idea," he agreed, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead. "I'll be back before you go on."

"Take your time," I assured him. "We've still got an hour until showtime."

After he left, I settled on the sofa with Tomi on my lap, careful not to disturb my freshly styled hair. Thara immediately relocated to curl against my side, purring contentedly now that Hunter's pacing had ceased.

"Your daddy worries too much," I told Tomi, who was happily playing with the bracelet on my wrist.

"But that's because he loves you all very much."

"Love Daddy," Tomi agreed, her limited vocabulary always managing to hit the most important points.

"Me too, baby," I said softly. "Me too."

I glanced at my phone, noting several missed calls from Billy. Whatever he'd discovered about Viper would have to wait until after the show. Tonight was about the music—about giving our fans the performance they deserved, about watching my daughters shine on stage.

I was pulled from my thoughts by a knock on the door.

"Come in," I called, expecting to see Hunter returning or perhaps one of the stage managers with a schedule update. I was wrong.

The door opened, and Jon walked in, his familiar smile both nostalgic and unwelcome.

"Hey Michi," he said, using the nickname only he had ever called me.

"Oh damn. What are you doing here?" I groaned, instinctively shifting Tomi closer to me.

"Harley invited Jake and Millie, but Millie had to work, so he asked if I wanted to come," Jon explained as he closed the door behind him and settled into the chair opposite me, making himself at home in my space as he always had. "Of course I wasn't about to miss the chance to see my girl perform."

Thara looked up at him and hissed, her fur bristling along her spine. At least someone in the room had no qualms about expressing their true feelings.

"I'm not your girl anymore, Jon," I sighed, the old exhaustion returning whenever he was around. After the incident with Hunter and Jon at the Cantina, seeing Jon was the last thing Hunter needed tonight. "I thought Hunter made it clear that he wanted you to stay away."

Jon shrugged with that casual dismissal that had once seemed charming and now just felt arrogant. "He had his friends, so I figured he was acting tough. Here though?"

I sighed, remembering all too clearly the disaster at the Cantina. Hunter had enlisted Trev, Hal, Pete, and even Jeremy to have his back and send what I thought was a pretty strong message. Apparently, Jon had interpreted it differently. "You know if Hunter sees you, he is going to freak."

Jon smirked, that self-assured expression that suggested he still believed himself untouchable. "He'll be fine. Anyway, I just wanted to wish you luck before the show. I told Jake I'd meet him at our seats." He stood, his eyes lingering on me longer than appropriate. "See you after, beautiful."

With that, he left as suddenly as he'd appeared, leaving behind only the faint scent of his cologne and the promise of trouble.

"Perfect," I sighed to myself, already dreading Hunter's reaction. I looked down at Thara, who was still glaring at the door with feline disdain. "Good girl. You tried to help."

Tomi patted my cheek, drawing my attention back to her. "Mama sad?" she asked, her small brow furrowed with concern.

"No, baby," I assured her, though the tension headache forming at my temples suggested otherwise. "Mama's just thinking."

I needed to warn Hunter before he ran into Jon unexpectedly. That confrontation didn't need to happen in public, especially not tonight with everything else going on. I reached for my phone, then hesitated. Telling Hunter now would only distract him from being there for the girls.

Perhaps it would be better to wait until after the performance. Jon would be in the audience, safely distant from backstage.

Or perhaps that was just what I was telling myself to avoid the inevitable storm.

I set Tomi down to play with her toys in the corner of the dressing room, my mind racing through contingency plans. Jon's appearance had thrown an unwelcome complication into an already tense evening. Between Viper's threats to Harley, Jake's visit stirring up her teenage emotions, and now Jon's unexpected presence, this show was becoming a minefield of personal drama.

"Focus on the music," I reminded myself, a mantra I'd used throughout my career whenever outside distractions threatened my performance. "Just focus on the music."

Tonight's show would go on as planned. My daughters would shine on stage. The audience would get the performance they deserved. And somehow, I would navigate the complicated web of relationships and threats surrounding my family without letting any of it touch the magic we created on stage.

Moments later, Hunter came back in, his expression a mixture of concern and resignation.

"Okay, the girls are ready," he reported, closing the door behind him. "Harley looks too grown up. I don't like this at all. But she refuses to change. Arissa did her makeup and—" He stopped abruptly, studying my face. "And what is wrong?"

I took a deep breath, deciding that hiding this from Hunter would only make things worse when he inevitably discovered it himself. "Jon came with Jake. He already popped in to say hello."

Hunter's expression darkened instantly, his jaw tightening in that way that always preceded his rare but formidable anger. "That son of a... was I not clear?"

"I thought you were," I said, watching him carefully. "I guess since his son was coming to see Harley, he figured he would tag along?"

"That family is nothing but trouble," Hunter said, pressing his fingertips to his forehead as if physically trying to contain his frustration. The gesture was so familiar—his way of processing without exploding, of maintaining control when he wanted to do anything but.

I moved to his side, placing a gentle hand on his arm. "It'll be okay, babe. One night. Just one night."

"I don't think I could handle more than that," he sighed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders as he leaned slightly into my touch.

Harley

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When Arissa finished my makeup, I barely recognized the girl staring back at me from the mirror. The transformation was startling—smoky eyes, contoured cheekbones, and lips defined in a shade that made them look fuller, more mature. Combined with the outfit, I certainly didn't look like a kid anymore.

"Wow, I look so different," I said, turning my head slightly to examine Arissa's handiwork from different angles.

"You're welcome," Arissa replied with a satisfied smile, clearly proud of her creation. A knock at the door interrupted her moment of triumph. "Come in!"

Dad walked into Arissa's dressing room, his expression casual. "Hey girls, just wanted to see if you needed anything—" He froze mid-sentence when his eyes landed on me, his face shifting instantly to parental alarm. "Absolutely not."

"Oh come on, Dad, she looks great," Arissa defended, stepping protectively between me and Dad's disapproval.

"She looks sixteen!" Dad cried, his voice rising with genuine concern.

"Do you know how long this took me?" Arissa countered, hands on her hips in a perfect imitation of Mom when she was standing her ground.

I stood up, meeting Dad's gaze directly. "I'm not changing. I like this look." It wasn't altogether true—the makeup felt heavy on my skin, and the clothes weren't really my style—but tonight wasn't about comfort. It was about Jake.

Dad sighed, the sound carrying the weight of a battle he knew he couldn't win. "One night. Tomorrow it's back to your normal look."

"Promise," I agreed quickly, relieved he wasn't going to push the issue further.

"Do either of you need anything?" he asked, his tone making it clear he was still bothered by my appearance but trying to move past it.

"No, we're ready," Arissa assured him, her victory secured.

"Good," he said simply, giving me one last concerned look before leaving the room.

Once the door closed behind him, I turned to Arissa. "Dad is so pissed."

Arissa shrugged, already turning back to her own preparations. "He'll get over it. You look great."

I returned to my dressing room to put the finishing touches on my look, then grabbed my guitar from its stand. The full-length mirror reflected a stranger back at me—older, more polished, like a

costume I was trying on rather than a true version of myself. But if this was what it took to make Jake see me differently, it was worth the discomfort.

I took a selfie and sent it to Aaron, seeking reassurance from the one person whose opinion I trusted most. "How do I look?" I asked in the text.

His reply came quickly: "You always look amazing, but I like your normal look best. You don't look like you and you are pretty awesome."

I stared at his message for a moment, a strange mix of emotions washing over me. Part of me had wanted him to be impressed by the transformation, to validate that this new look was better, more mature. Instead, his gentle preference for my normal self left me feeling oddly conflicted.

I put my phone away and headed to the corridor where the stage crew was already in position. The pre-show energy was electric, a buzz of anticipation that always made my heart race.

"Good luck!" Arissa called as she passed by on her way to her own waiting area, already dressed in her performance outfit—a crimson leather jacket over a black dress that caught the light with subtle sparkles.

I nodded and smiled, focusing on the moment ahead rather than the strange heaviness of the makeup on my face or the way the halter top felt foreign against my skin. As the intro music began to play, I took a deep breath, centering myself the way Mom had taught me.

The stage manager gave me my cue, and I strode out onto the stage, the roar of the crowd washing over me like a physical force.

"NEW YORK! I'm Harley Bradley! Welcome to the party!" I shouted, adrenaline surging through me as I launched into "Things I'll Never Say."

The song had quickly become a fan favorite, its catchy chorus and relatable lyrics connecting with audiences immediately. I'd learned to make it my opener, saving "Why" for the middle of the set when I needed to recapture the crowd's attention, and positioning "Daydream"—the most personal song, the one most clearly about Jake—just before my two Christmas covers.

I'd already figured out the best way to arrange my setlist to engage the crowd, to build and release tension, to tell a story through the progression of songs. It was something Mom had taught me from years of watching her perform—the architecture of a show was as important as the individual songs themselves.

As I moved through the first verse, my eyes scanned the audience, searching for one face in particular. The stage lights made it difficult to see beyond the first few rows, but I knew Jake was out there somewhere, listening to the lyrics I'd written with him in mind, hopefully finally understanding what I'd been trying to tell him for months.

The thought gave me confidence, pushing me to sing with more emotion, to connect more deeply with the words. For those few minutes on stage, the makeup and clothes didn't matter—only the music, only the connection, only the hope that somewhere in the darkness, Jake was finally seeing me for who I really was.

Or who I was trying to be.

I finished my set with a final chord that rang through the arena, the crowd's enthusiastic response washing over me like a wave. After thanking the audience one last time, I handed off to Arissa, retreating backstage where I could watch her performance from the wings.

From the moment she stepped into the spotlight, Arissa commanded the stage with an effortless presence that made me both proud and slightly envious. Her crimson jacket caught the light as she moved, her voice powerful and controlled as she launched into her first song. She was flawless—hitting every note, engaging the audience with natural charisma, moving with a fluid grace that I presumed came from years of battle training.

I felt like an amateur compared to her, which was ironic given that the first time she'd known music existed was a year and a half ago. She'd taken to it so quickly, adapting to Earth's musical traditions with the same determination she brought to everything. What had taken me years of lessons and practice seemed to come to her instinctively.

Still, I was happy with my set. The crowd had responded well, singing along to the songs they recognized, giving me their energy and attention. It was a good feeling, knowing I'd connected with them despite my nerves and the unfamiliar weight of makeup on my face.

Arissa would finish her set, then Mom would do hers, and then we would all go backstage where Jake would come see me. The thought sent butterflies through my stomach again. Would he mention my songs? Would he recognize himself in the lyrics? Would he finally see me as something more than just a kid sister?

I watched the rest of Arissa's performance from my hidden vantage point, allowing myself to simply enjoy her talent without comparison. By the time Mom took the stage, I had retreated to my dressing room to freshen up, though I kept the door open so I could hear the show through the monitors.

Mom's set was amazing, as always. How she managed two hours each night with so much energy was astounding to me. Even after decades of performing, she gave her all every night, was always changing up the show just a bit, and made every audience feel special. There were subtle variations in how she introduced songs, little moments of spontaneous interaction with the crowd, changes in arrangement that kept the music fresh even for those who had seen her multiple times.

It was a masterclass in performance—in connecting with an audience, in pacing a show, in balancing the familiar hits they came for with the moments of surprise that made each night unique. I tried to absorb it all, knowing these lessons would serve me well if I continued pursuing music as more than just a hobby.

As Mom's set approached its conclusion, I checked my reflection one more time, making sure Arissa's makeup artistry was still intact. The stranger stared back at me from the mirror, her eyes wide with anticipation beneath the smoky shadow.

I was excited to see Jake, but one thought kept nagging at me. What I wanted more than anything right now was to retreat to my bunk and text Aaron about the show. The realization was unexpected, a quiet truth beneath all the preparation and anticipation of Jake's visit.

After Mom finished her set to thunderous applause, we all gathered in her dressing room so she could cool down and unwind, as was our post-show tradition. This was also the time when any special fans or celebrity friends who happened to be in the crowd would come backstage to say hello. We had all settled in—Mom sipping her post-show tea, Dad with Tomi on his lap, Arissa and I on the sofa—when there was a knock at the door.

Jake and his dad came in, and my heart gave a small, obligatory flutter that felt more like habit than genuine excitement.

I'd always liked Jon. I'd known him basically my whole life and understood he was Mom's first boyfriend when she was even younger than me. She always said it was different because she grew up fast, being famous from such a young age. I also knew she had a hard time letting him go. When I was little and Mom was still married to Rocky, she would take me to New York, and Jon would take us to Rangers games. I didn't know then that they were having an affair—I was too young to understand—but looking back, it was so obvious.

Now, though, Mom seemed to finally be over him. He was more of an annoying friend who wouldn't go away than anything else. I still liked him; he had always been nice to me. In fact, if not for him convincing me to record a duet with him, I'm not sure I would even be on this tour... even though my parents were pretty ticked off that he hadn't asked them before we recorded.

Anyway, he was Jake's dad, and that was mostly how I saw him now. But when he came in with Jake, I saw Dad tense up immediately. Thara, who was curled in Mom's lap, turned her head to hiss at him with feline disdain.

"Hey Jon!" I smiled, genuinely glad to see him despite the obvious tension.

"Hey Harley. You were amazing up there! You too, Arissa," Jon said warmly. "You both have your mom's talent, beauty, and stage presence."

"I don't remember you being invited," Dad grumbled, his arm tightening slightly around Tomi as if she were a shield.

"Jake invited me. It was nice of Harley to invite him," Jon replied with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Jake moved across the room to sit next to me on the sofa, his presence familiar and comfortable.

"You were amazing up there, Harley. You're really talented."

I smiled, waiting for the butterflies, the whoosh that made me lightheaded, something... it always happened when Jake was around. And he was looking good, too, in his jeans and henley shirt with his hair perfect and that smile that had launched a thousand TikTok edits. But nothing came. I just wanted to get out of here and text Aaron. "Thanks! Did you like the songs?" I asked. I'd been waiting so long for him to hear them, and now I really didn't care that much.

"I did. You're a good songwriter." Jake's expression grew slightly awkward, his voice gentling. "I... can guess what they're about. You know I'm too old for you, right? This whole TikTok thing is just people being silly."

You would think that his rejection would have shattered me, but it didn't. The words that should have crushed my heart just made me feel... relieved? "Oh, I know. I'm sure it's all because of our parents. You look like your dad, I look like my mom. People want Jon and Michelle: The Next Generation. It's dumb." I found myself changing the subject with genuine interest rather than deflection. "How's Millie? And the baby?"

Jake looked at me with surprise, clearly having expected a different reaction. "Oh, good. She's really busy with work, but we're good. The baby is good."

"I'm happy for you. I really am glad you saw the show," I said sincerely. "It's so exciting to be on tour. And did you see my mom? She is amazing."

Jake nodded, relaxing as he realized I wasn't going to make things awkward. "Your mom has always been great on stage."

"OK, well, I really, really want a shower to get this stage makeup off, and I hate showering on the bus, so I'm going to go back to my dressing room," I said, suddenly eager to be alone with my thoughts. "See you later?"

"Um, sure. You really were great tonight," he said, giving me a hug.

No butterflies, no whoosh. It was like hugging a brother. I pulled away, my mind already elsewhere. I really wanted to shower and then text Aaron. I headed back to my dressing room to do just that, a strange lightness in my step that had nothing to do with Jake's presence and everything to do with the realization that my feelings had shifted without my even noticing.

As I closed the door behind me, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror—still wearing the makeup and clothes I'd chosen to impress Jake, still looking like someone I wasn't. But beneath it all, something had changed. The crush that had consumed so much of my attention for months had quietly faded, replaced by something else I wasn't quite ready to name.

I reached for my phone, already composing a text to Aaron in my head as I turned on the shower.

Michelle

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The moment Jon came in, I knew I wasn't going to get my post-show relaxation. And sure enough, he started antagonizing Hunter the moment he entered. Jake had sat next to Harley to chat while Jon approached me with that familiar, proprietary smile that still made my stomach tighten with old memories.

Thara, who had only half-heartedly turned her head to hiss when he first entered, now stood on my lap and arched her back as he approached, letting out a louder, more warning hiss. Her tail puffed to twice its normal size.

"Hey kitty cat," Jon said as he went to scratch her head. Thara was normally an attention seeker, happy to receive adoration in any form, but with Jon she was having none of it. She nipped his finger with her fangs, quick and deliberate.

"Damn," he said, pulling his hand back with a surprised frown.

"Sorry, she's a little protective of me," I said, pulling Thara closer to my chest where she continued to rumble with displeasure. Even my cat had better boundaries with Jon than I'd had for years.

Hunter was trying to maintain a conversation with Arion while simultaneously watching both me and Jon and keeping an eye on Harley and Jake. The tension in his shoulders was visible, his protective instincts on high alert.

"You were as amazing as always, Michi," Jon said, reaching for my hand with the casual entitlement he'd always displayed.

I pulled back, holding Thara closer as if she were a shield. "Thanks. You know how much I love my holiday shows."

"Oh, I know. Christmas has always been your time," he replied, undeterred by my physical retreat.

"Remember the first year we were dating and you invited me over to your house? You were so beautiful in that red dress." His expression softened with nostalgia. "I thought your Mom and Dean were going to kill me, though."

Jon laughed at the memory, and he wasn't wrong—my parents never did like him. Dean was usually cognizant of his role as a stepfather and let Mom take the lead, but with Jon he had tried to intervene, sensing something wasn't right.

"Zachary was the bigger threat," I said, remembering how my older brother had been only fifteen at the time while Jon was already in his early twenties. Despite being younger, Zachary had always been protective of me.

Jon rolled his eyes dismissively. "He never liked me."

"Imagine that. Zack didn't like a twenty-three-year-old dating his thirteen-year-old sister," Hunter interjected, his voice deceptively calm but edged with steel.

Jon turned to face him directly, his expression hardening. "Do we really need to do this again? You weren't there, you didn't know Michi then. You didn't grow up in the spotlight. It is an experience you cannot possibly understand."

I put my hand to my forehead, feeling the beginnings of a tension headache. This was the exact same debate they'd had at the Cantina, word for word, as if they were reading from a script neither could deviate from.

Around this time, I noticed Harley leaving the room to go back to her dressing room, leaving Jake behind. Her departure seemed to catch Hunter by surprise, but there was also relief in his expression as he turned his full attention to Jon.

"I thought I made it clear that you needed to stay away from my family," Hunter said, his voice low but firm, the kind of tone that had made even hardened criminals think twice during his Ranger days.

"Yeah, your mob boss routine was really scary," Jon scoffed, leaning back with affected nonchalance. "You had all your little friends around... very intimidating."

I'd had enough. This testosterone-fueled posturing was exhausting, especially after a full show. "Jon, we are not doing this again," I said firmly. "Hunter is my husband, and what you did with the duet and Harley was really a big breach of trust. He has a right to be upset." I met his gaze directly, tired of the dance we'd been doing for decades. "And seriously, I'm not yours anymore, and I haven't been for three years. You need to move on if we are ever going to have any kind of real friendship."

The bluntness of my words seemed to finally penetrate. A flicker of genuine hurt crossed Jon's face before he masked it with his usual charm.

Jake, who had been watching the exchange with obvious discomfort, stood up. "Dad, we should go. I want to check on the baby," he said, offering his father an escape route.

Jon nodded, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. "OK. Good seeing you, Michi, you were amazing as always." He turned to Arissa, who had been silently observing the entire interaction. "Arissa, you have some real talent. Good luck on the tour."

And with that, Jon and Jake were gone, leaving behind the familiar emotional debris that seemed to follow Jon wherever he went.

The room exhaled collectively once the door closed behind them.

"Well, that was fun," Arissa said dryly, breaking the silence. "Is it always like this when he shows up?"

"Pretty much," Hunter confirmed, the tension in his voice easing now that the immediate threat was gone.

I stroked Thara's fur, calming her as much as myself. "I'm sorry about that," I said to Hunter, knowing how much restraint it had taken for him not to escalate the situation.

"Not your fault," he replied, though the lingering frustration in his voice suggested the encounter would be discussed later, in private.

What struck me most, however, was Harley's unexpected departure. I had been bracing myself for teenage drama—tears, disappointment, the fallout of Jake's inevitable rejection. Instead, she'd simply... left. To shower, of all things.

It was so unlike the reaction I'd expected that I found myself wondering what had changed. The girl who had spent weeks planning this encounter, who had let Arissa transform her with makeup, who had written songs about her feelings for Jake, had walked away from him with apparent indifference.

"Did anyone else notice how... unbothered Harley seemed?" I asked, looking between Hunter and Arissa.

"I thought she'd be devastated when Jake basically friend-zoned her," Arissa agreed, looking equally puzzled. "But she just... didn't care?"

Hunter's expression shifted from lingering anger to parental concern. "That's not like her at all. Maybe she's just putting on a brave face?"

"Maybe," I said, though something told me there was more to it than that.

Whatever was happening with Harley, it would have to wait. Right now, we needed to finish packing up and get back to the bus.

But as I gathered my things, I couldn't shake the feeling that something significant had shifted—not just with Jon and his persistent presence in our lives, but with Harley and her sudden disinterest in the crush that had consumed her for months.

Change was in the air, and for once, it felt like it might be for the better.

Harley

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Once we were back on the bus and I was comfortable and settled in my bunk, I drew the curtain closed, creating a small private sanctuary amid the constant movement of tour life. Arion was in the bunk across from me, his presence a constant reminder of the threat that had necessitated his watchful eye, but for now, the thin fabric barrier gave me at least the illusion of privacy.

I pulled my phone out, my heart beating a little faster as I opened my messaging app to text Aaron.

"Hey wrench monkey, you up?" I typed, using the nickname I'd given him years ago when we were kids and he was always taking things apart.

"It's only 10 PM here. Yes I'm up. How was the show?" he replied almost immediately, as if he'd been waiting for my message.

"Awesome! I changed up the setlist and it worked well," I wrote, eager to share the details of my performance with him. It was strange how much I wanted his approval, his understanding of what I'd accomplished.

"And how's your lover boy? 😏" His response came with an eye-roll emoji that made me smile despite myself.

"LMAO. Funny. He's ok. Busy with the new baby, but he liked the show," I typed, then hesitated before adding the truth that was still sinking in. "Honestly though, it was different than I thought."

"What do you mean?"

I stared at his question, trying to articulate the strange shift I'd experienced. "I thought I was in love with him but like... he was right there, hugging me, and I felt... nothing. I wasn't even thinking about him when we were talking."

"Weird. Ok. So, what were you thinking about? The 50 layers of makeup?"

His teasing question made me pause. This was it. Did I tell him? Did I want to? If I told him, did it mean I liked him?

Wait...

Did I like him?

The realization crashed over me with sudden clarity. I couldn't wait to text him even when I was with Jake, and that feeling—that flutter in my stomach, that anticipation—that's where the butterflies had gone. I felt them when I talked to Aaron.

Aaron? Really? The wrench monkey?

Yep. I had a huge crush on Aaron.

The boy I'd known my entire life. The quiet genius who built gadgets in his room and could fix anything mechanical. The Blue Ranger who always had my back. Aaron, with his thoughtful eyes and rare but wonderful smile that made his whole face light up.

I took a deep breath and typed, "No dork. I kept thinking about you."

There was a pause before his reply came through: "Me? Why me?"

My heart pounded as I typed the words that would change everything between us. "Cause like... I think I like you? 💖"

The seconds after I sent that message felt like hours. I stared at the screen, watching the three dots appear and disappear as he typed, deleted, and typed again.

"You like me? Like, you like-like me? ? "

His response was so perfectly, awkwardly Aaron that it made me smile despite my nerves.

"...yeah..." I admitted, then quickly followed up with, "Did I just make it weird?"

The wait for his response felt eternal, my stomach twisting with a new kind of anxiety. Had I just ruined one of my oldest friendships? What if he didn't feel the same way? What if—

His reply finally appeared: "Not at all cause I like-like you too."

I stared at the words, reading them over and over to make sure I hadn't imagined them. A smile spread across my face, wider than any I'd managed during Jake's visit. This feeling—this giddy, nervous, wonderful feeling—was what I'd been chasing all along.

It wasn't the glamorous older guy with the perfect hair and famous father. It wasn't the fantasy I'd built up in my head and set to music. It was Aaron—steady, brilliant, loyal Aaron who had been there all along, who knew the real me beneath the makeup and stage persona, who preferred me just as I was.

I hugged my phone to my chest, unsure how to respond but certain that something important had just happened. Something real, not the manufactured drama of my crush on Jake or the TikTok fantasies of strangers on the internet.

This was between me and Aaron—a beginning, a possibility, a truth that had been waiting for us to discover it.

And for the first time since finding Viper's note in my bunk, I wasn't thinking about the threat hanging over me or the pressure of the tour or the expectations of being Michelle Morris's daughter. I was just thinking about Aaron, and what it might be like to hold his hand or see that rare smile directed at me with this new understanding between us.

It was a good feeling. The best feeling.

Finally, I replied, "So... I live in Ireland. You live in Angel Grove. What does this mean?" The practical question didn't diminish my excitement, but the reality of our situation couldn't be ignored.

"Well, I mean, Arissa's boyfriend lives on Saturn... 🌀 " His response made me laugh out loud, earning a curious "Everything okay?" from Arion outside my curtain.

"Fine! Just texting!" I called back before returning to my conversation with Aaron.

"LMAO... yeah, true. When you put it that way, Balincollig isn't that far from Angel Grove..." I typed, then felt a surge of boldness. "...wait! Does this mean you wanna be my boyfriend???"

There was a long pause before he replied again, long enough that I started to worry I'd pushed too far, too fast. "OK, did I make it weird now? 🙄"

Relief washed over me. "NO! Not at all... I was just asking..."

"Um, do you want me to be?" His hesitancy was so endearing, so perfectly Aaron—careful, thoughtful, never presuming.

"Maybe I do. If you wanted to be," I replied, mirroring his cautious approach while my heart raced with anything but caution.

"Maybe I want to."

I grinned at the screen, frustration and delight mingling at our mutual inability to just say what we meant directly. "OMG! So are you my bf or not? Cause you know my mom is gonna ask."

"What are you going to tell her? 🤔"

"OMG you are so impossible," I typed, rolling my eyes even though he couldn't see me. "I'm going to tell her, yes Mom, Aaron is my boyfriend."

"I like that answer. So you're my gf?"

"That's usually how the bf thing works, LMAO!!!"

I could almost see his smile through the text, that rare, full smile that transformed his usually serious face. The thought of it made my own smile widen.

This was so different from my crush on Jake. That had been all fantasy and projection—a romanticized version of someone I barely knew beyond family connections. This was Aaron, who had seen me at my worst, who knew all my flaws and quirks, who had been there for every milestone and meltdown.

Aaron, who understood what it meant to balance being a Ranger with being a normal teenager. Who could talk about tech and music and the weird specific challenges of having Ranger parents with equal understanding. Who didn't need me to wear makeup or fancy clothes to see me.

A new text appeared: "So when you get back from tour... can I take you on an actual date?"

The question made the reality of our new relationship status sink in. This wasn't just texting; this was something that would continue when I returned home. Something real.

"I'd like that," I replied, then added, "What would we do?"

"I have some ideas. But it's a surprise. 🔑"

"If it involves anything mechanical I'm going to reconsider this whole boyfriend thing," I teased.

"No promises. But I think you'll like it."

I hugged my phone to my chest again, feeling a warmth spread through me that had nothing to do with the small space of my bunk. Whatever Aaron was planning, I knew it would be thoughtful and specific to us—not some generic date idea, but something that reflected who we were together.

"I should probably get some sleep," I wrote reluctantly. "Early bus call tomorrow."

"OK. Sweet dreams, Har. 💙"

The blue heart emoji—his Ranger color—made me smile again. "Night, Aaron. 💙"

I set my phone aside, but sleep felt far away. My mind was racing with this new development, with all the possibilities it opened up. Aaron was my boyfriend. I was his girlfriend. The simplicity of it was beautiful after months of complicated pining over Jake.

As I finally drifted toward sleep, I realized something else: for the first time since finding Viper's note, I wasn't scared. I was a Ranger, after all. I had faced worse threats than a creepy stalker with a rose fixation. And now I had one more person in my corner—someone who would move heaven and earth to protect me if needed, just as I would for him.

Whatever Viper had planned, whatever his obsession with me entailed, I would face it. I was Harley Bradley, Violet Thunder Ranger, musician, and now, Aaron Kay's girlfriend.

"The Magic of Chaos"

"Mummy!" I heard from the living room. It was Killy's voice—my quiet, thoughtful son who rarely raised his voice unless something was genuinely amiss. I sighed, tapped the macro key that instantly blacked out my four monitors, and went to investigate. If Killy was calling me, it meant Rose was absolutely into something she shouldn't be.

Sure enough, I walked in to find Rose had attempted to engineer what appeared to be a massive rainbow marker by taping all of her Crayolas together. The result was a disaster: an entire spool of blue painter's tape with random, uncapped markers tangled in the sticky mess, the chaos spreading across the living room carpet and even clinging to our Aussie Shepherd, Daisy, who looked thoroughly ashamed of her involvement in the situation.

"Oh, for God's sake, Rose. Why?" I asked, my voice tight with that particular strain of parental exasperation that comes from witnessing creative destruction.

"Make rainbow, Mummy," Rose answered as if it were the most obvious answer in the world, her expression so earnest it was almost impossible to maintain my frustration.

"Of course. Why didn't I think of that. J! Get in here!" I called to my husband, knowing I needed reinforcements.

J appeared from his salon, sleeves rolled to his elbows, a smudge of purple hair dye marking his cheek. He'd just finished with a client, judging by the faint chemical smell that followed him. His eyes widened as he took in the scene. "What is it, Livvie—oh bloody fucking hell. Róisín..."

I nodded, gesturing to the marker apocalypse. "You want to take the twins to the salon so I can clean this mess up in peace?" I asked, already calculating how long it would take to salvage the carpet.

"Oi. Aye, sure love." He crouched down to Rose's level, somehow managing to look both stern and amused. "Rose, where did you get this one from?" He scooped up the twins with practiced ease.

"Let me guess. Was it 5-Minute Crafts?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Rose nodded, her eyes bright with the satisfaction of a creative vision attempted, if not quite achieved.

"I uninstalled all the apps on the TV," I sighed, mentally adding 'child-proof the entire house' to my never-ending to-do list.

"Probably something she watched before you did that's been rolling around in her little fairy brain," J said, adjusting Killy on his hip while keeping a firm grip on Rose, who was already squirming toward her next potential project.

Rose nodded vigorously, delighted by the description. "Fairy brain!"

"Come on Fairy Brain, let's go paint your nails," J said as he carried the twins away, shooting me a sympathetic look over his shoulder.

"Make pretty!" Rose's voice echoed down the hall, her enthusiasm undimmed by the chaos she'd created.

I couldn't help but laugh despite the mess. Rose was pure impulse, a little force of nature whose sole motivation in life was making things pretty and securing snacks. She was a loving girl, but utterly impulsive. No idea where she got that from—though J's raised eyebrow whenever I said this suggested he had theories.

I meticulously capped every marker, then carefully rolled up the tape, being extra gentle when I got to the bits tangled in Daisy's fur. "Sorry girl, but you really have to stay away from Rose when she gets an idea," I told the dog, who responded with a look of canine resignation that suggested she'd learned this lesson several times before.

Once the room was cleaned up—or at least restored to our family's version of order—I went down the hall to J's salon. He had already painted Rose's nails, which was one of the few activities she would actually sit still for, and had moved on to Killy's. Even with a cast, Killy had insisted on having his nails black like his Da. J was carefully painting the little fingertips visible through the cast, which thankfully would be coming off in a week.

"Pretty sparkle!" Rose called, waving her small, glitter-dusted fingers dangerously close to my face with reckless enthusiasm.

"Oh, so pretty, Love. But hands down, now. They need to dry," I instructed, gently guiding her arms back to her sides.

"Nails dry," Rose declared, dropping her hands with such sudden compliance that I was momentarily suspicious.

I sighed, "Thank you, Love. Truly."

J smiled, finishing the last of Killy's visible nails with a flourish. "Not a problem, mo chroí. Is the living room clean?"

I nodded, leaning against the doorframe. "Yes, for now. Until Storm Rose touches down again."

After the twins' nails were dry, we decided they needed to burn some energy, especially Rose. We had a lovely green space right across from our house, so we put shoes and coats on the twins and headed outside.

Killy immediately found a stick and started methodically poking at rocks—my little scientist, always investigating. Meanwhile, Rose took off at full fairy speed, arms outstretched as she zigzagged across the grass with no discernible pattern except pure joy.

Kara must have spotted us from her window because a few minutes later she emerged with Tiffy in tow, the little girl already calling out to Rose.

"Hi Rose!" Tiffy smiled. At six, I wasn't entirely sure why she enjoyed playing with my chaotic two-year-old, but they had formed an unlikely and endearing friendship.

"Tiffy!" Rose cheered, abandoning whatever imaginary game she'd been playing to race toward her friend, nearly toppling over in her enthusiasm.

"Hey Kara," I smiled as she came to stand beside us, looking as put-together as always.

"Hey Liv, Jeremy. Tiffy saw the twins playing and wanted to come out too," Kara explained, watching as the girls immediately launched into some elaborate game involving what appeared to be fairy princesses with superpowers.

"Rose was wreaking havoc inside. Needed to burn off some energy, and there's supposed to be a storm soon, so they'll be cooped up," I said, already dreading the prospect of containing Rose's energy within four walls during bad weather.

"Oh no, can your house withstand it?" Kara asked with a perfectly straight face.

"Not sure, barely survived the last storm with Rose," J laughed, his arm slipping around my waist as we watched our little whirlwind chase Tiffy across the grass. "The structural integrity of our home is constantly in question."

"Where are the girls?" I asked, referring to her other daughters, Kira and Kora (14 and 12 respectively). The Jordan household was usually bustling with activity, all three girls moving in their distinct orbits.

"Kira's holed up in her room working on her YouTube channel—something about a new eyeshadow technique," Kara explained with that particular mixture of pride and concern I recognized from my own parenting journey. "And Kora's at the track with Hal, trying to get some riding in before the storm hits."

"Did Amber talk to you more about Kira being a model?" I asked, keeping my voice casual though I knew it was a sensitive topic.

Kara sighed, her shoulders dropping slightly. "We have a meeting with her when Michelle gets back from her tour. I have a feeling Amber thinks Michelle will somehow convince Hal and me to let Kira do it." She shook her head, watching as Tiffy showed Rose some elaborate hand-clapping game.

"And you're not too keen on it?" I probed gently, though her position was fairly obvious.

"Having my fourteen-year-old model makeup?" Kara replied, her southern accent becoming more pronounced as it always did when she was concerned. "Not particularly. She's already obsessed with her appearance, and her channel is one thing—at least that's creative and she's in control. But

being the face of a commercial brand?" She shook her head again. "I just don't think she needs that kind of pressure or scrutiny."

"I don't blame you," I said, watching Rose attempt a cartwheel that more closely resembled a chaotic tumble. "If it were Rose, I'm not sure I'd allow it either." I tried to imagine my little hurricane as a teenager, already feeling exhausted at the prospect.

"I certainly wouldn't," J echoed firmly, his protective instincts flaring. "Though by the time Rose is fourteen, she'll probably have invented some new form of social media we haven't even conceived of yet."

"God help us all when that happens," I muttered, earning a knowing laugh from both J and Kara.

We let the kids play for a while longer, watching as Rose and Tiffy created an increasingly elaborate game involving fairy kingdoms and what appeared to be complex diplomatic negotiations between imaginary realms. Killy remained absorbed in his methodical exploration of rocks and sticks, occasionally looking up to observe the girls with that thoughtful expression that made him seem far older than his years.

The first distant rumble of thunder signaled it was time to head back. Kara collected Tiffy, who protested leaving her fairy princess duties, while J and I rounded up our twins. Rose, predictably, required physical extraction from her game, while Killy came immediately when called, his small fist clutching a "special rock" he'd discovered.

"Dinner at ours tomorrow?" I suggested to Kara as we parted ways. "If we survive the night with Storm Rose, that is."

"Sounds perfect," Kara agreed with a laugh. "I'll bring wine. We might both need it."

Back at our house, J disappeared into the kitchen to cook—his domain where I was banned after numerous culinary disasters—while I shepherded the twins into the living room. I set up Mario Kart for them, a game they were slowly beginning to grasp. They were actually starting to understand the point and occasionally managed to keep their tiny digital cars on the track for more than three seconds at a stretch.

"Mummy play too?" Rose asked, holding out a controller with such hopefulness that I couldn't refuse, despite having a dozen other things I should be doing.

"Of course, Love," I said, settling on the floor between them and taking my controller. "Just a few races, then Mummy needs to check on something."

We selected our characters—our choices so consistent they'd become family tradition. Killy immediately navigated to Toad, his small face serious as he made his selection. Rose bounced excitedly as she found Toadette, her enthusiasm making the character selection screen bounce wildly before settling. I chose Daisy, as always, my fingers finding the familiar controls with practiced ease.

"Mummy best racer," Killy stated matter-of-factly as the countdown began, his quiet voice carrying absolute certainty.

"Da says you cheat," Rose added cheerfully, already mashing buttons despite the race not having started.

I laughed, "Da just can't handle losing."

The race began, and I deliberately held back, letting the twins get ahead while still keeping close enough to help if they got stuck. Rose's driving style matched her personality—all enthusiasm and no strategy, her kart bouncing wildly off walls and occasionally driving in completely the wrong direction. Killy, by contrast, moved with careful precision, his tiny fingers gripping the controller with intense concentration as he navigated each turn.

"Look, Mummy! I flying!" Rose declared as her kart somehow launched off a ramp and into a ravine.

"I see that, Love," I replied, guiding my own kart to collect some power-ups. "Try to stay on the track this time."

"On track," Killy echoed, his kart moving at a steady, methodical pace that belied his age. He might not be the fastest, but he rarely crashed—a minor miracle for a two-year-old.

By the final lap, I allowed myself to race properly, weaving through the computer-controlled characters with the skill born of countless late-night gaming sessions. Gaming had been my stress relief long before I became a mother, and even with the chaos of twins, I still managed to maintain my edge—much to J's chagrin whenever we played together.

"Mummy winning!" Rose cheered as I crossed the finish line, seemingly unbothered that her own kart was facing the wrong direction somewhere near the starting line.

"Killy second," I noted with genuine pride as his Toad crossed the finish line behind my Daisy. "Well done, Love!"

Killy's small face lit up with quiet satisfaction, a rare and precious expression that always made my heart squeeze. "Again?" he asked hopefully.

"One more race," I agreed, selecting the next track. "Then Mummy needs to check on some work."

We played through another race—this one on Rainbow Road, Rose's favorite despite it being the most challenging track. She loved the colors and didn't seem to mind that her kart spent more time falling off the edge than actually racing. Killy navigated carefully, his tongue poking out slightly in concentration, while I demonstrated some of my favorite shortcuts just to hear his soft "wow" of appreciation.

After our second race (which I won handily, though I made sure Killy had a respectable second-place finish), I left them to play together while I slipped into my office to check on the code I'd been

working on. The four monitors sprang to life at my touch, displaying the complex encryption protocols I'd been developing for a client.

I'd barely had time to reorient myself to where I'd left off when J called from the kitchen. "Dinner in five, Love!"

"Coming!" I called back, quickly saving my work and shutting down the monitors. My project would have to wait until after the twins were in bed—assuming I could get them to sleep at a reasonable hour, which was always a gamble with Rose.

The smell of J's cooking drew me to the kitchen—a savory aroma of herbs and roasted vegetables that made my stomach growl appreciatively. He had a way with food that bordered on magical, transforming simple ingredients into meals that even the twins would eat without complaint.

"Smells amazing," I said, wrapping my arms around him from behind as he stirred something on the stove. "What culinary masterpiece are we having tonight?"

"Nothing fancy," J replied with characteristic modesty. "Just a simple risotto with those mushrooms Trevor brought over, and some chicken for the twins."

"Simple, he says," I laughed, pressing a kiss to his shoulder before moving to set the table.

"Da cooking!" Rose announced as she raced into the kitchen, Killy following at his more measured pace. "Yummy yummy!"

"Yes, Love, Da's cooking something very yummy," I confirmed, lifting her into her booster seat. "And what do we do at the dinner table?"

"Sit still," Rose recited, though her body was already wiggling in direct contradiction to her words. "No throw food."

"That's right," I nodded, helping Killy into his seat. "No throwing food, even if it looks like it might be fun to see if it sticks to the ceiling."

"One time," J muttered from the stove, though I could hear the smile in his voice. "She did that one time with spaghetti, and you'll never let it go."

"The stain is still there," I pointed out, gesturing to the faint mark on our kitchen ceiling. "A permanent reminder of why we don't give Rose anything with adhesive properties."

Dinner proceeded with the controlled chaos that defined most of our family meals—Rose alternating between enthusiastic eating and elaborate stories about her fairy adventures, Killy methodically separating each component of his meal into precise sections before eating them in a specific order, and J and I exchanging glances of exhausted amusement across the table.

"So," J said as he served himself another helping of risotto, "I heard from Mich..."

I shook my head, cutting Rose's chicken into smaller pieces. "How's the tour. What trouble's she managed?"

"Not her. Harley. Evidently she is over the wanker's son. She has a proper boyfriend now," J explained.

"Oh aye? Who is it then?" I asked as I repositioned Rose's plate.

"Some bloke from Angel Grove that's she's known since she was wee. I guess they reconnected over Thanksgiving," J explained.

"Oof, I'm sure Hunter loves that. If I were that wee bloke I'd be afraid given his girlfriend's Da is a Thunder Ranger," I said.

As if on cue, a flash of lightning illuminated the kitchen, followed seconds later by a rumble of thunder that made Rose's eyes widen with excitement.

"Storm coming!" she declared, bouncing in her seat. "Big boom!"

"Yes, Love, big boom indeed," I agreed, mentally calculating how many bedtime stories it would take to settle her down with a thunderstorm providing dramatic background effects. "Which means we need to finish dinner and get ready for bath time."

The rest of the meal passed quickly, punctuated by increasingly dramatic thunder that delighted Rose and made Killy press closer to my side, his sensitivity to loud noises making him more subdued than usual. By the time we finished, rain was lashing against the windows, the wind picking up to create that eerie whistling sound through our not-quite-perfectly-sealed windows. I wasn't exactly fond of loud noises myself, but I did my best to stay calm, so as not to upset Killy more.

"Bath time, then stories," I announced, standing to clear the plates. "J, do you want to handle bath duty while I clean up here?"

"Sure thing, Love," J agreed, already moving to scoop up the twins. "Come on, monsters. Time to get the marker residue and fairy dust washed off."

As their voices faded down the hallway—Rose's excited chatter about bubbles, J's patient responses—I began tidying the kitchen, my mind drifting to the work waiting in my office. The encryption project had a tight deadline, but family came first. The code would still be there after the twins were asleep.

I had just finished loading the dishwasher when my phone buzzed with a text from Kara: "Tiffy already asking when she can see Rose again. These two are inseparable!"

I smiled, typing back: "Rose will be delighted. Playdate this weekend? I can host to save your house."

Kara's reply came with a laughing emoji: "Deal. Though I'm not sure my house is any safer from Hurricane Rose than yours is."

The sound of splashing and giggles from the bathroom drew me down the hall, where I found J attempting to wash Rose's hair while she created an elaborate bubble landscape across the surface of the bath water.

"Mummy!" Rose called, her face lighting up as if she hadn't seen me in days rather than minutes. "Bubbles castle!"

"I see that, Love," I smiled, kneeling beside the tub. "It's very impressive."

"I'm trying to get the shampoo out of her hair," J explained with the weary determination of a man engaged in a task of monumental difficulty. "But she keeps diving under the bubbles."

"Rose," I said, using my serious voice. "Let Da wash your hair properly so we can get out and have stories before bed."

The magic word—"stories"—worked its usual charm. Rose immediately sat still, allowing J to rinse the shampoo from her blonde hair without further underwater expeditions.

Bath time concluded with minimal flooding of the bathroom floor (a victory in our household), and soon both twins were in their pajamas—Killy in his favorite red ones, Rose in a nightgown with fairy wings attached to the back.

"Three stories," Rose negotiated as I tucked her into bed, her expression serious despite the fairy wings now crushed beneath her.

"Two stories," I countered. "It's already past bedtime because of the bath adventures."

"Two and a half," she offered, her tiny face scrunched in what she clearly thought was a shrewd business expression.

"Two stories, and Mummy will do the voices," I said, knowing this was my strongest bargaining chip. Rose considered this for a moment before nodding solemnly. "Deal."

Across the room, Killy was already settled in J's lap, koala clutched to his chest, waiting patiently for the story ritual to begin. J sat in the nearby chair, gently adjusting the cast that still encased his small arm.

I selected two books from the shelf—a fairy adventure for Rose and a book about space for Killy. Outside, the storm continued to rage, rain lashing against the windows, but inside our small sanctuary, there was only the warm glow of nightlights and the familiar cadence of bedtime stories.

By the time I finished the second book, Killy's eyes were already drifting closed, his breathing evening out into the rhythm of sleep. J carefully carried him to his room. Rose, predictably, was still wide awake, her eyes bright despite the late hour.

"One more, Mummy?" she whispered, though her whisper was more like a normal speaking voice.

"Not tonight, Love," I said firmly, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "Time for sleep now. The fairies need their rest too."

"Fairies sleeping," she agreed, finally settling back against her pillow. "Night night, Mummy."

"Night night, Rose," I whispered, smoothing her hair one last time before joining J at the door.

We stood there for a moment, watching our daughter in the soft glow of the nightlights—Rose already fidgeting despite her claimed fatigue. These quiet moments, these small pockets of peace amid the chaos of our daily lives, were what I treasured most.

"They're something else, aren't they?" J murmured, his arm slipping around my waist.

"They certainly are," I agreed, leaning into him. "Though I'm not entirely convinced Rose is actually human. She might be part fairy, part hurricane."

J chuckled softly as we eased the door mostly closed, leaving it open just enough for the hallway light to spill in. "And Killy?"

"Killy is..." I paused, thinking of how different our twins were despite sharing the same birthday. "Killy is our little observer. Taking everything in, processing the world in his own quiet way."

We made our way to the living room, the storm still raging outside but somehow making our home feel cozier by contrast. J poured us each a glass of wine while I turned on the gaming console, the familiar startup sound a welcome distraction from the thunder.

"Mario Kart?" J asked, raising an eyebrow as he handed me a glass. "Bit late for that competitive streak of yours to come out, isn't it?"

"It's never too late to remind you who the champion is," I replied with a grin, selecting my usual character—Daisy, of course—while J reluctantly took his Luigi.

"Just one race," he warned, settling beside me on the sofa. "I'm not getting sucked into a tournament tonight."

"That's what you always say," I teased, already selecting Rainbow Road—my best track and his worst. "And then you lose and demand rematches until midnight."

"Cheeky," J muttered, but I could see the competitive glint in his eye as the countdown began.

One race turned into three, then five, our friendly competition providing the perfect distraction from the storm outside and the day's exhaustion. I won most races, as usual, though J managed to sneak in a victory on Bowser's Castle that he celebrated with far more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary.

"You're insufferable when you win," I laughed as he did a small victory dance after his lone triumph.

"And you're not?" he countered, dropping back onto the sofa beside me. "I seem to recall someone doing a full lap around the living room after beating me in Rainbow Road last week."

"That was different," I protested. "I beat my own record. It was a historic moment."

J laughed, pulling me against his side as I set down my controller. "Whatever you say, Love. Gaming champion, code breaker, marker disaster cleaner—you wear many hats."

"And I wear them all exceptionally well," I agreed, resting my head against his shoulder. The wine, the gaming, and the day's events had left me pleasantly tired, the storm outside now a soothing backdrop to our quiet evening.

"To surviving another day with Hurricane Rose," J toasted, raising his nearly empty glass.

"And to whatever creative disaster awaits us tomorrow," I added with a smile, clinking my glass against his.

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the rain providing a soothing backdrop to our rare moment of adult peace.

"What do you think Rose will get into next?" J asked, his tone somewhere between amusement and genuine concern.

I laughed softly, taking a sip of wine. "God only knows. Though after today's marker debacle, I'm thinking we should probably lock up the paint."

"And the glue," J added.

"And definitely the glitter," I finished, both of us shuddering at the memory of the glitter incidents that had left our house sparkling for weeks.

The storm outside intensified, a particularly loud crack of thunder making us both glance toward the twins' room. But no cries came—both children apparently sleeping through nature's drama.

"Small mercies," I murmured, settling back against J's shoulder.

J pulled me closer, his arm tightening around my waist as his lips found my temple. I'm not sure if it was to distract me from the storm—knowing my unease with loud noise—or if he was genuinely in the mood, or perhaps both, but when his gentle kiss on my temple shifted to a more purposeful one against my lips, I found I didn't particularly care about his motivation.

The wine had left me pleasantly relaxed, and the day's chaos with the twins faded into the background as J's hand slipped beneath the hem of my sweater, his touch warm against my skin. We stayed that way for a while, trading increasingly heated kisses on the sofa like teenagers rather than exhausted parents of twins, the storm providing a dramatic soundtrack to our impromptu moment of connection.

"Bedroom?" J murmured against my neck, his voice carrying that particular roughness that always sent a shiver down my spine.

I nodded, reluctantly extracting myself from his embrace to check that the twins' door was still closed, the nightlights still glowing softly through the gap at the bottom. Satisfied that our little hurricanes were indeed asleep, I took J's outstretched hand and let him lead me toward our room.

We barely made it through the door before resuming where we'd left off, clothes being discarded with the practiced efficiency of a long-established relationship. J kicked the door shut behind us, reaching back to turn the lock without breaking our kiss—a parental necessity we'd learned the hard way after one particularly traumatizing almost-interruption by Rose during her wandering phase.

I fell back onto the bed, J following me down, his weight a familiar comfort as his hands traced patterns across my skin that he'd perfected over years of learning exactly how to make me come undone. He shifted, moving to crawl up my body, when suddenly he collapsed with a sharp intake of breath, followed by a low groan of pain.

"Love? What is it?" I asked, immediately concerned, pushing myself up onto my elbows.

"It's fine, I'm grand," he insisted through gritted teeth, attempting to push himself back up only to collapse again with a wince.

"You are clearly not grand," I said, reaching for my discarded sweatshirt and pulling it over my head. The mood had effectively evaporated, replaced by the familiar concern of being partnered with someone as accident-prone as J.

"No, no, Love..." he pleaded, his expression caught between pain and disappointment. "Don't stop."

"You're hurt," I pointed out, already half-dressed. "You still want to go?"

"Aye, of course I do," he said with forced enthusiasm that was somewhat undermined by the grimace he couldn't quite suppress.

I looked at him skeptically, recognizing the stubborn set of his jaw. "Love, what did you do?"

"I twisted my knee crawling up to you," he admitted reluctantly, shifting slightly and wincing again. "I think I just overextended it."

"Oi! We need to get you to A&E," I insisted, already reaching for my phone on the nightstand.

"Can we go after?" he asked hopefully, gesturing vaguely toward the bed.

"Love!" My exasperation was tempered with fondness—only J would still be thinking about sex while potentially having damaged his knee.

He sighed, accepting defeat. "Fine."

I finished getting dressed, then helped him into his clothes, trying to minimize movement of his increasingly swollen knee. I texted Kara to see if she could stay with the twins while I got J to A&E—a request I'd made often enough that it had its own shorthand between us: "J vs. gravity again. Need twin coverage."

Her reply came almost immediately: "On my way. What did he do this time?"

"Knee vs. bedframe. Details when you get here," I texted back, already gathering J's wallet and keys.

Kara arrived within minutes, still in her pajamas with a light jacket thrown over them, her hair hastily pulled into a messy bun. "Go," she said, waving us toward the door. "I've got the twins. Text me when you know something."

"You're a lifesaver," I told her gratefully, helping J hobble toward the car.

The drive to A&E was familiar—too familiar, given J's propensity for injury—and by the time we arrived, his knee had swollen to an impressive size, the pain evident in the tightness around his eyes despite his attempts to downplay it.

"Ah, back again then?" Farrah, one of the nurses, greeted us as we entered, her expression a mixture of concern and amusement. "Dr. O'Malley is on tonight. He'll be glad to see his most regular patient."

"I'm sure he's missed me," J replied with a strained smile, leaning heavily on me as we made our way to the registration desk.

"What is it this time?" Farrah asked, already pulling up J's extensive medical file on her computer.

"Knee," I supplied, helping J into a chair. "Twisted it getting into bed."

Farrah raised an eyebrow but made no comment as she updated the file. "Right then. Shouldn't be too long a wait tonight. It's been quiet—well, until you arrived."

"We aim to keep you on your toes," J quipped, though the humor didn't quite reach his eyes as he shifted uncomfortably.

While we waited to be called, I texted Kara an update, assuring her that we'd likely be a while but that everything was under control. Her response—"Twins still sleeping. Take your time. I've got wine and your Netflix password"—was reassuring. At least someone was having a pleasant evening.

"Jeremiah O'Brien?" A nurse called from the doorway, and J winced at the use of his full name—something he detested almost as much as his current predicament.

"That's us," I confirmed, helping him to his feet—or rather, foot, as he was now completely unwilling to put weight on the injured knee.

We were led to an examination room where Dr. O'Malley was already waiting, his familiar face breaking into a smile that was equal parts professional concern and personal amusement. He'd treated J for everything from a dislocated shoulder (attempting to hang Christmas lights) to a broken toe (tripping over one of Rose's toys) to a sprained wrist (slipping on wet leaves while raking the garden).

"Jeremiah," he greeted, using the full name deliberately, knowing it would annoy J. "What have you done to yourself this time?"

"Just the knee, Doc," J replied, grimacing as he hoisted himself onto the examination table. "Nothing serious."

"I'll be the judge of that," Dr. O'Malley said, already moving to examine the swollen joint. "How did it happen?"

J glanced at me, a hint of color rising to his cheeks. "I, ah, twisted it. Getting into bed."

Dr. O'Malley's expression remained professionally neutral, though I caught the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. "I see. And were there any... extenuating circumstances that might have contributed to this injury?"

J's blush deepened. "Just trying to romance the missus."

"Mmhmm," Dr. O'Malley hummed, "Let's have a look, shall we?"

The examination was thorough, with J wincing and occasionally swearing under his breath as Dr. O'Malley manipulated the injured knee. I stood by, alternating between sympathy for J's pain and exasperation at how we'd ended up here—again—on what should have been a quiet night at home.

"Well, the good news is I don't think it's torn," Dr. O'Malley concluded after several minutes. "Likely just a sprain, though we'll need an X-ray to rule out any hairline fractures. And an MRI might be in order if the pain persists."

J groaned, "Not another MRI."

"Should have thought of that before you decided to play gymnast," I muttered, though I squeezed his hand sympathetically.

"I'll arrange for the X-ray," Dr. O'Malley said, making notes in J's file. "In the meantime, ice, elevation, and rest. And perhaps consider some less... acrobatic activities until it's healed."

J's face was now approximately the color of a tomato, but he nodded dutifully. "Right. Thanks, Doc."

As Dr. O'Malley left to arrange the X-ray, J turned to me with a pained expression that had nothing to do with his knee. "This is mortifying."

"It could be worse," I offered, trying not to laugh. "Remember when you had to explain the Christmas light incident to the entire A&E staff?"

"Don't remind me," he groaned, leaning back against the examination table. "I'm never going to live this down, am I?"

"Not a chance," I confirmed cheerfully, leaning in to press a kiss to his forehead. "But look on the bright side—at least we have a good excuse for why we're both going to be exhausted tomorrow."

"Not exactly how I planned to achieve that state," J muttered, but a reluctant smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Never is with you," I replied fondly, settling into the chair beside the examination table. "But it makes for interesting stories."

"Interesting is one word for it," he sighed, adjusting his position to try to find some comfort. "Sorry about... you know."

"Don't be," I assured him, taking his hand. "There will be other nights. Preferably ones that don't end in A&E."

"I make no promises," J replied with a hint of his usual humor returning. "You know me and gravity have an ongoing dispute."

"And gravity keeps winning," I pointed out, earning a reluctant laugh from J.

We sat in companionable silence for a moment, the chaos of the evening settling into the kind of absurd situation that seemed to follow us wherever we went. It wasn't how I'd envisioned our night ending, but there was something oddly fitting about it—just another chapter in our unpredictable life together.

"Do you think Kara's raiding our wine stash?" J asked suddenly, clearly trying to distract himself from the throbbing pain in his knee.

"Almost certainly," I confirmed. "But she's earned it, watching the twins on short notice. Again."

"We should get her something nice," J suggested. "A gift basket. Or a year's supply of wine, given how often she has to deal with our emergencies."

"I'll add it to the list," I promised, already mentally calculating how many bottles constituted appropriate compensation for midnight childcare duties.

The door opened, and a different nurse appeared with a wheelchair. "X-ray's ready for you, Mr. O'Brien."

J grimaced, both at the formal address and at the prospect of being wheeled through the hospital. "I can walk," he protested weakly.

"Hospital policy," the nurse replied firmly, clearly having heard this argument before. "Into the chair, please."

With my help and a fair amount of muttered cursing, J was settled into the wheelchair, his injured leg extended awkwardly in front of him. As the nurse prepared to wheel him away, he caught my hand.

"This isn't exactly how I planned to spend our evening," he said, his expression a mixture of pain and regret.

"It never is," I replied with a small smile. "But it's never boring with you, is it?"

"I aim to please," he quipped, squeezing my hand before releasing it.

"I'll be right here," I promised as the nurse began wheeling him toward the door. "Try not to injure anything else while you're gone."

His laugh, though strained, was genuine as he disappeared down the hallway, leaving me alone in the examination room to contemplate how a quiet evening at home had transformed into yet another medical adventure.

I pulled out my phone to update Kara, typing quickly: "X-ray in progress. Likely just a sprain. Might be a while yet. Twins still sleeping?"

Her response came almost immediately: "All quiet on the twin front. Take your time. I've found your secret chocolate stash, by the way. Consider it payment."

I smiled, settling back in the uncomfortable hospital chair to wait for J's return. It wasn't how I'd expected to spend my evening, but then again, life with J and the twins rarely went according to plan. And honestly, I wouldn't have it any other way—even if it meant regular visits to A&E and the occasional interrupted romantic moment.

Later, after they brought J back from the X-ray, we waited in the examination room for what felt like an eternity but was probably only twenty minutes. I'd already gone through my emails, checked on the twins via text with Kara (still sleeping, miraculously), and was halfway through an article about encryption protocols when Dr. O'Malley finally returned, J's X-rays displayed on his tablet.

"Good news for once," Dr. O'Malley announced as he entered, his expression considerably more relaxed than when he'd left. "No sprain, just overextended and irritated, especially given your last knee injury with the sidewalk incident."

J winced at the reminder of the time he fell off the sidewalk.

"You're going to end up needing a knee replacement at some point, lad," Dr. O'Malley continued, his tone carrying that particular mix of professional concern and friendly exasperation that he reserved specially for J. "The cartilage is showing signs of wear that's unusual for someone your age."

"Just give me a bionic knee," J replied with a tired smile. "Might as well upgrade while we're at it."

"Not today," Dr. O'Malley chuckled, making notes in J's file. "For once you're not leaving here in a boot. I think a brace will do ya. Take it easy for a couple of weeks, wear the brace, and you should be grand."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. After J's previous injuries, I'd half-expected him to be leaving with crutches or another walking boot—which would have been a nightmare with the twins, especially Hurricane Rose who required constant chasing.

"So I'm not banned from the stairs this time?" J asked hopefully, clearly thinking the same thing.

"Stairs are fine, but slowly," Dr. O'Malley cautioned. "No carrying the twins up and down, no running after them, and absolutely no climbing on anything—ladders, chairs, countertops. I don't want to see you back here because you decided your knee was 'grand enough' to hang Christmas lights or clean gutters."

A nurse arrived with J's brace—a substantial-looking contraption with velcro straps and metal supports that would definitely not go unnoticed by the twins. Rose, in particular, would be fascinated by it, which meant we'd need to be vigilant about keeping her from attempting to "decorate" it.

"Thanks, Doc," J said as Dr. O'Malley helped fit the brace. "Sorry for the late-night visit."

"All part of the service," Dr. O'Malley replied good-naturedly. "Though I wouldn't mind seeing a bit less of you, professionally speaking. Maybe try a less dangerous hobby? Stamp collecting, perhaps?"

I snorted at the mental image of J sitting quietly with a stamp album. "I think we both know that's not happening."

"Worth a try," Dr. O'Malley shrugged, finishing with the brace adjustments. "Right, you're all set. The nurse will be in with discharge papers and care instructions. And Jeremy? Try to stay vertical for at least a month this time, yeah?"

"No promises," J replied with a grin that didn't quite mask his discomfort as he tested putting weight on the braced knee.

After Dr. O'Malley left, I helped J gather his things, supporting him as he adjusted to the brace.

"How's it feeling?"

"Like I've been an absolute eejit," he admitted, wincing slightly as he took a few experimental steps.

"Not my finest moment, is it?"

"Not your worst either," I reminded him, thinking of some of his more spectacular injuries. "At least there's no cast this time."

"Small mercies," he agreed, leaning on me as we made our way slowly out of the examination room after completing the discharge paperwork.

The drive home was quiet, J occasionally shifting to find a comfortable position for his braced leg, me trying not to yawn as the late hour and stress caught up with me. By the time we pulled into our driveway, it was well past midnight, the storm having moved on to leave behind a damp, quiet night.

"Home sweet home," I murmured, helping J out of the car with considerably more care than our hasty departure had involved.

Kara met us at the door, her expression a mixture of concern and amusement as she took in J's brace. "Another one for the collection?" she asked, stepping aside to let us in.

"Just a brace this time," J confirmed, making his way carefully to the sofa. "No major damage, thankfully."

"Twins still sleeping?" I asked, hanging up my coat and helping J with his.

"Haven't heard a peep," Kara confirmed. "Though I did check on them twice to make sure they were still breathing. It's unusual for Rose to be this quiet for so long."

"Don't jinx it," I warned, though I was equally surprised. Rose typically had a sixth sense for disruptions to routine, often waking at the slightest deviation from normal household patterns.

"How did it happen?" Kara asked, gesturing to J's knee as she gathered her things to leave.

J and I exchanged a glance, and I could see the debate in his eyes—whether to share the embarrassing truth or come up with a more dignified explanation.

"I was getting into bed and twisted it wrong," he said finally, opting for a simplified version of events. "Nothing exciting."

Kara's raised eyebrow suggested she suspected there was more to the story, but she mercifully didn't press for details. "Well, I'm glad it's not serious. Do you need anything before I go? Tea? Help getting upstairs?"

"We're fine," I assured her, giving her a grateful hug. "Thank you for coming over on such short notice. Again."

"That's what neighbors are for," she replied easily. "Though I did drink half a bottle of your wine and eat most of those chocolate biscuits you had hidden in the pantry."

"Worth every crumb," I said sincerely. "We owe you."

After seeing Kara out, I returned to find J attempting to prop his leg up on the coffee table, his face tight with discomfort despite his efforts to hide it.

"Bed?" I suggested, already moving to help him up.

"In a minute," he said, patting the sofa beside him. "Just need to rest a bit first. That hospital chair did my back no favors."

I settled beside him, careful not to jostle his injured knee. "Some night, huh?"

"Not exactly how I planned to end it," he agreed with a rueful smile. "Sorry about... you know."

"Don't be," I said, leaning my head against his shoulder. "There will be other nights. Preferably ones that don't involve trips to A&E."

"I'll do my best," he promised, though we both knew his track record wasn't exactly reassuring.

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the quiet house a stark contrast to the chaos of the evening. Outside, the last remnants of the storm dripped from the eaves, a gentle patter that was almost soothing after the earlier thunder.

"How are we going to explain the brace to the twins?" J asked suddenly. "Rose is going to have a field day with it."

I groaned, imagining our daughter's reaction. "We'll tell them you hurt your knee and need to be extra careful. Killy will understand. Rose will... well, Rose will probably try to decorate it with glitter and fairy stickers."

"Probably," J agreed with a soft laugh. "At least it's not a cast."

"We should get some sleep," I said finally, stifling a yawn. "The twins will be up with the sun, brace or no brace."

"You're right," J agreed, though he made no immediate move to stand. "Just... give me a minute. Not looking forward to the stairs."

I understood his hesitation. Our house, charming as it was, featured a staircase with an awkward turn—challenging enough on a good day, let alone with a braced knee and post-A&E exhaustion.

"One step at a time," I said, standing and offering my hand. "I've got you."

The journey upstairs was slow and punctuated by J's creative cursing, but we managed without incident. By the time we reached our bedroom, we were both too exhausted for anything but the most basic nighttime routine—teeth brushed, faces washed, pajamas donned with considerably less enthusiasm than they'd been removed earlier.

"Well, this isn't quite how I imagined ending up in bed with you tonight," J quipped as he carefully arranged himself under the covers, adjusting his braced leg with a wince.

"Oddly enough, it's exactly how I expected it to end," I replied, settling beside him. "Given our track record."

"Cheeky," he murmured, but there was affection in his voice as he reached for my hand in the darkness. "Love you, Livvie."

"Love you too," I replied, squeezing his fingers gently. "Even when you're an absolute disaster."

"Especially then," he corrected with a soft laugh.

"Especially then," I agreed, feeling the day's tension finally begin to ebb as sleep beckoned. "Though maybe try for fewer disasters in the immediate future? For my sake?"

"I'll do my best," he promised, his voice already heavy with approaching sleep. "No guarantees, though."

"Never are with you," I murmured fondly, letting my eyes drift closed.

The next morning I woke to an unusual silence. Sunlight filtered through the curtains we'd forgotten to close properly, casting soft patterns across our bedroom. For a moment, I was disoriented by the quiet—no patter of tiny feet, no enthusiastic declarations about fairies or breakfast or whatever new idea had formed in Rose's ever-active imagination overnight.

I glanced at the clock: 7:47. Somehow, miraculously, I was the first one awake. Rose and her boundless fairy morning energy must have been truly exhausted from yesterday's adventures.

My gaze drifted to J, still sleeping soundly beside me. His hair was a complete mess, sticking up at impossible angles, his face relaxed in sleep in a way it rarely was when awake. He wore his favorite buffalo plaid pajama pants and black tank top, one arm flung above his head while the other rested protectively over his braced knee. This clumsy man. This clumsy, wonderful, amazing man who somehow, against all odds, had chosen to love me.

Plain old Olivia Paige Olsen.

Maybe it was the season—the holidays always tended to bring out a certain nostalgia—but watching him sleep, just looking at him in this rare moment of stillness, made my heart swell in my chest until I could barely breathe with the force of it.

After I lost my parents and Donna, I had felt so desperately alone. I had Abs, and she was wonderful—my rock, my constant—but that was all. For twelve years, I had moved through life feeling fundamentally incomplete, as if some essential part of me had been carved away. Then this wonderful, sexy, handsome, dashing—albeit clumsy and occasionally foot-in-mouth-afflicted—bloke had bought me a pint and proceeded to make me fall hopelessly in love with him.

I had never been in love before J. I'd convinced myself I was broken, that losing my family had somehow damaged my capacity for that kind of connection. I believed I would never know what it felt like to love someone so completely that their happiness became essential to my own.

He changed all that. He moved across an ocean for me, married me, gave me the two most wonderful children in the world. Through him came Trevor, Michelle, James, Pete, and everyone else in our big, wonderful chosen family—people who had filled the empty spaces grief had left behind until I could barely remember what that loneliness had felt like.

I loved this man in a way I never thought possible, and even after thirteen years together, I somehow still loved him more each day. Even when he was clumsy, or when he succumbed to what I affectionately called his "foot-in-mouth syndrome" and infuriated me to the point of speechlessness, I still loved him so much it made my heart physically ache.

Somehow, he had made me feel like I wasn't just Plain Old Livvie. With him, I was his clever girl, his tech fairy, his mischievous little sidhe. He made me feel special in a way no one else ever had—like I mattered, like I was essential, like Livvie O'Brien was important not just for what I could do or what I could fix, but simply for being who I was.

In the quiet morning light, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest, I was overwhelmed by a gratitude so profound it brought tears to my eyes. For all his clumsiness, for all the trips to A&E and interrupted romantic moments, for all the chaos he brought into my life—or perhaps because of it—he had given me a life I never dared dream I could have.

J stirred slightly, wincing as the movement jostled his injured knee. His eyes fluttered open, immediately finding mine with that particular softness he reserved just for me.

"Morning, Love," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep. "Why're you looking at me like that?"

I chuckled as I felt tears prickle at the corners of my eyes, a warm ache spreading through my chest. "Oh, just because I love you so bloody much, you bastard."

He reached out, his hand finding my arm and pulling me gently toward him until I was nestled against his side, careful of his injured knee. "I love you too, my little sidhe," he whispered into my hair, his accent thicker in the morning, making the endearment sound like a secret spell between us.

I rested my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear. "I know I don't always express it enough," I said softly, "but you're my world, J."

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, his hand making slow circles against my back. "You're mine too, Livvie. Mo chroí."

We lay like that for a moment, suspended in the rare peace of early morning, the house unusually quiet around us. It was almost perfect—would have been perfect, if not for the gradual realization that something was amiss in that very quietness.

"Where is Rose?" J asked cautiously, the same thought clearly having occurred to him.

"She isn't up yet," I replied, though uncertainty crept into my voice. "Haven't heard a peep."

"Um, Livvie," J said, his tone carrying that particular note of parental dread we'd both come to recognize, "have you considered she is up and the quiet isn't a good thing?"

"Oh bloody fucking hell..." I groaned, rolling out of bed and bolting for the door. Years of parenting Rose had taught us one immutable truth: silence was never, ever a good sign.

I raced downstairs, taking the steps two at a time, a litany of possible disasters running through my mind. What creative chaos had our little hurricane unleashed this time?

I skidded to a halt at the kitchen doorway, momentarily stunned by the scene before me. Rose stood on a chair she'd pushed up to the counter, surrounded by what appeared to be every container of food coloring we owned, several mixing bowls, and the large pump bottle of EOS lotion I kept in the living room for dry hands. The counter was awash in a rainbow of colors—swirls of blue and green and purple blending together in puddles that dripped onto the floor, where Daisy was happily licking up the spillage.

But it wasn't just the counter. Rose herself was a masterpiece of color—her pajamas splattered with vibrant stains, her hands dyed a deep blue-purple, and her face... oh god, her face was smeared with what appeared to be a mixture of food coloring and lotion, giving her the appearance of a tiny, deranged circus performer.

"Rose," I said carefully, trying to keep my voice even despite the chaos before me. "What are you doing, Love?"

She turned to me with a beaming smile, completely oblivious to the destruction she'd created.

"Making potions, Mummy! Magic potions!" She held up a bowl of viscous purple liquid that sloshed dangerously close to the edge. "This one make Daisy fly!"

I glanced down at our poor dog, who had patches of blue and green on her fur where Rose had apparently already tested some of her "potions." Daisy looked up at me with what I could only describe as canine resignation.

"Rose, we don't make potions with Mummy's lotion," I said, moving carefully across the sticky floor to take the bowl from her hands before catastrophe could escalate further. "And we definitely don't put potions on Daisy."

"But Daisy like it!" Rose protested, gesturing to where the dog was indeed still licking the colorful puddles from the floor. "Tasty magic!"

"I'm sure she does," I agreed, lifting Rose down from the chair, trying not to think about how many bottles of food coloring she'd emptied or how the EOS lotion—not expensive, thankfully, but still a full bottle I'd just bought at Tesco last week—was now mixed into her concoctions. "But food coloring isn't for drinking, Love, not even for dogs."

I heard a shuffling behind me and turned to see J making his way carefully into the kitchen, his braced leg moving stiffly as he took in the technicolor disaster zone.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," he muttered, eyes widening at the scene. "What in the world..."

"Magic potions, Da!" Rose announced proudly, holding up her blue-stained hands for his inspection. "For fairy wings!"

J looked from Rose to me, a mixture of horror and amusement crossing his face. "I see our little alchemist has been busy this morning."

"That's one word for it," I replied dryly, already calculating how many towels this cleanup would require and whether the food coloring would ever come out of the grout between our kitchen tiles.

"Where's Killy?" J asked, looking around for our son, who was conspicuously absent from the potion-making chaos.

As if summoned by his name, Killy appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, his expression serious as he surveyed the colorful carnage. Unlike his sister, he was still in his space pajamas, koala clutched in his good arm while his cast rested against his side.

"Rose make mess," he observed quietly, his tone neither judgmental nor particularly surprised. It was simply a statement of fact, delivered with the resignation of a child who had long since accepted his twin's chaotic nature.

"Yes, she has," I agreed, moving to ruffle his hair. "Did you sleep well, Love?"

He nodded, leaning slightly against my leg, careful to keep his distance from the sticky floor.

"Hungry," he added pragmatically.

"Breakfast might be a bit delayed," J said, eyeing the kitchen with trepidation. "Given the, ah, current state of affairs."

"I help clean," Killy offered solemnly, though he made no move to enter the danger zone of Rose's creation.

"That's very kind, buddy," J replied, "but I think this might be a job for Mummy and Da. Why don't you take your koala to the living room while we sort this out?"

Killy nodded, clearly relieved to be excused from the cleanup duty, and retreated to the safety of the living room.

"Right then," I said, turning back to Rose, who was now attempting to paint her arms with more of the colorful mixture. "Bath time for you, young lady. And then we'll talk about why we don't use Mummy's things without asking."

"But potions, Mummy!" Rose protested, her lower lip jutting out in a practiced pout. "Not finished!"

"Oh, I think you're quite finished," I assured her, carefully picking her up to minimize the transfer of color to my own clothes—a futile effort, I knew, but one had to try. "Da will start cleaning up while I get you in the bath."

"I make more after?" she asked hopefully, apparently undeterred by the impending consequences of her creative endeavors.

"Absolutely not," I replied firmly. "No more potions today. Or tomorrow. Possibly not until you're eighteen."

J suppressed a laugh, leaning against the doorframe to take weight off his injured knee. "I'll start on this mess," he offered, though his expression suggested he had no idea where to begin. "You handle the walking rainbow."

"Are you sure?" I asked, glancing meaningfully at his braced leg. "You're supposed to be resting that knee."

"I'll manage," he assured me. "Besides, I think decontaminating Rose might be the more challenging task at this point."

Looking at our daughter, who was now attempting to lick the color from her own fingers despite my efforts to stop her, I had to agree. "Fair point. Come on, Rose. Bath time."

"Magic bath!" she declared, apparently deciding that if she had to have a bath, it might as well be an enchanted one.

"Yes, Love. Magic bath," I agreed, carrying her carefully up the stairs, leaving a trail of colorful footprints in our wake. "With extra soap. Lots and lots of extra soap."

As I ran the bath, stripping Rose of her ruined pajamas and trying not to despair at the state of her skin (would food coloring stain a child? I wasn't entirely sure), I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. Of course this would be how our morning started—with magical potions and a technicolor kitchen and a dog who would probably be tinted blue for days.

It was chaos, pure and simple. But it was our chaos. And despite the cleanup ahead, despite J's injured knee and Rose's creative destruction and the inevitable battle to remove food coloring from every surface in our house, I wouldn't trade a single chaotic moment of it for all the peace and quiet in the world.

"Blue water, Mummy!" Rose exclaimed delightedly as the food coloring began to wash off her skin and into the bath, turning the water a murky shade of indigo.

"Yes, Love. Very blue," I agreed, already mentally adding 'clean bathtub' to the day's disaster recovery list. "Now let's see if we can find your actual skin under all that magic, shall we?"

As I scrubbed at Rose's stained hands and face, listening to her cheerful babbling about fairy potions and flying dogs, I sent up a silent prayer of thanks for this messy, complicated, colorful life—and for the clumsy, wonderful man downstairs who had given it to me.

"Frantic Schedules and Best Laid Plans"

"December 29th at 9:30 AM is fine. Let's get the Bradleys and Jordans on the schedule. We need to close this deal so we can start preparing the Spring campaign," I said, tapping my pen against the glass desk as I reviewed the calendar on my tablet.

"Of course, Ms. O'Sullivan," Jerrica replied, her fingers moving efficiently across her tablet as she made the appointment. She'd only been my assistant for three weeks, but she'd already mastered the precise balance of efficiency and anticipation that I required. A promising start.

As I worked through the stack of proposals for our new line, I deliberately ignored the production crew positioned in the corner of my office. The red light on the main camera blinked steadily—a constant reminder that my professional life was now entertainment for the masses. After months of filming, I'd grown accustomed to their presence, though I hadn't quite warmed to it. Still, "Beauty and the Chef" had premiered to fantastic ratings, earning an immediate renewal for a second season. The exposure was undeniably good for business, even if it meant sacrificing privacy.

A soft knock interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I called, setting aside the design portfolio I'd been reviewing.

Aine waddled through the doorway, one hand supporting her lower back, the other resting on her impressively rounded belly. At nearly nine months pregnant, she looked both radiant and exhausted—a combination I remembered all too well. Today was her last day before maternity leave, a transition I could see was weighing on her despite our careful planning.

"Aine! Hey! How are you doing?" I asked, rising to greet her.

"Amber," she began, lowering herself carefully into the chair, her Irish accent more pronounced with her evident anxiety, "are you sure you're okay with me going on leave already? We have the Spring campaign to work on, and I can work until the baby is born." Her hands fidgeted with the hem of her maternity blouse, her expression caught between professional dedication and maternal exhaustion.

I laughed softly, recognizing the familiar struggle playing out across her face. "Gina can handle it," I assured her, leaning against the edge of my desk. "We will miss you, but nothing—absolutely nothing—matters more than you having that beautiful baby girl and both of you being happy and healthy."

I crossed my arms, my tone shifting to the one Trevor called my "non-negotiable voice." "I know it's hard to stop. And the stress nearly killed me. I won't have that for you. You're taking maternity leave, and you're going to focus on yourself and that baby girl."

The camera crew shifted slightly, clearly sensing the emotional weight of the conversation. I ignored them, keeping my attention fixed on Aine.

She sighed, her shoulders relaxing slightly in surrender. "Okay. I know you're right. It's just... hard."

"I know. I remember," I said, my voice softening with genuine understanding. "It's hard for women like us to walk away from work, even for a little bit, but your health has to come first."

My mind flashed back to April—to the delivery room where both Rachel and I had nearly died. The hemorrhaging, the emergency procedures, the terrifying hours when Trevor didn't know if he would lose his wife, his daughter, or both. The memory still had the power to make my heart race, even now with Rachel thriving as a seven-month-old.

"Besides," I added with a deliberate lightness, pushing the memories away, "I need you back at full strength after leave."

Aine sighed, her hand absently tracing circles over her belly. "Okay."

"Now, go finish up your last day and then turn your attention to James and your daughter," I said, softening my tone. "Everything here will be waiting when you're ready to come back."

At the mention of James, Aine's expression shifted from professional resignation to personal exasperation. "Yeah, James is going to be like having another baby," she said with an eye roll that conveyed volumes about their complicated relationship.

"Oh no," I leaned forward, instantly recognizing the look. "What did he do now?"

"More of the same," she replied, frustration evident in her voice. "One step forward, two steps back. He gave me a key to his flat, but then he stopped calling for a week. He talked about getting a house together, then suddenly he didn't want to leave his 'perfect bachelor setup.' He even brought up marriage once—" her voice caught slightly, "—but quickly backtracked when I asked if he was serious."

I felt a familiar surge of protectiveness toward my head of web marketing. Seeing her caught in this emotional limbo with James while preparing for their child stirred both sympathy and irritation.

"So, James is being James," I summarized, not bothering to hide my disapproval. "He better grow up fast. That baby is coming, ready or not."

"Oh, I'm aware," Aine said, her Irish accent thickening with emotion. "I'm not sure he is."

The camera crew had gone suspiciously still, clearly recognizing they'd stumbled onto reality gold—the kind of personal drama viewers lived for. I resisted the urge to ask them to leave; Aine knew the parameters of filming, and this conversation would likely make the final cut regardless.

"Do you still care about him?" I asked, keeping my voice gentle but direct. "Like, do you actually want to be with him? Not just for the baby's sake?"

She nodded without hesitation, though her eyes betrayed her conflicted feelings. "I do. I actually really care about the bloke, even if he is a bloody eejit." Her hand moved protectively over her belly again. "I just keep getting whiplash from him. One minute he's excited about being a father, talking

about nursery colors and names, and the next he's panicking about losing his 'freedom' like he's some teenager instead of a forty-two-year-old man."

Michelle

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It was nice to wake up in my own bed. Well, one of them. We had a five-day stretch in Nashville, so we were staying in my apartment rather than a hotel. With one show at the Ryman and filming for the series scheduled, it made sense to base ourselves here.

Hunter and I had claimed my queen-sized bed, with Tomi's travel crib tucked into the corner of our room. The older girls had pulled out the sofa bed in the living room, and we'd set up an air mattress for Arion in what was generously called the "dining area"—really just an alcove with a small table that I rarely used for actual dining when alone. My one-bedroom apartment was intended as a place for me to crash during filming, not as a family home for six people, but we were making it work.

This was the first time the kids had seen my Nashville place. Usually, Hunter would visit alone while the girls stayed with my mom in Ireland because of school schedules. I was genuinely excited to share this part of my life with my daughters and to introduce them to my castmates. Harley had been particularly interested in the production side of things, peppering me with questions about cameras and lighting that I couldn't really answer.

I carefully extracted myself from Hunter's arm, which was draped across my waist. Thara, who was sleeping on my pillow as was her royal prerogative, opened one eye and let out a soft, disapproving mew. She was not pleased about being disturbed, but Tomi was already awake and bouncing in her crib, her little hands gripping the rail.

"Good morning, baby girl," I whispered, lifting her out and carrying her to the changing table we'd squeezed into the corner. As I changed her diaper, she babbled happily, her little fingers reaching for my hair.

Once she was fresh and clean, I glanced back at Hunter, who had rolled over to claim my vacated warm spot in the bed. "Hunter," I said, nudging his shoulder gently. "We gotta get up and start getting ready."

He groaned, burying his face deeper into the pillow. "Five more minutes."

"No five more minutes," I replied, bouncing Tomi on my hip. "I only have one and a half bathrooms in this apartment, and six people need to get ready. We need to start the rotation now if we're going to make it to set on time."

Hunter cracked one eye open, taking in the sight of Tomi and me. "Fine," he conceded, pushing himself up. "But coffee first."

"Already brewing," I promised, having set the timer the night before—one of my many small strategies for managing chaos in limited space. "I'll wake the girls while you get dressed."

I carried Tomi with me as I headed out to rouse the rest of our temporarily compressed household, mentally reviewing the day's schedule and wondering how my Nashville life and my family life would blend in this new, shared space.

I had a packed filming schedule for the day, but we'd worked out the logistics in advance—Hunter would be able to take the girls back to the apartment if they got bored or restless, and my dressing room was equipped with a portable crib where Tomi could nap during my scenes. The production had been surprisingly accommodating when I mentioned my family would be visiting.

Once everyone was ready—a minor miracle involving strategic bathroom scheduling and Hunter making breakfast while I did Harley's hair—we piled into my SUV and headed to the studio. The girls were uncharacteristically quiet during the drive.

"This is where you work, Mom?" Arissa asked.

"Yes, baby girl," I confirmed, catching her eye in the rearview mirror. "This is where I pretend to be Dixie."

As we pulled into the reserved parking space with "M. MORRIS" stenciled on the sign, I felt a strange flutter of nervousness. Having my family visit my professional world felt oddly vulnerable, as if they were seeing a side of me that existed separately from my identity as their mother.

I led them through security, where the guards greeted me with familiar nods and handed out visitor badges to everyone. Arissa immediately clipped hers to her jacket with evident pride, while Harley studied hers with the cool assessment of someone trying not to appear too impressed.

"And this is the main fire station set," I explained as we walked through the massive soundstage, gesturing toward the elaborately constructed interior that had become my second home. "And over there is the set of my house, where I film most of my scenes."

The attention to detail never failed to impress me—the living room where so many pivotal scenes had unfolded, the front porch where my character had shared tearful goodbyes and passionate reunions.

"This is so awesome!" Arissa exclaimed, her usual composure giving way to genuine excitement.

"It's so different than on TV." Unlike Harley, who had visited various sets with me over the years, this was Arissa's first time seeing the behind-the-scenes reality of television production.

I smiled as I spotted Chris approaching from the direction of the makeup trailers, his familiar easy gait and warm smile a welcome sight. "Hey! Chris!" I called, waving him over. "I want you to meet my family." I made the introductions with a touch of maternal pride. "This is Harley, Arissa, Tomi, and Arissa's boyfriend Arion."

"Very nice to meet you all," Chris said, his smile genuine as he shook hands with everyone. He crouched down to Tomi's level, earning an immediate giggle from my youngest. "Especially you, little lady. Your mom talks about you all the time."

"All good things, I hope," Hunter quipped, extending his hand to Chris.

"The best," Chris assured him with a laugh. "Though I have to say, the pictures don't do any of you justice. Michelle's been holding out on us."

The introductions continued as we made our way through the studio—Jessica, who played my character's rival, immediately bonded with Harley over their shared interest in music; Marcus, our gruff but lovable director, showed Arissa how the cameras worked; and Karen from wardrobe insisted on giving everyone a tour of the costume department, where Dixie's signature boots and leather jacket were displayed alongside other iconic pieces from the show.

Tomi quickly became the studio darling, passed from one crew member to another as everyone fell in love with her sunny disposition and ready smile. Even Marcus, notorious for his no-nonsense attitude on set, melted when she reached for his beard with curious fingers.

"You've created quite the beautiful family," Jessica murmured to me as we watched Hunter entertaining the girls with behind-the-scenes anecdotes he'd picked up from my stories over the years.

"They created me," I replied softly, the truth of it settling in my chest with comfortable weight. "I'm just lucky enough to be along for the ride."

Eventually, we settled in my dressing room while I prepared for filming. The familiar space felt different with my family in it—warmer, more alive, the professional and personal aspects of my life merging in a way that felt surprisingly right. Harley immediately gravitated toward the small collection of guitars I kept on set, while Arissa examined the elaborate mood board the production team had created for Dixie's character development this season.

"You have to wear all this?" Hunter asked, eyeing the significant padding I used to create Dixie's more voluptuous figure—a source of endless amusement for him at home.

"Not all at once," I laughed, allowing Karen to help me into the specialized bra that had sparked so many tabloid rumors. "But yes, Dixie's assets are considerably more impressive than mine."

Once I was transformed into my character—hair teased into Dixie's signature wild curls, makeup considerably more dramatic than my personal preference, and costume complete with the padding that gave me Dixie's distinctive silhouette—we headed to the set for my first scene of the day.

The girls watched from director's chairs positioned just behind the monitors, their faces illuminated by the screens as they observed the technical aspects of bringing a scene to life. Tomi sat contentedly on Hunter's lap, occasionally pointing and whispering "Mama" when I appeared on the

monitor, while Arion stood protectively behind Arissa, his training evident in the way he continuously scanned their surroundings despite the safe environment.

Between takes, I caught Harley explaining the concept of marks and blocking to Arissa, her knowledge of film production surprising me. There was something deeply satisfying about sharing this part of my life with them, about letting them see the work and craft behind the character that so many viewers knew only as a finished product.

"And cut!" Marcus called after we'd completed a particularly emotional scene. "Perfect, Michelle. Let's move on to scene twenty-three after lunch."

As the crew began resetting for the next sequence, I made my way back to my family, still in full Dixie mode but feeling entirely like myself as Tomi reached for me with eager hands.

"What did you think?" I asked, searching their faces for genuine reactions.

"You're amazing, Mom," Harley said with uncharacteristic directness, her usual teenage reserve momentarily set aside. "I mean, I knew you were good, but seeing it happen right in front of me..."

"It's like you become someone else entirely," Arissa finished, her analytical mind clearly processing the transformation she'd witnessed. "But somehow still you, underneath it all."

Hunter's eyes met mine over Tomi's head, his expression holding all the pride and love I could have hoped for. "Just another day at the office for the most talented woman I know," he said simply.

In that moment, with my professional world and personal world colliding so seamlessly, I felt a completeness I hadn't realized I'd been missing—as if two essential parts of myself had finally been properly introduced.

Amber

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"Ms. O'Sullivan, your husband is here," Jerrica's professional voice announced over my intercom, the slight lift in her tone betraying her fondness for Trevor—a common effect my husband had on my staff.

"Send him in," I replied, reaching down to scoop up Ellie from her plush bed beneath my desk. The tiny dog yawned dramatically before perking up at the prospect of a visitor. "Daddy's here to see us," I murmured to her, scratching behind her ears. "Wonder what he wants?"

The door opened, revealing Trevor in one of his impeccably tailored suits—charcoal gray with subtle pinstripes that emphasized his lean frame. Despite the formal attire, his hair was slightly windswept, suggesting he'd been running his hands through it—a telltale sign of stress that I'd learned to recognize years ago.

I rose to greet him, Ellie tucked securely in one arm as I crossed the office. The cameras tracked our movement, but we'd both become adept at ignoring their presence during personal moments.

"Hi, Love," Trevor said, his voice softening as he leaned in to kiss me. He smelled of his signature cologne and the faint, lingering scent of the restaurant kitchens—an oddly comforting combination that I'd come to associate with him.

"What brings you to my side of Cork?" I asked as I returned to my desk, setting Ellie down on her cushion where she immediately curled up to resume her interrupted nap. Trevor rarely made impromptu visits to my office during business hours unless something significant was happening.

Trevor took the seat across from me, his posture betraying his tension despite the casual way he crossed his legs. "Supplier issues for Limerick," he admitted with a sigh. "We've hit a snag on the deal."

I frowned, immediately calculating the potential impact on our timeline. The Limerick location was meant to be the next restaurant in our expanding restaurant empire—a massive undertaking that combined Trevor's Michelin-starred cuisine with traditional Irish fare. "But we're due to open in March," I reminded him. "We need those deals in place."

"I know," Trevor replied, frustration evident in the tightness around his eyes. "I've tried, Pete's tried..." He paused, his expression shifting to one I recognized all too well—the look that said he needed my particular brand of assistance. "I know the restaurant side isn't your normal area, but maybe you can finesse a deal?"

I couldn't help but smirk at his transparent appeal to my negotiation skills. While Trevor was a genius in the kitchen and a savvy businessman in his own right, we both knew I had a particular talent for making difficult deals happen—a combination of charm, strategic pressure, and an uncanny ability to find leverage where others saw none.

"Send me the information," I said, already mentally rearranging my afternoon schedule. "I'm on it, Love."

Relief washed over Trevor's face, his shoulders visibly relaxing. "You're a lifesaver," he said with genuine gratitude. "The main issue is with the meat supplier. They're trying to change terms at the last minute, claiming increased costs due to Brexit complications."

I nodded, already formulating my approach. "Classic negotiation tactic. They wait until you're invested and facing a deadline, then squeeze for better terms." I reached for my tablet, pulling up my calendar. "I'll call them this afternoon. By tomorrow, they'll be begging us to accept their original offer."

Trevor's mouth quirked up at the corner. "Remind me never to negotiate against you."

"Too late for that," I teased, thinking of our early courtship and the many delicate negotiations that had brought us to our current partnership. "You've been outmaneuvered for years."

"If I recall," Trevor replied with a knowing smile, "I outmaneuvered you the night we met." His eyes held that particular gleam that always appeared when he referenced our unconventional beginning.

"Did you?" I arched an eyebrow, leaning back in my chair. "Who is the one that ended up getting a place to live that night?"

"Touché," he chuckled, conceding the point with a graceful inclination of his head.

"Oh! Before I forget," I said, suddenly remembering the delivery that had arrived earlier. I reached for the pristine white box positioned carefully at the edge of my desk. "Rachel's Christmas dress was delivered today."

Trevor's expression immediately brightened, his earlier stress momentarily forgotten. "Oh, let me see!" he said, leaning forward with genuine excitement that would have surprised anyone who knew only his stern, professional kitchen persona.

I carefully lifted the lid and folded back the layers of tissue paper to reveal the dress. It was a masterpiece of tiny details—deep crimson velvet with delicate ivory lace trim, small pearl buttons down the back, and a perfect satin sash. I had convinced Lydia to make this dress as a special favor; she normally refused to design children's clothes on principle, claiming they were "a waste of her artistic vision." But after she had strong-armed me into working with Thara for the Autumn campaign—a nightmare of feline temperament that had nearly derailed the entire shoot—she had grudgingly admitted she owed me. The result was this: a Lydia James exclusive for Rachel's first Christmas.

"Oh wow, it's perfect," Trevor breathed, reaching out to touch the fabric with the reverent care he usually reserved for the finest ingredients. "Lydia outdid herself." His eyes met mine, sharing the particular joy we found in these parental indulgences. "I need to get her shoes to match. Prada?"

I nodded, already envisioning the complete ensemble. "Black patent leather. I saw the perfect pair in their children's collection."

Trevor's smile widened. "Our daughter's going to be the best-dressed baby at Christmas dinner."

"Was there ever any doubt?" I replied, carefully returning the dress to its nest of tissue paper. Between my fashion connections and Trevor's perfectionism, Rachel had been stylishly attired since before she was born. "Speaking of which, have you finalized the menu? Your mother keeps texting me about it."

Trevor groaned, running a hand through his hair. "I told her I'd handle it. I have a restaurant, for God's sake. I think I can manage Christmas dinner."

"You know Niamh," I said with a sympathetic smile. "She just wants to be involved."

"She can be involved by enjoying the meal and not critiquing my Yorkshire puddings again," he muttered, though there was no real heat in his complaint.

The intercom buzzed, Jerrica's voice cutting through our domestic planning. "Ms. O'Sullivan, your one o'clock is here."

"Send them in in five minutes," I replied, giving Trevor a regretful look. "Duty calls."

He nodded, standing and straightening his jacket with practiced ease. "I'll email you the supplier details. Work your magic, Love."

"Consider it done," I assured him, rising to meet him for a goodbye kiss.

As he headed for the door, I couldn't help but smile at how seamlessly we'd learned to navigate our complicated lives—his restaurants, my beauty empire, our daughter, and now this reality show documenting it all. It wasn't always easy, but we'd become experts at the delicate balance required to make it work.

"Oh, and Amber?" Trevor paused at the doorway, his expression shifting to something more serious. "Thank you. For handling the supplier issue."

"That's what partners do," I replied simply.

As the door closed behind him, I turned my attention back to my desk, already mentally composing the approach I would take with the recalcitrant supplier. They had no idea what was coming their way. When it came to protecting our business interests—and by extension, our family's future—I was absolutely relentless.

Poor bastards wouldn't know what hit them.

I finished up a couple of scheduled meetings, then cleared my calendar for an hour to handle Trevor's supplier issue. My approach would be two-pronged: first, explore alternatives to create leverage, then confront the current supplier with a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. In negotiations, the person with options always held the power.

I picked up my phone and dialed Trent Fernandez. Fernandez Industries had given me an excellent deal on materials for both Amber Nichole Cosmetics and Rachel Amber Beauty lines, and I knew they had a substantial food division as well. If I couldn't get Jensen Foods back in line, Trent might be the perfect alternative.

"Trent? Hey, it's Amber O'Sullivan," I said when he answered, keeping my tone warm but professional.

"Amber, always a pleasure to hear from you," Trent replied, his voice carrying that particular blend of charm and calculation that marked most successful executives. "What can I do for you?"

Trent was a ruthless businessman by reputation, but he operated with a straightforward pragmatism I respected. He was every bit as interested in closing mutually beneficial deals as I was, which made our professional relationship refreshingly uncomplicated.

"Trevor came to me today with a problem," I explained, getting straight to the point. "Jensen Foods is trying to revise terms at the last minute for our new Limerick restaurant, and I've absolutely loved working with you on my beauty brands. Would Fernandez Industries be interested in supplying our restaurant division as well?"

There was a brief pause as Trent considered the proposition. "Well, we would," he said finally, "but here's the thing—for it to be worth expanding our distribution network in Ireland, we would need an exclusive deal for all of the O'Sullivan restaurants, present and future."

I leaned back in my chair, mentally calculating the scope of what he was suggesting. "You realize that we either have or will have restaurants throughout the Republic of Ireland, and we have one in Austin, Texas?" I needed him to understand the scale of commitment he'd be taking on.

"I am aware," he replied without hesitation, confirming my suspicion that he'd already researched our restaurant portfolio thoroughly before I'd even called.

"What sort of offer can you make me?" I asked, cutting to the chase. "It would have to be worth cutting ties with Jensen altogether."

"Tell me the deal Jensen has with you, what they promised initially, and we will beat it," he said confidently.

I laid out the details of our arrangement with Jensen Foods—the pricing structure, the delivery schedule, the quality guarantees—while omitting certain specifics that would give Fernandez too much negotiating advantage. Trent listened carefully, occasionally asking clarifying questions that revealed his sharp grasp of the food supply business.

When I finished, he didn't hesitate. "We can offer you a 20% reduction from those rates, guaranteed for three years with an option to renew at the same terms." He proceeded to outline a comprehensive proposal that was not only more cost-effective for us but also strategically valuable for Fernandez Industries as they expanded their European market presence.

"This is an attractive offer," I acknowledged, impressed by the thoroughness of his preparation. "You know I have to take it back to Jensen and give them right of refusal." It was a standard courtesy in business relationships, though in this case it was also a tactical move.

"Absolutely," Trent agreed smoothly. "But he will never match it. He can't afford to with his current supply chain structure."

"If that's the case, you'll be hearing from me soon," I promised.

"I look forward to it."

After ending the call with Trent, I took a moment to organize my thoughts before dialing Tanner Jensen. I'd met him only once at a business function, but his reputation for being stubborn preceded him. Time to see if that stubbornness extended to walking away from a lucrative long-term contract.

"Mr. Jensen, this is Amber O'Sullivan from O'Sullivan Incorporated," I said when he answered, deliberately using our parent company name rather than identifying as Trevor's wife. This was business, not a social call.

"Mrs. O'Sullivan, yes, I was speaking with your husband earlier," Tanner replied, his tone suggesting he viewed this as a domestic matter rather than a corporate negotiation. "What can I do for you?"

"It's Ms. O'Sullivan," I corrected him coolly, "and I'm really only calling as a courtesy." Without preamble, I laid out Trent's offer in precise detail, making sure he understood exactly what he was up against. The camera crew had gone still during my call with Trent, but now they were filming with renewed interest, clearly sensing the confrontation brewing.

"You know we can't match that," Tanner said after a moment of stunned silence, his voice tight with barely contained frustration.

"Then you should have held to the original deal you discussed with Trevor," I replied evenly. "If you had, we wouldn't have needed to seek out alternatives. But we did, and so this is the offer now. If you want to continue working with O'Sullivan Inc, this is what it looks like." I paused for emphasis. "I'm not even looking for you to beat the Fernandez offer, just match it."

"We would be operating at a loss," he protested, an edge of desperation creeping into his voice.

"Yeah, and you'll be losing the entirety of our business if you don't," I countered without sympathy. "Your choice is between a reduced profit margin on a guaranteed long-term contract or no contract at all. I need your decision by close of business today."

"Ms. O'Sullivan, cutting ties would be breaching the contract we currently have," Tanner said, clearly thinking he had me.

"If you think that, then you don't read your own contracts," I replied smoothly. "There is a clause that gives us the right to terminate the agreement if the supplier attempts to modify terms without mutual consent. Your attempt to change pricing after we'd reached an agreement constitutes exactly that." I paused, letting the information sink in. "Page seventeen, section 4.3, if you'd like to review it. Trevor may be the chef, but I'm the one who reviews all contracts before they're signed."

There was a telling silence on the other end of the line. I could practically hear him scrambling to pull up the document.

"I'll need to consult with our legal team," he finally said, his confidence noticeably deflated.

"By all means," I agreed pleasantly. "But as I mentioned, I'll need your decision by close of business today. Fernandez is eager to move forward, and I don't like to keep potential partners waiting."

I ended the call feeling the familiar rush that came with outmaneuvering an opponent. The camera crew had captured the entire exchange, and I could tell by their expressions that they'd gotten exactly the kind of reality TV gold they were hoping for.

My phone rang almost immediately. Trevor.

"That was fast," I answered, unable to keep the satisfaction from my voice.

"Jensen just called me in a panic," Trevor explained, sounding both impressed and amused. "Said something about you threatening to take all our business to Fernandez?"

"Not threatening," I corrected. "Presenting options. He has until five o'clock to match Fernandez's offer, which, by the way, is twenty percent better than the original deal you negotiated."

"Twenty percent?" Trevor's voice rose in surprise. "How did you manage that?"

"Volume commitment," I explained. "I offered them exclusive supplier rights to all O'Sullivan restaurants, current and future. The scale makes it worthwhile for them, especially as they're looking to expand in Europe."

"And Jensen?"

"Is currently discovering that the termination clause in their contract is more robust than they remembered," I said with a small smile. "I suspect they'll come around, but if not, Fernandez is ready to step in."

"Have I told you lately that you're terrifying?" Trevor asked, his tone warm with admiration.

"Not since last week," I replied lightly. "When I negotiated that lease for the Dublin location."

"Well, you are. Gloriously, brilliantly terrifying," he said. "I'm almost sorry for Jensen."

"Don't be," I advised. "They tried to take advantage of you. Nobody does that to my family."

After we hung up, I turned my attention back to the stack of proposals for the Spring campaign. The camera crew had finally departed, off to film some B-roll around the office, giving me a rare moment of privacy.

Ellie stirred from her nap beneath my desk, stretching lazily before hopping up into my lap. I absently stroked her soft fur while reviewing design concepts, my mind already moving on to the next challenge.

At precisely 4:47 PM, my phone rang again. Tanner Jensen.

"Ms. O'Sullivan," he began, his tone markedly more respectful than earlier. "After consulting with our team, we'd like to accept your terms."

"All of them?" I clarified, wanting no room for misinterpretation.

"Yes," he confirmed. "We'll honor the original agreement for the Limerick location and match the Fernandez offer for all other properties."

"Excellent," I said, keeping my voice neutral despite the victory. "I'll have my legal team draw up the revised contract. You'll have it by tomorrow morning."

After ending the call, I immediately texted Trevor: *Jensen caved. We got everything. I'll tell you the details at home.*

His response came seconds later: *Never doubted you for a second. Bringing home champagne.*

I smiled, setting my phone aside and returning to the Spring campaign proposals with renewed energy. Some might call my negotiation style aggressive, but I preferred to think of it as protective. In business as in life, I'd learned that nobody would fight for what was mine unless I did it myself.

And when it came to the family and empire that Trevor and I had built together, I would always fight with everything I had.

The intercom buzzed, interrupting my thoughts. "Ms. O'Sullivan, the production team would like to get a closing statement about the Jensen negotiation," Jerrica informed me.

"Send them in," I replied, straightening my posture and mentally composing what I would say. The cameras would capture my triumph, of course, but they'd never truly understand the deeper motivation behind it—the fierce determination to secure not just my own future, but the future of the little girl who now waited at home with her grandmother, blissfully unaware of the empire being built in her name.

Michelle

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I was on a break between scenes, taking advantage of the fifteen minutes before my final shots of the day to spend time with my family. I sat in my dressing room, still fully in Dixie mode—hair teased to dramatic proportions, makeup considerably more intense than I'd ever wear in real life, and the infamous padded bra that gave my character her distinctive silhouette.

Tomi sat on my lap, utterly fascinated by Dixie's enhanced cleavage. Her tiny fingers kept patting the top of my chest with curious persistence, clearly trying to understand the discrepancy between her mother's normal appearance and this transformed version.

"No, baby girl," I gently redirected her hands for the fifth time, trying not to laugh. "Those aren't real."

She immediately reached out again, drawn by the mystery of her mother's temporary transformation.

"I still don't understand why you're doing this," Arion said quietly from where he stood near the door, his posture rigid with discomfort. "It's not behavior befitting of royalty."

I couldn't help but laugh at his earnest concern. Despite having been on Earth for several weeks now, Arion still struggled with certain cultural concepts—particularly the separation between performer and performance that was fundamental to acting.

"Arion, Dixie is not royal," I explained patiently, adjusting Tomi on my lap to keep her hands occupied with a small toy rather than my costume. "And here, neither am I. I'm just doing my job."

"It's just playing pretend," Arissa added helpfully from the sofa where she and Harley were sharing a plate of snacks from craft services. "Like a really elaborate game that adults get paid to play."

"Children play pretend," Arion countered, his brow furrowed with genuine confusion. "Adults rule planets and lead armies."

Hunter, who had been quietly observing the exchange while scrolling through his phone, looked up with barely concealed amusement. "Not all adults have your particular job description,."

"Doesn't Saturn have movies or plays?" Arissa asked, her tone gentle as she tried to help her boyfriend understand this aspect of Earth culture. "Entertainment?"

Harley nodded before Arion could answer. "Yes, but Arion is part of the royal guard trainee program, so he doesn't get out much." She shot him a teasing grin. "Loosen up and enjoy the show."

Arion's posture relaxed slightly, though his expression remained dubious. "We do have performance arts, but those who participate are from specific artistic castes. Not..." he hesitated, clearly trying to find a diplomatic way to phrase his thoughts, "...not royalty."

"Well, on Earth, anyone can be an actor," I explained, standing up with Tomi still in my arms.

"Queens, plumbers, waitresses—doesn't matter where you come from or what title you hold. It's about talent and opportunity." I adjusted my costume, checking my reflection in the mirror to ensure Dixie's appearance remained intact despite Tomi's curious explorations. "And sometimes, it's about paying the bills until something better comes along."

"But you are already wealthy and powerful," Arion persisted, genuinely puzzled. "You don't need to... pretend."

I exchanged a look with Hunter, who understood better than most the complicated relationship I had with my various careers and identities. "Need isn't always about money, Arion," I said carefully.

"Sometimes it's about fulfilling different parts of yourself."

"Mom's been performing since she was a kid," Harley chimed in, reaching for another mini muffin from the snack plate. "It's part of who she is."

"Like being a Ranger," Arissa added thoughtfully. "Or royalty. Different roles, same person underneath."

A knock at the door interrupted the philosophical discussion. Marcus, our director, poked his head in. "Five minutes, Michelle. We're setting up for the final confrontation scene."

"Be right there," I confirmed, handing Tomi to Hunter. "Duty calls."

As I did a final check of my appearance, making sure Dixie's signature look was perfect down to the last detail, I caught Arion watching me with that same mixture of confusion and reluctant fascination.

"Think of it as diplomatic training," I suggested with a wink. "Learning to be someone else while still being yourself is a useful skill in intergalactic politics."

His expression cleared slightly, the reframing apparently making more sense to his military mind. "A form of strategic deception?"

"Something like that," I laughed, heading for the door. "Though we generally prefer the term 'acting.'"

As I made my way back to set for the final scene—a dramatic confrontation between Dixie and her ex-boyfriend's wife—I found myself smiling at Arion's perspective. There was something refreshing about his confusion, a reminder of how strange and wonderful my Earth life might seem when viewed through an outsider's eyes.

Queen, musician, actress, mother, Ranger—the roles sometimes felt impossibly contradictory, even to me. But somehow, in the space between all those identities, I'd found room to be simply Michelle.

After we finished filming, I retreated to my dressing room to shed Dixie's persona. I scrubbed away the heavy makeup, unpinned the teased hair, and carefully removed the specialized undergarments that gave my character her distinctive silhouette. Layer by layer, I reclaimed myself from the role I'd inhabited all day.

I changed into comfortable purple sweats with a matching hoodie, pulled my hair into a messy bun, and slipped on my well-worn Uggs—the uniform of an off-duty mom rather than a TV star or intergalactic royal. By the time I emerged, looking nothing like the glamorous character I'd been playing, I felt the familiar bone-deep exhaustion that came after a full day of emotional scenes.

Hunter looked up from where he was entertaining Tomi with a picture book, relief evident in his expression. He always seemed more comfortable with me as Michelle rather than Dixie, though he'd never admit it outright.

"There you are," he said, standing to meet me. "The real you."

"The tired me," I corrected with a small smile, accepting his quick kiss. "But also hungry."

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door. Chris, Jessica, and Kim—my primary cast mates—poked their heads in, already changed into their civilian clothes as well.

"We're heading to Hattie B's for dinner," Chris announced. "Spouses and kids included. You guys want to join?"

Usually, I would have had to decline such invitations or go alone, leaving Hunter back in Ireland with the girls. The ability to simply say "yes" to an impromptu dinner with colleagues felt like a luxury I hadn't fully appreciated until now.

"We'd love to," I replied, glancing at Hunter for confirmation. His nod was immediate—he knew how much it meant to me to have this rare opportunity to blend my professional and personal worlds.

"Great!" Jessica beamed. "My kids are dying to meet your girls. They've heard all about them."

Forty-five minutes later, we were seated at Hattie B's, Nashville's famous hot chicken establishment. The restaurant had accommodated our large group with two tables—one for the adults and babies, and a separate one nearby for the older kids. Harley and Arissa had immediately hit it off with the other cast members' children, while Arion tried to blend in with them.

"He's very... attentive," Kim observed quietly, following my gaze to where Arion was watching the area with careful vigilance.

"He's from Ukraine. Hyper-vigilant," I explained. It was plausible and seemed to satisfy the question. Brad, Kim's husband and a successful country artist in his own right, passed me a basket of biscuits. "What's it been like being back in Nashville?" he asked. "Must be strange after living away for so long."

I considered the question, looking around the familiar restaurant with its quintessentially Southern atmosphere. Despite my years away, the rhythms and flavors of Nashville still resonated with something deep inside me.

"Like coming home," I answered honestly, accepting the basket. "It's really nice to reconnect with my country roots."

"Even if home is actually Ireland now?" Chris teased, his eyes crinkling with good-natured amusement.

I laughed, acknowledging the strange duality of my life. "Yeah, well, what can I say? I've gotten used to having multiple homes." I glanced at Hunter, who was helping Tomi with her mac and cheese, his focus entirely on our daughter despite the celebrity company. "But home is really wherever they are."

The conversation flowed easily from there, drifting between industry gossip, parenting war stories, and reminiscences of past projects we'd worked on together. It was comfortable in a way that only comes from years of shared experiences, both professional and personal.

I found myself watching the kids' table periodically, enjoying how naturally Harley and Arissa interacted with the others. Harley was deep in conversation with Jessica's oldest son, who apparently shared her interest in music, while Arissa was patiently teaching Chris's daughter some game involving elaborate hand movements.

"They're great kids," Brad commented, following my gaze. "Not a hint of the celebrity brat syndrome you see so often."

"We've tried to keep them grounded," Hunter replied, "Though it helps that we live in a small town where nobody cares who their mom is."

"Must be nice," Kim sighed. "My boys can't even go to the grocery store without someone asking for my autograph or taking pictures."

The conversation turned to the unique challenges of raising children in the spotlight, a topic where Hunter and I had more experience than most, given our various public roles. As we shared stories and advice, I felt a deep appreciation for this rare moment of normalcy—just a group of parents comparing notes over good food, the fact that we all happened to be recognizable faces secondary to our shared experiences.

"So, will we be seeing more of the family around set now? Or is this a one-time visit?" Kim asked.

"They will come when they can. The girls have school so they can't visit much, but I'm glad they could come this time," I said.

"After the tour you're spending the holidays in Ireland?" Kim asked.

I nodded, "Yeah. Until I have to come back to film the rest of the season. And then I have a spring tour. I'm holding off scheduling too many dates next year until we find out if we get our season 2 renewal."

"Makes sense. It's up in the air. Ratings haven't been stellar, but they are respectable. No telling what the network will do," Chris nodded.

"I'm hopeful. I would love to keep playing Dixie," I said.

We all sat and chatted for a couple of hours before heading out. Once we got back to my apartment it didn't take long to get everyone settled into bed. Thara wasn't happy I had left her in the apartment all day. I usually took her to set with me. She showed her disdain by sleeping on Hunter's pillow instead of mine.

I had a couple more days of filming before the Ryman show, and then it was back on the road to finish the Christmas tour. As much as I loved my job—all my jobs—I was bone-tired, looking forward to spending time at home in Ireland without cameras or crowds or constant travel.

It turned out those final filming days brought unexpected good news. Through some miracle of efficient scheduling and cooperative weather, we actually finished shooting the season ahead of schedule. I'd still need to return for a week or so in the new year for inevitable re-shoots and pickups, but this meant I would have significantly more time at home before my spring tour kicked off—a gift none of us had anticipated.

When I shared the news with Hunter and the girls over dinner at the apartment, their reactions ranged from Harley's casual "Cool" to Arissa's more enthusiastic planning of projects we could tackle during the extended family time.

"More time for you to actually rest," Hunter said quietly later that night, his hand finding mine in the darkness of our bedroom. We both knew how rarely that happened—how the demands of my multiple careers often left little space for genuine recovery.



The Ryman show loomed large in our Nashville schedule—a venue so steeped in musical history that even veteran performers approached it with reverence. I'd played there many times over the decades, but this performance felt different, more significant. Perhaps because it was the first time my daughters would join me on that hallowed stage, or perhaps because it represented a perfect fusion of my past and present—the country roots that had shaped me and the family that now defined me.

I could tell Harley was appropriately nervous as we arrived for sound check. Her usual teenage nonchalance slipped occasionally, revealing the weight she felt performing in a venue where legends had stood. The Mother Church of Country Music didn't suffer amateurs gladly, and despite her youth, Harley understood this implicitly.

"Just breathe through it," I advised her quietly as we walked the stage during setup. "Let the history lift you up instead of weighing you down."

She nodded, running her fingers along the wood of her guitar with unusual reverence. "Did you feel like this your first time here?"

"Terrified," I admitted with a small smile. "I was twelve, opening for Martina McBride. I threw up twice before going on."

Harley's eyes widened slightly at this confession. "Really? You?"

"Really," I confirmed. "But the minute I started singing, it all fell away. The venue has a magic to it—you'll feel it once you're out there."

When the time came for her set, I watched from the wings as my daughter took her place center stage, her slender figure momentarily dwarfed by the majesty of the venue. For one breath, two, she stood frozen, the weight of the moment visible in the tension of her shoulders.

Then she began to play, and just as I'd promised, the magic took over. Her voice filled the historic space with a confidence that belied her thirteen years. The audience responded immediately, drawn in by her authentic presence and undeniable talent.

Arisa's set followed with equal success. Where Harley's performance had a raw emotional quality, Arissa brought precise technical skill and commanding stage presence—different approaches that complemented each other perfectly. Watching her own the stage, it was hard to believe she'd only discovered music a year and a half ago upon arriving from TK-91.

By the time I took the stage for my own set, the energy in the room was already electric. I'd structured the show to build upon what my daughters had started, weaving their songs into my narrative and bringing them back out for several numbers throughout the evening.

Standing on that stage—the same boards where Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, and Johnny Cash had stood—with my daughters beside me, I experienced a moment of perfect alignment. The Michelle who had first dreamed of singing at the Ryman as a child, the global superstar who had performed

on stages across the world, the mother who had watched her children discover their own musical voices—all versions of myself converged in that moment of harmony, both literal and figurative.

The show was flawless, one of those rare performances where every note, every transition, every moment of connection with the audience happened exactly as intended. I loved every second of being on that stage, knowing that somewhere in the audience, Hunter was watching with Tomi on his lap, while my cast mates and crew experienced this other facet of my professional life.

When we took our final bow—Harley, Arissa, and me standing together as the historic venue echoed with applause—I felt a completion I hadn't anticipated. Whatever came next—whether another season of the show, the spring tour, or some new opportunity I couldn't yet imagine—this night would stand as a testament to what was possible when all the pieces of my complicated life worked in concert rather than competition.

As we made our way backstage, flushed with success and the particular exhaustion that follows a performance that demands everything, I caught Harley and Arissa exchanging a look of shared understanding. They'd felt it too—the magic of the venue, yes, but also the magic of what we'd created together.

"So?" I asked as we reached the green room, unable to contain my curiosity. "What did you think?"

"It was..." Harley began, searching for words that could capture the experience.

"Perfect," Arissa finished simply. "It was perfect, Mom."

And it was—a rare, precious moment of perfection in our beautifully imperfect lives.

The rest of the tour flew by in a blur of cities, venues, and hotel rooms—the familiar rhythm of life on the road punctuated by video calls home to Hunter and Tomi on the nights they couldn't join us. Before I knew it, we were preparing for our final show in Phoenix, Arizona.

By this point, Arion had almost gotten the hang of being an Earth teen... almost. He'd mastered the art of casual slouching and had stopped addressing venue staff as "honored service providers," but his formal Saturnian training still emerged at unexpected moments. Just yesterday, he'd instinctively dropped to one knee when I entered the tour bus lounge area, earning a mortified "Arion!" from Arissa and an eye-roll from Harley.

The Arizona show had evolved into something of a family reunion. Andros and Ashley were flying in with Ally and Aaron so that Aaron could see Harley perform—a development that had Hunter cycling through various stages of paternal concern. I'd caught him muttering about "that boy" while packing, though he'd quickly shifted to a neutral expression when Harley bounced into the room.

I'd also extended invitations to Hal's brother Jim and his family, along with Hal's mother Jessica. The Jordans had become such an integral part of our extended Irish family that it felt right to include them in this final performance of the tour.

"Are you sure about this?" Hunter had asked when I mentioned my plan to fly everyone back to Ireland with us for Christmas. "That's a lot of people on one plane."

"That's why I chartered the larger jet. And don't worry. Zachary is bringing his family and Mom so we are splitting the cost with Zachary and Kelly," I replied, scrolling through my tablet to confirm the arrangements. "Besides, it's Kara and Hal's first Christmas outside the US. They're nervous about being away from family, so having everyone together will make it special."

Hunter's expression had softened at that. He understood better than most the importance of chosen family, especially during the holidays. "Fair enough. But I'm not sitting next to Aaron."

I'd laughed, patting his cheek affectionately. "Noted. I'll make sure there's a buffer zone between you and Harley's boyfriend."

The word "boyfriend" still made Hunter wince slightly, though he'd been making a valiant effort to accept Aaron's role in Harley's life. It helped that Aaron was Andros and Ashley's son, with a solid Ranger pedigree and the same quiet reliability that characterized his father. Still, Hunter's protective instincts ran deep, especially when it came to our middle daughter.

Andros and his family would be accompanying us as well, ostensibly so Aaron could spend time with Harley, but also because Andros and Hunter had some Ranger business to discuss. The ongoing situation with Viper had everyone on high alert, though we'd agreed to set aside those concerns during the actual holiday celebrations.

"Arizona's going to be busy," I warned the girls as we prepared for the final show. "Full house tonight, and then we're packing up the private jet and heading straight home."

"Home," Arissa repeated, the word carrying a weight of anticipation. Despite her adaptability to tour life, I could tell she was ready for the familiar comforts of our Irish farmhouse. "I can't wait to sleep in my own bed."

"With your own boyfriend right across the hall," Harley teased, earning a light shove from her sister.

"Yours will be with him," Arissa countered, though there was no real heat in her retort. The sisters had settled into a comfortable rhythm of gentle ribbing about their respective relationships.

"I know," Harley replied with a triumphant smile. "Two whole weeks of Aaron in Ireland."

I watched their banter with a mixture of amusement and that particular maternal concern that never quite dissipates, no matter how capable your children prove themselves to be. The dynamics between Harley and Aaron, Arissa and Arion were still so new, still developing—another layer of complexity in our already complicated family life.

But those were concerns for another day. Tonight was about music, about finishing this tour on a high note before we could all retreat to the peace of our Irish home for the holidays. The private jet

was fueled and waiting, ready to carry our extended family across the Atlantic once the final encore was complete.

As I began my pre-show ritual—the vocal exercises and stretches that had become second nature over decades of performing—I found myself already anticipating the moment when we'd land in Ireland, when the tour clothes would be packed away and the Christmas decorations would come out. As much as I loved the stage, loved sharing music with audiences around the world, the promise of home—of unscheduled days and family meals and quiet moments by the fire—beckoned with irresistible appeal.

Just one more show, and then we could all exhale.

The final performance carried a certain weight—not just the culmination of weeks of touring, but also the knowledge that so many people we loved would be in the audience tonight. Mom, Zachary, Kelly, and their two younger kids; Jim, his wife Sue, and their three children; Jessica; Andros, Ashley, Ally, and Aaron; and of course Arion. Hunter would be hosting everyone in a private suite while the girls and I performed, juggling Tomi and VIP hospitality duties simultaneously.

I was backstage completing my final preparations when my phone rang. Jeremy's number flashed on the screen, causing an immediate spike of concern—it would be nearly 3 AM in Ireland.

"Hello?" I answered, already bracing for bad news.

"Mich, I'm glad I caught you," Jeremy's voice came through, tense despite his obvious attempt to sound casual. "I was worried you'd be on stage already."

"Will be soon," I replied, glancing at the clock. "What's up?"

He sighed, the sound heavy with reluctance. "Livvie just told me that Amber invited Mia to Christmas. She agreed and is bringing RJ and his daughters... and his father."

I froze, a cold wave of disbelief washing over me. "Are you fucking serious?" The words escaped before I could temper them. Fuck Amber. And Mia. They knew exactly how Hunter and I felt about RJ. It was bad enough that Mia was dating my ex-husband, but to bring him to Christmas—to our home territory, our safe space—felt like a deliberate provocation.

"I'm sorry, Mich," Jeremy said, his voice gentle. "I just wanted to warn you before you landed and found out."

"I appreciate it," I managed, already mentally calculating how to navigate this new complication. "I have to finish getting ready, but I'll call you from the plane. Love you."

"Love you too. Good luck, Love," Jeremy replied before we disconnected.

"FUCK!" I exclaimed, tossing my phone onto the dressing table with more force than necessary.

As if summoned by my outburst, Hunter burst through the door, his expression thunderous. "I'm going to kill him!" he declared without preamble.

"I'll help," I agreed automatically, before realizing we might not be talking about the same person.

"Wait—who are you talking about?"

"Blake," Hunter replied, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "My idiot baby brother is here with Tori and Lindsey. They surprised us by inviting themselves onto the jet to go to Ireland to join us for Christmas."

"Oh," I said, momentarily confused by his reaction. "That's good though, isn't it? We have room on the plane." Blake and Tori were family, after all, and Lindsey was close to Harley's age—another cousin for holiday festivities.

"Yeah, well, he also brought Sensei Omino so he can meet the Celtic Rangers," Hunter continued, his expression suggesting there was more to the story.

"Which is also good..." I began, then the realization hit me. "Wait. If Sensei is here, then..."

"Yes," Hunter confirmed grimly. "LeAnn and Cam are with them too. And they're all coming back with us. I have to spend Christmas with my sister and ex-boyfriend."

I let out a long sigh, suddenly understanding his agitation. "I see your ex-boyfriend and raise you an ex-husband."

"What?" Hunter's head snapped up, his personal annoyance momentarily forgotten.

"Jeremy just called me," I explained, gesturing to my discarded phone. "Evidently Amber invited Mia to Christmas, and she's bringing RJ and his daughters and father along. So my ex-husband will be there too."

Hunter's expression darkened further. "You've got to be kidding me. RJ? At our house?"

"Technically, Trev and Amber's house," I corrected automatically, though the distinction did little to mitigate the situation. "But yes, apparently so."

"This is going to be a disaster," Hunter muttered, pacing the small confines of the dressing room.

"RJ, Cam, LeAnn, the Riordans, Andros and Ashley, Blake and Tori... it's like someone's trying to recreate the United Nations of Rangers in Ballincollig."

Despite my own frustration, I couldn't help but laugh at his description. "When you put it that way, it does sound ridiculous." I moved to him, placing my hands on his shoulders to halt his pacing. "Look, we'll deal with it. We've handled intergalactic wars and dimensional threats. We can handle one chaotic Christmas."

Hunter's tension eased slightly under my touch. "You're right. It's just..." he trailed off, the unspoken concern hanging between us.

"I know," I said softly. "I'm not thrilled about RJ being there either. But we're not going to let it ruin our holiday. Or tonight's show." I glanced at the clock again. "Speaking of which, I need to finish getting ready. The girls will be looking for me."

Hunter nodded, visibly regrouping. "Right. One crisis at a time." He leaned forward, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead. "I'll go break the news to the girls about their extended family joining us. You focus on the show."

As he turned to leave, I caught his hand. "Hunter? Let's not tell them about RJ yet. Let's get through tonight first."

He hesitated, then nodded in agreement. "Fair enough. See you on stage, my love."

After he left, I turned back to the mirror, studying my reflection as I completed my transformation into performance mode. The news about RJ had thrown me more than I wanted to admit. But I couldn't afford to dwell on it now—not with a sold-out arena waiting and my daughters depending on me to lead the way.

Tonight was about music, about family, about closing this chapter before opening the next. Whatever complications awaited us in Ireland could wait until we were airborne.

One show at a time. One song at a time. One breath at a time.

I squared my shoulders, adjusted my costume one last time, and headed for the stage.

From the wings, I watched Arissa finish her set, her confidence and stage presence belying the fact that she'd only been performing for a matter of months. The crowd's enthusiastic response washed over her as she delivered her final song—a Christmas ballad we'd arranged together that showcased her rich alto perfectly. Despite my pride in her performance, I couldn't fully focus, my mind cataloging the increasingly complicated passenger manifest for our flight home.

Mom, Zachary, Kelly, my niece and nephew, my three girls, Arion, Jessica, Jim and Sue, their three kids, Blake and Tori, Lindsey, Cam and LeAnn, Sensei Omino, Andros and Ashley, Aaron, Ally, and of course Hunter and myself (and Thara). Twenty-seven people. And a cat. All crammed into one private jet, no matter how luxurious, for an eight-hour transatlantic flight. And at the end of it all, I would have to deal with RJ and Mia waiting at our destination.

The logistics alone were dizzying, not to mention the interpersonal dynamics—Hunter and Cam's awkward history, not to mention mine with RJ, Aaron and Harley's new relationship under the watchful eyes of both sets of parents. It was like orchestrating a particularly volatile diplomatic summit rather than a family holiday.

Deep breath.

Arissa took her final bow, the spotlight catching the crimson highlights in her blonde hair as she waved to the crowd. My cue was approaching—thirty seconds until I would step out and close this tour, this chapter, before facing whatever awaited us in Ireland.

The stage manager gave me the signal, and I moved into position. The familiar pre-show adrenaline surged through me, momentarily displacing all other concerns. As the lights dimmed and the

opening notes of my first song began to filter through the sound system, I felt the transformation happen—the shift from Michelle the worried wife and mother to Michelle Morris, performer and professional.

The moment I stepped onto the stage, everything else melted away. The crowd's roar enveloped me like a physical force, the energy of thousands creating that unique alchemy that had sustained me through decades of performances. In this space, in this moment, nothing mattered except me, the music, and the show. Not the complicated travel arrangements, not the looming holiday tensions, not even RJ's unwelcome presence in our Christmas plans.

There was only this—the perfect communion between artist and audience, the songs that had defined my career and the new ones that continued to shape it, the spotlight that had been my home since childhood. Here, I knew exactly who I was and what I was meant to do.

The show was perfect—one of those rare performances where every element aligned exactly as planned. The energy of the crowd, the precision of the band, the seamless flow from one song to the next—it all came together to create a fitting finale for the tour. When I brought Harley and Arissa back on stage for our closing number, the audience's response was overwhelming, a wave of appreciation that washed over all three of us.

After the final encore and multiple bows, I rushed backstage to clean up and change. Unlike most post-show evenings where we'd linger, savoring the performance high and unwinding gradually, tonight we were on a tight schedule. The private jet was waiting, fueled and ready for its transatlantic journey, and we needed to be airborne as soon as possible to maintain our timeline.

I showered quickly, scrubbing away my stage makeup and letting the hot water ease some of the tension from my shoulders. As I changed into comfortable travel clothes—soft leggings, an oversized sweater, and well-worn boots—I mentally ran through my checklist one last time. Passports for everyone, Thara's travel documents, Tomi's favorite stuffed animals for the flight, the gifts I'd picked up in various cities for everyone back home...

Once dressed and packed, I made my way to the green room where Hunter was still playing host to our extended family and friends. The space, designed for perhaps a dozen people at most, was comically overcrowded now. Blake and Tori were chatting with Andros and Ashley in one corner, while Sensei Omino observed the proceedings with serene detachment from a seat near the window. The Jordan contingent had claimed the sofa, with Jessica holding court among her grandchildren. Zachary and Kelly were helping Mom with her coat, while Cam and LeAnn stood slightly apart, looking as uncomfortable as I felt about the impending journey.

"There she is!" Blake called out as I entered, his familiar grin momentarily easing my stress. "The woman of the hour!"



A chorus of congratulations and compliments followed—sincere appreciation for the show we'd just delivered. I moved through the room, greeting everyone individually, accepting hugs and well-wishes while trying to maintain some semblance of order.

"Alright everyone," I announced after completing my rounds. "The buses are waiting to take us to the airport. If you could gather your things, we'll get this caravan moving."

The logistics of transporting twenty-seven people (plus one feline) from venue to airport required military precision. Hunter had arranged for three large SUVs in addition to our tour bus, with carefully planned passenger assignments to minimize potential conflicts and ensure everyone arrived safely.

"Mom, Zachary, Kelly, and the kids with us on the bus," I directed, falling naturally into the role of coordinator. "Blake's family, LeAnn, Cam, and Sensei in the first SUV; Jordans in the second; Andros and family in the third. Everyone has their passports?"

A general murmur of assent followed as people began gathering their belongings and moving toward their assigned vehicles. I caught Hunter's eye across the room, his expression a mixture of resignation and amusement at the controlled chaos we were orchestrating.

"You good?" he asked quietly when we finally had a moment together, Tomi half-asleep against his shoulder.

"As good as I can be," I replied honestly. "One hurdle at a time, right?"

He nodded, pressing a quick kiss to my temple. "One hurdle at a time."

The journey to the airport proceeded with surprising efficiency, our motorcade moving through the late-night Phoenix traffic without incident. At the private terminal, the process continued smoothly—baggage transferred to the waiting jet, passengers boarding in orderly fashion, seating arrangements predetermined to minimize potential friction during the long flight.

As I settled into my seat, Tomi already dozing in the specially installed crib beside me and Thara sulking in her carrier under Hunter's watchful eye, I surveyed our traveling party. The Bradleys, the Jordans, the Morrisises, the Thunder ninjas, the Space Rangers—representatives from nearly every chapter of our complicated lives, all bound for Ireland and whatever awaited us there.

This was going to be a really long flight. But as I watched Harley and Aaron settling into their seats across the aisle (with Blake strategically positioned between them as Hunter's designated buffer), and Arissa explaining something to Sensei Omino with animated gestures while Arion looked on with quiet pride, I felt a sudden wave of gratitude beneath my exhaustion.

Complicated as it was, this was our family—chosen and biological, human and alien, ninja and Ranger and everything in between. And despite the challenges that awaited us in Ballincollig (RJ foremost among them), there was something undeniably special about bringing all these pieces of our lives together, even if just for a chaotic Christmas holiday.



As the jet engines roared to life and we began our journey across the Atlantic, I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. Whatever came next, we would face it together—just as we always had, just as we always would.

One hurdle at a time.

"The Calm before the Storm-Christmas Edition"

"Da! Brekkie!" Rose's voice pierced the early morning quiet, followed immediately by the distinct sound of small hands rattling the bars of her new door-length baby gate.

I groaned, burrowing deeper under the duvet for just one more precious moment of warmth. The digital clock on my nightstand read 7:17 AM—a lie-in by Rose's standards, but still painfully early after our late night preparing for the impending family invasion.

The baby gate had been installed after what we now referred to as "The Potion Incident," when Rose had demonstrated her ability to silently escape her room and create havoc before the rest of the household stirred. The gate made her room look distressingly like a tiny prison cell, but for everyone's safety (and my sanity), it was a necessary evil. It wasn't as if we couldn't hear her if she genuinely needed something—Rose had never struggled with volume control.

Today would be absolute chaos. Michelle was returning from tour with what seemed like half the Ranger community in tow, and Mia was arriving with RJ and his family—a diplomatic nightmare waiting to happen given the history between Michelle and her ex-husband. The day before, Kara's extended family had arrived, and Kara's mother Linda was already driving Hal to distraction with her opinions about everything from Irish weather to the lack of Baptist churches in the area.

I nudged J, who was doing an impressive impression of someone still deeply asleep despite Rose's increasingly insistent rattling. "Your daughter wants you."

He grunted, one eye cracking open reluctantly. "Why is she only mine when she's being a terror?"

"It's genetic," I replied, but relented at his pitiful expression. "Fine, we can both get her."

We rolled out of bed, the cold floor a shock against my bare feet as we padded down the hallway to Rose's room. The sight that greeted us was both impressive and alarming—she had somehow scaled the bars of the gate and was now hanging upside down, her fairy pajamas dangling precariously and her blonde hair brushing the floor.

"Róisín! Get down!" J cried, his voice carrying that particular note of parental terror reserved for moments when one's child is demonstrating unexpected and dangerous climbing abilities.

Rose giggled, clearly delighted by both her acrobatic achievement and her father's reaction. Her small face was flushed with the exertion and triumph of her jailbreak attempt.

"You get the baby monkey," I said, unable to suppress a laugh despite the clear safety concerns. "I'm going to check on Killy."

I turned toward our son's room, grateful that at least one of our children understood the concept of morning calm. Killy was sitting up in his bed, a picture book open on his lap, his expression one of quiet concentration as he studied the illustrations. His cast had finally come off the week before, leaving behind only the faintest shadow of a tan line where it had protected his healing arm.

"Good morning, Mummy!" he greeted me, his smile lighting up his serious little face.

"Good morning, baby boy," I replied, crossing to scoop him up into a hug. His small arms wrapped around my neck, his weight solid and warm against me. It struck me suddenly that soon he would be too big for me to carry like this—the thought bringing an unexpected pang of melancholy. For now, though, I would savor these moments while they lasted.

"Ro Ro loud," he observed solemnly, his head tilting slightly toward the hallway where we could hear J negotiating with Rose about the proper way to dismount from her climbing expedition.

"Yes, Rose is loud," I agreed, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "But that's just how she tells us she loves us very, very much."

We headed out of his room just as J was lifting Rose down from her perch, her small body wriggling with unspent energy despite the early hour.

"Mummy! I climb!" she announced proudly, as if I might have somehow missed this development.

"I see that, Love," I replied, shifting Killy to my hip. "Very impressive. But perhaps we save the climbing for the playground, yes?"

Rose considered this suggestion with all the gravity of a supreme court justice before nodding once. "OK. Brekkie now?"

We settled into our morning routine with practiced efficiency—J making tea for himself, coffee for me, and juice cups for the twins while I took Daisy and Peach to the back garden for their morning constitutional. The dogs bounded across the frost-tipped grass, their breath forming small clouds in the December air.

I stood on the back step, cradling my coffee mug for warmth while watching the dogs and trying to savor this small pocket of normalcy. With the chaos that was about to descend upon our household—Rangers and ninjas and exes and in-laws all—ordinary mornings would soon be in short supply.

From inside, I heard the distinct crash of something being knocked over, followed by Rose's delighted giggle and J's long-suffering sigh. I smiled into my coffee, mentally adding "clean up breakfast disaster" to my already extensive to-do list for the day.

Normal wasn't going to be on the menu for quite some time. But then again, with our family, what exactly counted as normal anyway?

I returned to the kitchen just in time to witness the aftermath of Rose's latest adventure—a bag of frozen waffles splayed across the floor, the toaster dangling precariously off the counter's edge, saved from destruction only by J's quick reflexes. Rose stood amid the chaos, looking more pleased than contrite about her contribution to morning entropy.

"How does she even reach the freezer?" I asked, setting my coffee mug down safely out of Hurricane Rose's path.

"She pulled a chair," J explained, nodding toward the dining chair now positioned strategically by the refrigerator. "I turned my back for literally five seconds to get the butter."

I surveyed the scene—frozen waffles scattered like icy hockey pucks across our kitchen tiles, Killy watching the proceedings with his usual analytical detachment, and J looking like he might need something stronger than tea to face the day ahead.

"OK then," I said, clapping my hands to redirect Rose's attention before she could devise a new method of breakfast sabotage. "Why don't we go watch Bluey while Da makes brekkie?"

"BLUEY!" Rose cheered, breakfast destruction instantly forgotten as she bolted toward the living room with the single-minded determination of a toddler offered screen time.

J shot me a look of profound gratitude as he righted the chair and began collecting the scattered waffles. "Thank you, Love."

"Tactical retreat," I replied with a wink. "The better part of valor when dealing with natural disasters."

I watched Killy follow his sister at a more measured pace, pausing to carefully step over a waffle rather than disturb it. The contrast between our twins never failed to amaze me—same birthday, same genetics, yet entirely different approaches to navigating the world.

"No worries," I added, reaching down to help collect a few of the more far-flung waffles. "Let me know when brekkie is ready."

"Twenty minutes," J promised, already loading the toaster. "Assuming no further interventions from our resident chaos agent."

I nodded and headed toward the living room, where Rose was already bouncing on the sofa cushions, chanting "Bluey, Bluey, Bluey!" while Killy carefully arranged his favorite throw blanket on his designated corner of the couch. I grabbed the remote and navigated to their favorite episode—the one about the magical xylophone that could freeze people—and settled between them as the cheerful theme song filled the room.

Rose immediately snuggled against my side, her earlier manic energy temporarily channeled into focused attention on the blue cartoon dog and her family. Killy leaned against my other side, his small hand finding mine with unconscious ease.

These quiet moments—these small islands of peace amid the daily chaos of raising twins—were what I treasured most. I intended to savor every second of it while I could.

"Mummy, Bluey's da silly," Rose observed, giggling at the cartoon father's antics.

"Yes, Love," I agreed, thinking of J in the kitchen, heroically salvaging breakfast from the wreckage. "Das often are."

Breakfast proceeded with surprising smoothness after the waffle incident—a minor miracle given Rose's propensity for turning simple meals into performance art. J managed to salvage enough undamaged waffles for everyone, and both twins actually consumed their food rather than redecorating the kitchen with it.

Getting everyone dressed presented the next challenge of our morning obstacle course. Rose insisted on wearing her fairy wings over her jumper—a battle I chose not to fight—while Killy methodically selected each item of clothing with the serious deliberation of a tiny fashion critic. Despite these complications, we managed to have everyone washed, dressed, and reasonably presentable within a timeframe that could generously be described as "efficient."

"Boots, Rose. Not fairy slippers," I reminded her as she attempted to pair her outdoor coat with indoor footwear. "It's cold outside."

"Fairies no cold," she protested, though she reluctantly allowed me to swap the glittery slippers for proper wellies.

"Even fairies need warm feet in December," I countered, zipping her coat while J helped Killy with his.

Once the dogs were settled with fresh water, we herded the twins toward the car. Our destination was Michelle's house—or what J jokingly referred to as "the compound," though Michelle preferred the more dignified term "estate." Whatever you called it, the sprawling property on the outskirts of Ballincollig was significantly better equipped to handle the incoming holiday invasion than our modest home.

"Everyone buckled?" J asked as he started the car, performing the ritual check in the rearview mirror.

"Buckled!" Rose confirmed with unnecessary volume, while Killy simply nodded, already engrossed in the small book he'd brought along.

The drive to Michelle's took us through Ballincollig and out toward the rolling countryside beyond, where properties grew larger and more secluded. Michelle's place sat on several acres, the main house large enough to accommodate her immediate family plus guests, with additional cottages on the grounds for overflow visitors. When they'd built it, I'd thought it excessive for a family of four. Now, with their expanded household and frequent visitors, it made perfect sense.

"Michelle's going to be absolutely knackered," I remarked to J as we turned onto the long private drive that led to the main house. "They only landed what, four hours ago?"

"Five," J corrected, navigating around a delivery van parked near the entrance. "But you know Michelle. She texted me three times since landing to make sure we were coming over. Apparently she misses her best friend more than she needs sleep."

I smiled at that. Despite the considerable differences in our lifestyles Michelle and J were the best of mates. Their bond was one of the constants in our chaotic lives.

"Tomi! Tomi!" Rose chanted from the backseat, bouncing against her car seat restraints as the house came into view. The twins had missed their little friend during her absence on tour, and Rose in particular had been counting down the days until she could show Tomi her new "fairy magic tricks"—a prospect that filled me with equal parts amusement and dread.

"Remember, Rose, gentle with Tomi," I reminded her as J parked alongside several other vehicles already crowding the circular drive. "She's smaller than you, and she's probably tired from her trip."

"Gentle," Rose agreed with suspicious promptness, which usually meant the advice had gone in one ear and out the other.

As we unloaded from the car, I took in the scene before us. Michelle's normally immaculate front garden showed signs of the recent arrival—luggage still being ferried inside, several unfamiliar rental cars parked haphazardly, and the distinct sound of multiple conversations drifting through the open front door. The tranquil Irish estate had transformed overnight into what appeared to be a small international airport terminal.

"Ready to face the madness?" J asked, hoisting Killy onto his hip while I took Rose's hand firmly in mine.

"Not remotely," I replied with a laugh. "But when has that ever stopped us?"

With the twins in tow, we approached the front door, bracing ourselves for the chaos that awaited within. Whatever happened over the next two weeks, it certainly wouldn't be boring.

Michelle opened the door before we could knock, practically launching herself into J's arms with the enthusiasm of someone who'd been separated from her best friend for months rather than weeks. If I should have been jealous of their closeness, I wasn't—not even slightly. I'd long ago come to understand that J loved Michelle like a sister, and she loved him as a brother. Their bond was one of the foundations of our extended family, not a threat to my marriage.

"I missed you," she said, her American accent more pronounced than usual, as it often was after touring.

"Missed you too, Love," J replied, returning her hug with equal warmth. He glanced over her shoulder at the chaos visible inside. "Looks like you're running a hotel here."

She laughed, pulling back to survey the scene behind her with a mixture of pride and mild horror. "Sort of? Though no hotel would allow this level of disorganization. Come in before you freeze."

"Auntie Michelle!" Rose didn't wait for further invitation, launching herself at Michelle's legs with fairy-winged abandon.

"Hey, Fairy Girl!" Michelle exclaimed, scooping Rose up with practiced ease. Despite her petite frame, Michelle had always been surprisingly strong—a fact I attributed to years of touring and the rigors of her other, less public career activities.

Killy offered a more reserved wave from J's arms, his smile genuine but his approach to greeting characteristically more measured than his sister's.

We stepped into the warmth of the house, and I was immediately struck by the sheer number of people occupying Michelle's normally spacious living room. Some faces were familiar from previous visits or video calls; others were complete strangers.

"OK, introductions," Michelle said, shifting Rose to her hip as she gestured around the room.

"Jeremy and Livvie, over there we have Andros and Ashley Kay, two of our dear friends from Angel Grove. They're the parents of twins too—Ally and Aaron. Aaron is Harley's new boyfriend." She nodded toward a couple seated on one of the sofas—the man with short brown hair, the woman blonde and warmly smiling.

"The kids are all upstairs sleeping still," Michelle continued, "jet lag hit them hard. Of course you know my brother Zachary and his wife Kelly." She gestured to where Zachary was engaged in what appeared to be an intense conversation with a dark-haired man near the fireplace.

"I believe you've met Hunter's brother Blake and his wife Tori," she added, indicating a shorter, dark-haired man and a blonde woman who waved in friendly recognition. "And we also have the rest of Hunter's family—his foster father Albert Omino, Hunter's foster sister LeAnn Omino, and her fiancé, Cam Watanabe." These last three were seated near the window, the older man observing the proceedings with serene detachment while the younger couple appeared to be in the midst of a quiet disagreement.

"Everyone," Michelle concluded, "these are our best friends, Jeremy and Livvie O'Brien, and their twins Rose and Killy."

"Nice to meet you lot," J said with his characteristic easy charm, though I detected the slight tension in his shoulders that always appeared when faced with large groups of new people.

"Likewise," Andros replied, his manner formal but not unfriendly.

I scanned the room, mentally cataloging names and relationships, trying to construct a coherent map of this complex social gathering. The sheer number of interconnections was dizzying—Rangers, ninjas, family members, and various combinations thereof. And this was just the advance guard; Mia, RJ, and the Jordans were still to come.

Rose, predictably, had no such concerns about the complexity of the social dynamics. "Where Tomi?" she asked Michelle directly, already squirming to be put down so she could begin her search.

"Tomi is napping, sweetie," Michelle explained gently. "She's very tired from the long flight. But she'll be so excited to see you when she wakes up."

Rose's face fell momentarily before brightening with new purpose. "I make surprise for Tomi!" she declared, clearly already formulating some scheme that would likely involve glitter, tape, or other implements of creative destruction.

"That's a lovely idea," I said quickly, intercepting her before she could dash off unsupervised. "But first, let's say hello to everyone properly, shall we?"

As J and I began making our rounds of the room, exchanging pleasantries and fielding the inevitable questions about raising twins, I caught sight of Hunter emerging from the kitchen. He looked exhausted but content, a mug of what was undoubtedly strong coffee clutched in his hand like a lifeline. When he spotted us, his face broke into a genuine smile.

"The O'Briens have arrived," he announced, crossing to greet us. "Now the holiday can officially begin."

"Or the madness," J countered with a grin, clasping Hunter's free hand in greeting. "Your house is looking more like Grand Central Station than usual."

"You have no idea," Hunter replied, lowering his voice. "And this is just the first wave. Wait until the Jordans arrive with Hal's entire extended family."

I glanced at Michelle, who was now engaged in conversation with Ashley while still keeping a watchful eye on Rose. Despite the evident exhaustion shadowing her eyes, she looked happy—genuinely, unreservedly happy to have her home filled with people she cared about.

Whatever chaos the next two weeks might bring, I realized, it was a chaos born of connection, of chosen family and shared history. And that, perhaps, was worth all the logistical nightmares and potential diplomatic incidents ahead.

Even if it did mean keeping Rose away from unsecured art supplies for the duration of the visit.

J managed to get the twins settled at Michelle's coffee table with some crayons and paper—a relatively safe creative outlet that wouldn't result in permanent property damage. Rose immediately began creating what appeared to be a fairly welcome card for Tomi, her tongue poking out in concentration as she selected colors with uncharacteristic deliberation. Killy, meanwhile, was methodically drawing what looked like a remarkably accurate rendition of a rocket ship, his small hand steady as he added precise details.

With the children momentarily occupied, J and I joined the adults, finding space on one of the sofas opposite Andros and Ashley. Hunter appeared with fresh mugs of coffee for us, earning my eternal gratitude—the early morning Rose wake-up call was beginning to catch up with me.

"So is everyone staying here?" J asked, gesturing vaguely to indicate the assembled company.

"Your guest rooms must be bursting at the seams."



Michelle shook her head, settling into the armchair beside Hunter's. "We've got a bit of a billeting system worked out. Andros and Ashley are staying here in the main house with their twins. Zachary and his family are staying over at Mom's house on the property—so they're sort of here, but not under the same roof." She took a sip of her coffee before continuing. "Arisa's boyfriend Arion is staying here too, of course."

"Of course," J echoed with a knowing smile.

"Everyone else is staying at the hotel in town," Michelle concluded. "We've basically taken over the entire top floor. The manager was thrilled."

I mentally calculated the logistics involved in coordinating so many people across multiple locations—transportation arrangements, meal planning, activity scheduling—and felt a renewed appreciation for Michelle's organizational skills. For someone whose public persona often emphasized her artistic side, she had a remarkably practical approach to managing chaos.

"Speaking of accommodations," Zack said, rising from his seat with Kelly following suit, "we're heading back out to Mom's house to check on her and the kids." He stretched.

"OK, see you later," Michelle replied, the easy shorthand of siblings evident in their brief exchange.

As Zack and Kelly made their farewells and headed out, I noticed Michelle visibly relax, her shoulders dropping slightly as the front door closed behind them.

"OK, we're safe," she said, her voice lowering conspiratorially. "Kelly was the only one who didn't know about the Rangers."

"Michelle!" Cam's eyes widened in alarm behind his glasses, his head jerking pointedly in our direction as if we might have somehow missed the reference.

"Oh, Jeremy and Livvie know," Michelle dismissed his concern with a casual wave. "In fact, Livvie was the one who managed to coordinate Billy's systems with the Celtics'." There was a note of pride in her voice that would have been flattering if I hadn't been suddenly aware of Cam's intense scrutiny.

He turned to look at me, his expression a mixture of skepticism and professional affront. "That's quite a feat for a civilian." The words carried a distinct chill, his tone suggesting he found the very idea dubious at best, reckless at worst.

I met his gaze directly, years of navigating male-dominated tech spaces having taught me never to show uncertainty when my skills were questioned. "Yeah, well, I'm the best." The statement wasn't bravado—it was a simple fact. Billy wouldn't have brought me in if there had been anyone else capable of bridging those systems.

"Are you now?" Cam asked, adjusting his glasses in what seemed to be a habitual gesture. The lights reflected off the lenses, momentarily obscuring his eyes.

Hunter sighed from his position by the fireplace, the sound carrying years of familiarity with this particular conversational pattern. "Cam, don't."

"Wait! Cam, yes..." J's face lit with sudden recognition, his filter-free brain making connections aloud before his social awareness could intervene. "I know that name. Hunter's ex!"

I shot him a look that clearly communicated "Seriously?" along with promises of a detailed discussion later about appropriate timing for relationship history observations.

"Oh, sorry..." J mumbled, having the grace to look embarrassed as he registered the sudden tension in the room.

"What was Billy thinking, letting a civilian access the Ranger database?" Cam grumbled, apparently deciding to focus on the professional rather than personal aspects of the awkward moment. "Those systems contain sensitive information about active Rangers, not to mention the technical specifications for weapons systems."

I felt my hackles rise at his dismissive tone. After months of working with Billy on increasingly complex encryption protocols, after successfully bridging technologies that had been deemed fundamentally incompatible, being referred to as just a "civilian" by someone who hadn't even seen my work was more than a little grating.

"Billy was thinking he needed someone who could actually solve the problem," I replied coolly, "rather than someone who'd just tell him why it couldn't be done."

"Livvie," J warned quietly, recognizing the particular edge in my voice that typically preceded me verbally eviscerating someone.

Michelle intervened before the conversation could deteriorate further. "Livvie's work was crucial, Cam. Without her, we wouldn't have been able to establish communication between the Morphin Grid and the Celtic magic. The systems are completely stable."

"For now," Cam muttered, though he seemed slightly chastened by Michelle's defense.

Hunter pushed off from the mantel where he'd been leaning, moving to stand slightly between Cam and the rest of us—a peacemaking gesture that spoke volumes about their complicated history.

"Livvie's credentials are impeccable," he said firmly. "And more importantly, she's family. So maybe we table the tech debate until after the holidays?"

The subtle emphasis on "family" wasn't lost on anyone in the room. Even Rose looked up from her drawing, her uncanny ability to detect emotional undercurrents kicking in despite her young age.

"Da mad?" she asked J in a stage whisper that was perfectly audible to everyone present.

"No, Love," J assured her, though his eyes remained on the interaction between Hunter and Cam. "Just grown-up talk."

An awkward silence settled over the room, broken only by the sound of Killy's crayon moving methodically across his paper. I found myself studying Cam more carefully now, trying to reconcile this somewhat prickly tech expert with the person Hunter had once been involved with. The contrast between Cam's reserved, slightly judgmental demeanor and Hunter's more open, direct approach was striking.

LeAnn, who had been quiet throughout the exchange, finally spoke up. "So, these twins of yours," she said, clearly making an effort to shift the conversation to safer ground. "They look so different."

"Fraternal twins often do," I confirmed, grateful for the change of subject. "Though sometimes I wonder if they're actually from the same species, let alone the same womb."

This earned a genuine laugh from several people, the tension in the room dissipating slightly as attention turned to the more universally appealing topic of children.

"We have fraternal twins too," Ashley offered with a warm smile. "Ours are boy-girl as well. It's amazing how different they can be, isn't it?"

As the conversation shifted to the safer territory of parenting experiences, I caught Michelle's eye across the room. She mouthed a silent "sorry" with a small shrug that managed to convey both apology and a certain resignation about the interpersonal dynamics at play.

I gave her a subtle nod in return. If navigating ex-relationship awkwardness was the biggest challenge we faced today, we'd be getting off lightly. After all, RJ hadn't even arrived yet.

Eventually, the sound of multiple footsteps on the stairs announced the arrival of the younger generation. Arissa appeared first, carefully carrying a still-drowsy Tomi in her arms. Behind her followed Harley, a girl with blonde hair who bore a striking resemblance to Ashley, and two boys—one with a distinctly formal posture, the other with a more relaxed demeanor despite his evident fatigue.

"Well, good morning," Michelle greeted them with a warm smile. "Or afternoon, technically. How was the jet lag nap?"

"Morning," Harley mumbled, running a hand through her sleep-tousled blonde hair. Her eyes brightened slightly as she spotted us. "Oh, hey Uncle Jeremy."

"Tomi!" Rose immediately abandoned her artwork, preparing to launch herself across the room at her favorite playmate.

I caught her mid-sprint with the practiced reflexes of a father who'd learned to anticipate Rose-shaped projectiles. "Hold it, Fairy Girl. Let Tomi wake up first." He shifted his hold to keep Rose contained while addressing Harley. "Hi there. Glad to see you lot home safe."

Ashley smiled, gesturing toward the two teenagers we hadn't met before. "Well, those are our twins, Aaron and Ally."

"Aaron is Harley's boyfriend," Michelle added with deliberate casualness, though I caught the slight protective tension in Hunter's posture at the word 'boyfriend.' "And that other boy is Arion, Arissa's boyfriend."

The formal boy—Arion—gave a slight bow of his head that seemed oddly ceremonial for a casual introduction. "Nice to meet you," he said, his accent carrying a subtle lilt that wouldn't be recognizable to most as non-terrestrial. J and I were among the few in the extended circle who knew his true origins as a Saturnian royal guard.

"Likewise," I replied, noting the way he positioned himself slightly behind Arissa—protective but not possessive, his eyes continuously scanning the room in a pattern that spoke of security training rather than typical teenage awkwardness.

"Daddy," Tomi's sleepy voice called as she spotted Hunter, her arms reaching out from Arissa's hold with the absolute certainty that her father would respond.

Hunter crossed the room in two strides, taking his youngest daughter from Arissa with a gentleness that contrasted with his imposing physical presence. "Hi, Princess," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Did you have a good nap?"

Tomi nodded against his shoulder, her small hand patting his cheek in a gesture of toddler affection that made even LeAnn's expression soften.

"Tomi play now?" Rose asked hopefully, still restrained in J's arms but vibrating with the effort of containing her excitement.

"Maybe after she has a snack," Michelle suggested diplomatically, recognizing that her youngest was still transitioning from sleep to wakefulness. "Rose, would you like to help me get some fruit and cheese from the kitchen for everyone?"

It was a masterful redirection—offering Rose the important "job" of helping while simultaneously preventing her from overwhelming Tomi. Rose nodded eagerly, her previous impatience transformed into purposeful energy.

"I help too," Killy offered quietly, carefully setting down his crayon and standing.

"Perfect," Michelle smiled, extending a hand to each twin. "My best little helpers."

As Michelle led the twins toward the kitchen, the teenagers drifted toward the vacated coffee table, Harley and Aaron settling close together on the floor while Ally began flipping through Rose's abandoned drawings with polite interest. Arissa remained standing near Arion, their postures mirroring each other in a way that suggested familiarity.

"So," Blake broke the momentary silence, addressing J and me with genuine curiosity. "Michelle tells us you're actually from Ireland?"

"I am," J confirmed. I grew up near Dublin. Livvie is from Australia originally.

I nodded, "Yeah, but Ireland is home now, though I'll admit the weather took some getting used to."

"It rains a bit more than Australia," Blake laughed, his easy manner a stark contrast to his brother's more reserved demeanor. "Hunter's always complaining about it."

"I do not," Hunter protested, though his objection lacked conviction. "I just made reasonable observations about the precipitation patterns."

"Whatever you say," Blake countered with brotherly glee.

Their good-natured bickering created a welcome shift in the room's atmosphere, the earlier tension with Cam giving way to more relaxed conversation. As the adults fell into discussions about weather differences between their various home regions, I observed the teenagers' interactions with quiet interest.

Aaron had positioned himself close to Harley, their shoulders touching in that particular way of new couples—constantly seeking physical reassurance of connection. Arion, meanwhile, maintained a slight but noticeable distance from Arissa, though his attention remained fixed on her with unwavering focus. The contrast in relationship styles was striking—Earth teenager versus Saturnian guard, casual affection versus formal devotion.

When Michelle returned with the twins and a platter of snacks, Tomi had sufficiently awakened to express interest in playing with Rose. Hunter set her down carefully, and the two little girls immediately fell into the special language of toddler friendship, as if no time had passed since they'd last seen each other.

"Airy ings!" Tomi exclaimed, reaching to touch Rose's sparkly appendages with evident admiration.

"I show you magic," Rose promised, taking Tomi's hand with uncharacteristic gentleness and leading her toward the abandoned art supplies.

Killy followed at a more measured pace, his expression serious as he apparently took it upon himself to supervise the girls' activities.

Watching the children interact, I felt a surge of gratitude for this strange, extended family we'd built here in Ireland. Despite the occasional tensions and complicated histories, there was something beautiful about these connections that transcended conventional boundaries—former Rangers and current Rangers, humans and aliens, biological family and chosen family, all gathered under one roof.

Of course, the real test would come when RJ arrived. But for now, in this moment of relative peace, I allowed myself to enjoy the simple pleasure of watching our children play together while surrounded by people who, despite their differences, shared a common bond of service and sacrifice.

And if that bond occasionally manifested as awkward ex-relationship dynamics or territorial tech debates... well, that was just part of the package deal.

Michelle

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Eventually, the older kids grew restless with the indoor confinement, convincing Hunter to take them to the park in town. Andros and Blake decided to join him, and somehow this expedition expanded to include Tomi and the twins as well—a development that clearly delighted Rose, who was already planning what "fairy games" she would teach Tomi.

"Are you sure you can handle all of them?" I asked Hunter as he gathered jackets and helped Tomi into her boots.

"There are three of us and six kids," he replied with the confidence of someone who hadn't fully thought through the chaos potential of Rose combined with jet-lagged teenagers. "What could possibly go wrong?"

"Don't tempt fate," I warned, though I was secretly relieved at the prospect of a quieter house for an hour or two. The constant social interaction after months of touring had left me craving a brief respite, even from people I loved.

LeAnn, meanwhile, had decided that Sensei Omino needed rest before his planned visit to the Celtic Academy tomorrow. "The time change is more difficult at his age," she explained as she helped her foster father into his coat. "We'll head back to the hotel for a few hours."

I nodded, "Of course. We'll see you for dinner?"

"Wouldn't miss it," LeAnn confirmed, though her eyes darted briefly to where Cam stood examining the bookshelves, suggesting she might have additional motivations for removing her father from the potentially tense environment.

When all was said and done, the only ones left behind with me were Livvie, Jeremy, Ashley, and of course, Cam. The sudden relative quiet in the house was almost disorienting after the morning's constant activity.

"Well," I said, stretching slightly as the front door closed behind the park expedition, "who wants coffee?"

"Actually," Cam spoke up before anyone could respond to my offer, "Billy mentioned he set up a command center for you. I'd be interested in seeing it."

So that was why he'd stayed behind. I should have known.

I sighed, exchanging a quick glance with Livvie, whose expression suggested she'd reached the same conclusion. "Yeah, this way."

I led our reduced group through the house to my office, a room that ostensibly served as the space where I handled business correspondence and songwriting, but which concealed one of Billy's more

ingenious installations. Closing the door behind us, I moved to the bookshelf and pressed a specific sequence of decorative elements that appeared to be ordinary bookends and ornaments.

A soft hum preceded the bookshelf sliding aside to reveal a staircase leading down to what had originally been a wine cellar before Billy converted it into a fully functional command center. As we descended the stairs, the lighting automatically activated, illuminating a space that would have looked at home in any Ranger base across the globe.

"Welcome to my secret lair," I said dryly, gesturing around the room.

The command center featured multiple workstations with advanced computer systems, a central holographic display table, communications equipment capable of reaching other Ranger teams worldwide, and a secured weapons locker that contained our morphers when not in use. The walls were lined with monitors displaying everything from local news feeds to energy signature scanners that continuously monitored for anomalies.

Cam moved immediately to the main console, his eyes lighting up with the particular enthusiasm of a tech specialist encountering new equipment. "Very nice," he said, examining the systems with professional appreciation. "I would expect nothing less from Billy, even if his judgment has been questionable lately." He shot a pointed look at Livvie, the comment clearly aimed at her involvement.

Livvie's expression shifted from polite interest to barely contained indignation. "If you have something to say," she said evenly, though I could hear the edge beneath her calm tone, "say it."

The tension in the room spiked instantly. Jeremy shifted closer to Livvie in a gesture of silent support, while Ashley glanced at me with raised eyebrows, clearly trying to gauge whether intervention was necessary.

Cam straightened, adjusting his glasses in that characteristic gesture that I remembered all too well from our shared Ranger days. "I simply question the wisdom of giving a civilian—however skilled—access to systems that connect directly to the Morphin Grid. It's not personal."

"It sounds pretty personal from where I'm standing," Livvie countered, crossing her arms. "And for the record, I didn't just 'access' the systems—I rebuilt the interface protocols from the ground up to create a bridge between fundamentally incompatible energy signatures. Something Billy himself said couldn't be done."

"Which is precisely my point," Cam replied, his voice taking on the lecturing tone that had always driven Hunter crazy during their relationship. "If Billy couldn't do it, perhaps there were good reasons why it shouldn't be done. The Grid isn't just technology; it's a semi-sentient multidimensional energy matrix with properties we're still discovering after decades of study."

"I'm well aware of what the Grid is," Livvie said, her patience visibly thinning. "I've been working with it for months."

"A few months is hardly—"

"Enough," I interrupted, stepping between them before the discussion could escalate further. "Cam, Livvie's work has been invaluable to our operations here. The bridge she created between the Grid and Celtic magic has saved lives and opened possibilities we hadn't considered. Billy trusts her, and so do I."

Cam's expression suggested he had more to say, but Ashley intervened smoothly. "The integration looks seamless," she observed, moving to examine one of the workstations. "Is this where you're monitoring the Viper situation?"

I shot her a grateful look for the redirection. "Yes. We've been tracking his movements when possible, though he's become increasingly adept at masking his energy signature."

"Which is why we needed the Celtic connection," Livvie added, seizing the opportunity to move past the confrontation. "Their magic operates on different principles than the Grid. It can detect things our technology misses, especially when Viper is using death energy to cloak himself."

Cam's interest in the technical aspects of the problem temporarily overrode his skepticism. "Death energy? That's not a term I'm familiar with."

I moved to the central display, activating a holographic representation of the energy patterns we'd been tracking. "It's the corrupted power source Viper's using. It's essentially the opposite of the life force that powers the Celtic Rangers—a negative energy that absorbs rather than generates power. We encountered it for the first time with the Death Ranger."

As the hologram displayed the distinctive signature—a swirling, void-like pattern that seemed to pull light inward rather than emit it—Cam's expression shifted from skepticism to genuine scientific curiosity. "Fascinating. This doesn't match any known evil power source in our records."

"That's because it's not from our dimension originally," I explained, grateful that the conversation had shifted to technical matters rather than personal ones. "Viper's found a way to harness it."

For the next twenty minutes, we fell into a detailed discussion of the technical aspects of tracking Viper and containing the death energy. Despite their initial friction, Cam and Livvie gradually found common ground in the problem-solving aspects of the situation, their shared technical expertise allowing them to communicate in a shorthand that occasionally left Jeremy and Ashley exchanging bemused glances.

"So this is where the magic happens," Jeremy observed during a brief lull, glancing around the command center with appreciation. "Quite literally, in this case."

"One of several locations," I confirmed. "We've got smaller monitoring stations at the Celtic Academy and at Livvie and Jeremy's place, plus the main hub at Billy's lab."

"Distributed systems," Cam nodded approvingly. "Smart. Harder to take down the entire network that way."

"That was Livvie's suggestion, actually," I said, unable to resist the opportunity to highlight her contribution again. "After the incident with the Death Ranger."

Cam had the grace to look slightly abashed, though he quickly masked it with professional interest. "The redundancy protocols are impressive. Very... thorough."

It wasn't quite an apology, but from Cam, it was as close as we were likely to get to an acknowledgment of Livvie's expertise.

"Thank you," Livvie replied with equal professionalism, though I caught the slight smile of vindication that flickered across her face.

Before the conversation could potentially veer back into contentious territory, my phone chimed with an incoming message. I glanced at the screen and felt my stomach tighten.

"Everything okay?" Ashley asked, noticing my expression.

"Fine," I replied automatically, though the text from Hunter suggested otherwise: *Trev texted me. RJ and Mia have arrived.*

RJ was in Ireland. The holiday complication I'd been dreading was now imminent.

"Michelle?" Jeremy prompted, his perceptiveness as sharp as ever.

I tucked my phone away, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. "Just an update from Hunter. They've landed."

Jeremy and Livvie exchanged a look that spoke volumes about their understanding of what that meant. Ashley, who knew my history with RJ, offered a sympathetic smile, while Cam—mercifully—seemed oblivious to the subtext, his attention already returning to the technical displays.

"Well," I said with forced brightness, "we should probably head back upstairs. I'm sure everyone could use a proper cup of coffee after all this tech talk."

As we made our way back to the main floor, I felt the familiar tension settling between my shoulders—the same tension that always accompanied thoughts of RJ. After all these years, after everything that had happened between us, I'd hoped that the prospect of seeing him would no longer affect me this way.

Yet here I was, a successful musician, a respected Ranger, a queen of an entire planet, and still dreading a dinner with my ex-husband as if I were twenty-six again.

Some things, apparently, never changed—no matter how much we might wish them to.

As we made our way back to the living room, Cam continued his interrogation of Livvie, his professional curiosity evidently overriding his earlier skepticism.

"So, how did Billy recruit you?" he asked, his tone suggesting he was trying to reconcile her obvious technical proficiency with his preconceptions about civilian involvement.

"He didn't," Livvie replied with that particular straightforward bluntness I'd always appreciated about her. "I hacked his systems and uncovered the Ranger tech."

Cam stopped abruptly on the stairs, nearly causing Ashley to collide with him from behind. "You what?" His voice rose an octave in disbelief. "But Billy used Aquitarian encryption. No one on Earth has even seen those protocols outside of the Rangers."

Livvie glanced back over her shoulder, a small, satisfied smirk playing at the corner of her mouth. "Like I said, I'm the best."

I suppressed a laugh at Cam's expression—a perfect mixture of horror and reluctant admiration that reminded me why Hunter had once been drawn to him, despite their fundamental differences. Cam had always respected technical prowess, even when it challenged his worldview.

"She really is that good," Jeremy added proudly, his arm slipping around Livvie's waist. "Though to be fair, she wasn't specifically targeting Ranger systems. She just saw a code she wanted to hack. And Liv can hack anything."

"So it would seem," Cam said, his tone sour.

I sighed. This was going to be a long holiday indeed.

Amber

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"Mia!" I squealed with genuine delight, rushing forward to embrace my best friend as she stepped through the doorway.

She chuckled warmly, returning my embrace with equal enthusiasm. "Hi Amber. I missed you too."

I pulled back to look at her properly, assessing her appearance with the critical eye of both a friend and a beauty professional. She looked good—radiant, even—her time in Ocean Bluff clearly agreeing with her. I filed away this observation for later analysis, already suspecting the source of her glow.

"And RJ, good to see you again," I said, turning to greet the man behind her with a smile.

"Likewise," he replied with that easy charm that had undoubtedly served him well throughout his life. "And this is my father, Finn James." He gestured toward an older man who carried himself with a quiet dignity, his silver hair and kind eyes giving him a distinguished appearance.

"It's so nice to meet you," I said, extending my hand.

"Nice to meet you," Finn replied, his handshake firm but not aggressive. "Mia has told me so much about you and your family." His voice carried a warmth that seemed genuine rather than merely polite, immediately raising my estimation of him.

"And you two," I continued, crouching slightly to address the twin girls partially hidden behind RJ, "hi girls." I opened my arms, genuinely pleased to see them again. Summer and Autumn had completely charmed me during our previous meetings.

"Hi Aunt Amber," they chorused in near-perfect unison, stepping forward to accept my hug with the particular combination of shyness and enthusiasm unique to six-year-olds meeting a semi-familiar adult.

"Please, come in," I said, straightening and gesturing toward the house. "Trev and Niamh are inside with Rachel."

I led the group through the entryway and into the living room, where Trevor was seated on the sofa with Rachel in his lap, Niamh beside them engaged in the particular form of baby-worship that had become her primary occupation since Rachel's birth.

"That's my husband Trevor, his mom Niamh, and our baby Rachel," I announced, unable to keep the pride from my voice as I made the introductions. "This is Finn, RJ's dad."

Trevor rose to greet our guests, expertly balancing Rachel against his shoulder with the practiced ease of a father who'd quickly mastered the one-handed handshake. "Welcome," he said, his natural hospitality immediately evident despite the slight wariness in his eyes. Trevor was well aware of the potential complications RJ's presence might create in our extended social circle. Unlike me, who reveled in Michelle's discomfort, Hunter was Trev's best friend so he felt a bro code obligation to dislike RJ, but couldn't because of Mia being my best friend.

"Lovely to meet you," Niamh said, her Irish lilt warming the words as she turned her attention to Finn. I watched with sudden interest as her expression shifted subtly—a slight widening of the eyes, a faint color rising to her cheeks that had nothing to do with the warmth of the room.

Well, well, well. That was interesting.

I studied Finn's reaction to my mother-in-law and caught the slight straightening of his posture, the momentary pause before he responded. "The pleasure is mine," he said, his eyes lingering on Niamh's face a heartbeat longer than strictly necessary for polite acknowledgment.

Oh my god. Was Niamh attracted to Finn? Was the attraction mutual? The strategic part of my brain—the part that had built a beauty empire through careful observation and decisive action—immediately began calculating possibilities.

Did I need to play matchmaker? The prospect was deliciously tempting. A holiday romance between our parents would not only be adorable but might also help smooth over some of the inevitable tension when Michelle arrived. Nothing diffused awkwardness like having a new couple to focus on.

"Niamh has been an absolute lifesaver since Rachel was born," I said, deliberately creating an opening for conversation between them. "I don't know what we would have done without her expertise."

"Nonsense," Niamh protested, though her pleased expression belied her modest words. "Just doing what any grandmother would do."

"You're modest, she's a saint," I pointed out, turning to Finn. "Niamh left the village she lived in her whole life to move here and help with Rachel."

"That's impressive," Finn replied, genuine interest evident in his voice.

Mia caught my eye across the room, one eyebrow raised in silent question. I gave her the smallest of nods—our longtime shorthand for "yes, I'm seeing it too"—and her lips quirked in suppressed amusement.

"Autumn, Summer, would you like to see Rachel's nursery?" I asked the twins, who had been remarkably patient during the adult introductions.

"Can we, Daddy?" Summer asked, looking up at RJ with hopeful eyes.

"Of course," he agreed, his expression softening as it always did when he addressed his daughters.

I recognized an opportunity when I saw one. With the twins eager to explore and the adults needing to settle in, I could create the perfect opening for Niamh and Finn to have some time alone.

"Why don't we all head up?" I suggested with casual deliberation. "I think Rachel could use a moment with her Mamo after all this excitement." I kept my tone light, as if this were simply a practical consideration rather than a transparent matchmaking maneuver.

Trevor began to hand Rachel to Niamh, then glanced at Finn with sudden realization. "What about Fi—"

"Shhhhh, it's fine, mi corazón," I interrupted, placing my hand on the small of his back and applying gentle but insistent pressure to guide him toward the stairs. My husband was notoriously protective of his mother—a quality I found endearing in most circumstances but inconvenient for my current purposes.

Trevor shot me a puzzled look, but I simply widened my eyes meaningfully and tilted my head toward the stairs. After years of marriage, he recognized my "trust me, I know what I'm doing" expression, though his slight frown suggested he didn't entirely approve of whatever scheme he suspected I was hatching.

"The nursery is this way, girls," I said to the twins, who were already halfway up the stairs, their natural childhood curiosity propelling them forward.

As our small procession made its way upstairs—the twins chattering excitedly, Trevor glancing back with a resigned expression, Mia shooting me knowing glances—I cast one final look over my shoulder at the living room.

Niamh was already engaged in conversation with Finn, Rachel contentedly nestled in her arms as she gestured toward something on the mantelpiece—probably the family photos I'd arranged there. Finn had moved closer, his posture attentive as he listened to whatever Niamh was saying.

Perfect. Phase one of Operation Holiday Romance was officially underway.

"You're shameless," Mia murmured as she passed me on the stairs, her voice low enough that only I could hear.

"Strategic," I corrected with a small smile. "There's a difference."

Trevor, who had caught the exchange, raised an eyebrow. "Amber, are you matchmaking again?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied with practiced innocence. "I'm simply being a good hostess and showing our guests around while allowing your mother some time to rest with the baby."

"And Finn. Alone. Together." Trevor's tone made it clear he wasn't fooled for a second.

"Is that who we left down there?" I asked, widening my eyes in mock surprise. "I hardly noticed."

RJ, who had been focused on keeping track of his daughters, glanced back with sudden interest.

"Wait, are you trying to set up my dad?"

"Of course not," I said smoothly. "But if two single people happen to enjoy each other's company over the holidays, who am I to interfere with the natural course of events?"

"Natural," Trevor repeated skeptically.

"Fine, maybe I'm creating an opportunity. But look at them—they're both attractive, intelligent, kind people who have been alone for far too long. What's the harm in a little holiday connection?"

"My dad hasn't shown interest in anyone since my mother died," RJ said, his expression thoughtful rather than disapproving.

"And your mom hasn't had a date in ages," I said to Trev, seizing on RJ's acceptance as support for my matchmaking endeavors.

Trevor looked at me with that particular expression of certainty that only a son could have regarding his mother's love life. "Not since my dad."

I laughed automatically, assuming he was joking, then paused when his expression remained serious. "Oh, you're serious? Trevor, are you loco? She was a teenager when she had you and didn't know who your father was. Do you really think she hasn't been with anyone since?"

The twins had scampered ahead to the nursery, allowing our conversation to venture into more adult territory without little ears present.

"She never brought anyone around..." Trevor said defensively, his voice carrying that slight edge that always emerged when discussing his complex family history.

"Mi corazón, I hate to break it to you, but just because you never saw it doesn't mean she didn't do it," I replied, trying to balance honesty with sensitivity. "And then when you went to school in Paris, you didn't come back to Ireland for over a decade... you think she was just at home knitting that whole time? Your mom isn't a nun, she's a woman that enjoys men."

Trevor's expression shifted to something between horror and denial, his hands rising as if to physically block my words. "No, she doesn't. I'm not listening to this," he insisted, quickening his pace to catch up with the twins.

Mia and RJ exchanged amused glances as Trevor retreated, clearly recognizing the universal truth that no one wants to contemplate their parent's romantic life.

"You really have no filter, do you?" Mia asked with a mixture of exasperation and affection.

"Why start now?" I shrugged unapologetically. "Besides, Trevor needs to get over this idea that his mother has been living like some Victorian widow. Niamh is vibrant, attractive, and has definitely not been celibate for thirty-plus years."

"Still," RJ observed with surprising diplomacy, "maybe ease him into the idea of his mother dating? Most men have a blind spot when it comes to their mothers' romantic lives."

I considered this advice, watching Trevor's retreating back as he disappeared into the nursery. "Fine, I'll be more... tactful," I conceded, though the concept didn't come naturally to me. "But I'm not abandoning Operation Holiday Romance. Those two had a spark, and I'm going to fan it into a flame."

"Just try not to burn the house down in the process," Mia suggested dryly.

"Details," I dismissed with a wave of my hand.

As we continued down the hallway, I mentally adjusted my strategy. Trevor's unexpected resistance meant I would need to be more subtle in my approach—a challenge, certainly, but not an insurmountable one. After all, I hadn't built a beauty empire by backing down from obstacles.

Niamh and Finn would have their holiday connection, Trevor's sensibilities notwithstanding. I just needed to be cleverer about how I orchestrated it.

And if there was one thing I excelled at besides cosmetics formulation and marketing strategy, it was getting my way without people realizing I was pulling the strings.

By Christmas Eve, I'd have Niamh and Finn under the mistletoe. Trevor would just have to deal with it.

After we headed back downstairs, we found Niamh had made a cup of tea for Finn and they were sitting comfortably in the living room, engaged in conversation that had both of them laughing. Trevor's expression immediately darkened at the sight, his protective instincts clearly kicking into overdrive.

Mia, ever perceptive to social undercurrents, smoothly intervened before Trevor could say anything. "Well, we should probably get to the hotel and get settled. We'll see you at dinner?" she asked, placing a gentle hand on RJ's arm to signal it was time to collect the twins.

I nodded, unable to suppress the mischievous smile that tugged at my lips. "Absolutely. Michelle is hosting. I wouldn't miss that for the world." The prospect of witnessing Michelle's reaction to RJ's presence was an entertainment bonus on top of my matchmaking plans.

"You're terrible," Mia said with a knowing eye roll, though her tone carried more affection than censure.

"Will you be joining us tonight as well?" Niamh asked Finn, her voice carrying a note of interest that confirmed my earlier observations. The slight color in her cheeks hadn't faded during our absence.

"I will," Finn answered with a warm smile that seemed reserved specifically for her.

"Then I'll see you then," she said, the traditional Irish farewell somehow sounding more like a promise than a polite convention.

After goodbyes were exchanged and Mia's group had departed for their hotel, I turned to Niamh with deliberate casualness. "Finn seems nice," I observed, unable to resist testing the waters.

Trevor shot me a warning look that I pretended not to notice, his eyes clearly communicating "don't you dare" in a language only spouses can fully interpret.

"Yes, he was lovely," Niamh replied with practiced neutrality, though the slight pause before "lovely" spoke volumes to my trained ear. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go get ready for dinner." She handed Rachel to Trevor and headed out to her cottage behind our house, her departure just a touch more hurried than her usual unhurried pace.

Once she was safely out of earshot, Trevor turned to me with an expression of profound exasperation. "Mo ghrá, why? Why are you doing this to me?" he asked, bouncing Rachel gently as she began to fuss.

"Doing what?" I replied with exaggerated innocence, taking Rachel from his arms and settling her against my shoulder. "I simply made an observation. Finn does seem nice—intelligent, respectful, clearly devoted to his family. Those are admirable qualities."

"You know exactly what you're doing," Trevor countered, running a hand through his hair in that particular way he did when genuinely agitated. "You're trying to... to set my mother up with RJ's father. At Christmas. When Michelle and Hunter and their entire extended family will be present. Have you considered the complications this might create?"

"Complications like your mother actually enjoying herself? Having someone interesting to talk to? Possibly experiencing a holiday romance that brightens her life?" I challenged, keeping my voice gentle despite the pointed questions. "Trevor, your mother is a grown woman who has devoted her

entire life to taking care of others—first you, now Rachel. Don't you think she deserves some happiness of her own?"

"Of course I do," he said, his resistance softening slightly. "But with RJ's father? Do you have any idea how awkward that could be if Michelle—"

"If Michelle what? Objects to two completely unrelated adults enjoying each other's company?" I raised an eyebrow. "Michelle doesn't get a vote in who your mother spends time with. Neither do you, for that matter."

Trevor sighed, the fight visibly draining from him. "I just don't want her to get hurt. Or caught in the middle of whatever tension might emerge between Michelle and RJ."

His concern was genuine, and despite my determination to proceed with my matchmaking plans, I felt a surge of affection for his protective instincts. I shifted Rachel to my other shoulder, moving closer to place my free hand against his cheek.

"Mi corazón, your mother is one of the strongest women I know. She raised you alone and has navigated far more challenging situations than a holiday gathering with complicated interpersonal dynamics. Give her some credit."

Trevor leaned into my touch, his expression still troubled but softening. "I just... I've never seen her with anyone. Not once in my entire life. What if she's not interested in dating at all? What if we're misreading the situation entirely?"

"Then nothing happens," I said simply. "I'm not going to force them together or lock them in a closet. I'm just... creating opportunities for connection. If there's nothing there, then there's nothing there."

"Promise me you won't interfere too much," Trevor said, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that told me this mattered deeply to him. "No manipulation, no schemes. Just... let things happen naturally. Or not happen. Promise me, Amber."

I considered his request, weighing my natural inclination to orchestrate outcomes against my respect for his feelings. "I promise not to actively interfere," I said carefully. "But I reserve the right to create favorable circumstances for natural interaction."

Trevor's lips quirked in a reluctant smile. "That's as close to restraint as I'm going to get from you, isn't it?"

"Probably," I admitted with a small laugh. "But I do promise to be respectful of your mother's feelings and choices. If she shows any sign of discomfort or disinterest, I'll back off completely."

"Fair enough," he conceded, leaning forward to press a kiss to my forehead. "Now, we should probably get ready for dinner ourselves. I have a feeling tonight is going to be... eventful."

"Eventful is one word for it," I agreed, already anticipating the complex dynamics that would unfold at Michelle's dinner table. "Let's just hope everyone remembers it's the season of peace and goodwill."



Though privately, I had to admit that a little holiday drama might make for a more memorable Christmas than perfect harmony. And if that drama happened to distract everyone from noticing the budding connection between Niamh and Finn? Well, that would just be a fortuitous coincidence.

Sometimes the best strategies were the ones that capitalized on existing chaos rather than creating new complications. And with Michelle, Hunter, RJ, and the entire extended Ranger family gathered under one roof, chaos was practically guaranteed.

## "Dinner Theater"

I looked in the mirror and sighed, studying my reflection with a critical eye. I'd chosen my outfit carefully—a simple purple sweater dress that was elegant without appearing like I was trying too hard. The last thing I needed was for anyone to think I was making a special effort because RJ would be present.

Thara hopped up onto the vanity with feline grace, her tail swishing as she positioned herself between me and the mirror, demanding attention in that particular way that only cats and toddlers truly master.

"Hi, baby girl," I murmured, scratching under her chin. "Mommy is not looking forward to this dinner. What was I thinking, inviting everyone over?" I sighed again as I stroked her silky fur, drawing comfort from her rumbling purr. "This house is big, but not big enough to hold me, RJ, Cam, and Hunter without some kind of diplomatic incident."

Thara blinked at me with those knowing eyes, her expression somehow both sympathetic and judgmental at the same time.

"And if Mia is coming, you know she's bringing Kaya," I continued, addressing the cat as if she understood every word—which, she very well might. "I know you love tormenting her, but please be nice for Mommy. There's going to be enough chaos. Even for me." I pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her head, earning a soft chirp in response.

The bedroom door opened as Hunter walked in, looking unfairly handsome in dark jeans and a crimson button-down that brought out the gold in his hair. Even after all these years, the sight of him still caused a flutter in my chest—a reaction that had nothing to do with the stress of the evening ahead.

"I have everything set up, and dinner is in the oven," he reported, crossing to stand behind me. His hands came to rest on my shoulders, our eyes meeting in the mirror's reflection. "Are you sure you're okay?"

The concern in his voice was evident, and I felt a surge of gratitude for his steady presence. Whatever complications the evening might bring, at least we would face them together.

"I just am not looking forward to seeing RJ and Mia together," I admitted, allowing myself a moment of vulnerability that I rarely showed outside our bedroom. "It's strange enough seeing him after all these years, but seeing him with Mia..."

"I know," Hunter said, his thumbs working small circles against the tension in my shoulders. "I can't believe she is with him either, but it's okay. We'll get through this dinner together."

I leaned back against him, drawing strength from his solid presence. "Promise you won't punch anyone? Even if they deserve it?"

"I make no such promise," Hunter replied, his tone light though I could hear the steel beneath it.

I turned to face him, my expression conveying exactly what I thought of that response. "Babe."

His jaw tightened slightly, that familiar tension appearing whenever RJ's name entered our conversations. "You know he gets under my skin. I hate him for what he put you through," Hunter said, the protective anger that had defined their relationship for years surfacing despite his attempts to contain it.

The last time we'd seen RJ what should have been an awkward encounter had devolved into a heated exchange that ended with Hunter's fist connecting with RJ's jaw.

"I know. Me too..." I admitted, reaching up to cup his face. "But... we have to learn to live with him." I didn't add what we both knew—that RJ was now a permanent fixture in our extended circle through Mia, that these holiday gatherings would likely become a regular occurrence, that our carefully separated lives had become irrevocably entangled once again.

Hunter covered my hand with his, turning to press a kiss to my palm. "For you, I'll try. But if he says one thing—one thing—that upsets you..."

"Then I'll handle it," I said firmly. "I'm not twenty-three anymore, Hunter. I don't need you to fight my battles for me, especially not physical ones."

He had the grace to look slightly abashed at the reminder. "Fair enough. But the offer stands."

I rose on tiptoe to kiss him lightly, a silent thank you for his support, however imperfectly expressed. "Come on. The first guests will be arriving soon, and I need to check on the girls."

As if summoned by our conversation, there was a soft knock at the door before Arissa poked her head in. "Mom? Grandma and Uncle Zack are here. And Arion says the O'Briens just pulled into the driveway."

"We'll be right down," I assured her, giving Hunter's hand a final squeeze before releasing it. "Is Harley ready?"

Arissa's expression shifted to one of mild exasperation. "She's changed outfits four times already. I think she's nervous about everyone meeting Aaron."

"Tell her to pick something and stick with it," I said, recognizing the delaying tactic for what it was.

As Arissa disappeared to deliver the message, I turned back to Hunter, taking a deep breath to center myself. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," he replied, offering his arm with exaggerated formality. "Shall we go face the chaos, Your Majesty?"

The teasing reference to my Saturnian title brought a genuine smile to my face, easing some of the tension that had been building all day. "Lead on, Consort."

Together, we headed downstairs to where our complicated, extended, impossible family awaited—a gathering that would test the limits of holiday goodwill and my own capacity for diplomatic navigation. Just another Christmas in the Bradley household.

When we got downstairs, the house was already filling with the familiar chaos of family arrivals. Jeremy and his family had just come in, Rose immediately making herself the center of attention with her fairy wings and enthusiastic greetings while Killy observed the scene with his characteristic quiet assessment. They were talking with Andros and Ashley, who seemed to be sharing some story that had Jeremy laughing heartily.

Mom was in the kitchen with Kelly, the two of them deep in conversation as they arranged appetizers on serving platters. Zachary was on the floor in the living room with Tomi, my brother displaying the same natural ease with children that had made him such a good father to his own. My youngest was showing him her favorite stuffed unicorn with solemn importance.

The doorbell rang, announcing more arrivals. Hunter moved to answer it, revealing the O'Sullivans on our doorstep. Trevor carried Rachel in a carrier against his chest, the baby bundled against the December chill, while Amber surveyed our home with her usual appraising eye—no doubt mentally redesigning our holiday decorations.

Hunter greeted Trevor with the easy warmth of best friends, the two of them immediately falling into conversation about something that had them both laughing. Niamh slipped past the group with practiced grace, heading directly for the kitchen where she knew she'd find my mother. Those two had formed an unexpected but deep friendship since we'd moved to Ireland, bonding over their love for their granddaughters.

This left me to play nice with Amber—a complex dance we'd perfected over the years, our relationship a mixture of genuine affection and mutual irritation that somehow worked despite (or perhaps because of) our fundamental differences.

"Lovely decorations," Amber commented, her tone suggesting they were adequate rather than impressive. "Very... traditional."

"Thank you," I replied with a smile that matched her own in its polite insincerity. "Not everyone needs their Christmas tree to coordinate with their brand colors."

She laughed, the sound genuine despite our verbal sparring. "Touché. Though I notice there's quite a bit of purple in your color scheme."

"Pure coincidence," I assured her, though we both knew it wasn't. Some habits died hard, and my preference for my signature color extended to most aspects of my life, holiday decorations included.

As we moved further into the house, I couldn't help but ask the question that had been lingering in my mind since learning of the guest list. "Where's your bestie?" I inquired, unable to keep the slight eye roll from accompanying the words.

Amber's smile took on a distinctly mischievous edge. "Don't worry, she's on her way. With her boyfriend." The emphasis she placed on the last word was deliberate, designed to provoke a reaction.

"I thought she didn't like that term," I replied, keeping my tone carefully neutral despite the twist of discomfort in my stomach at the thought of RJ in that role.

"Companion, boyfriend, whatever," Amber pressed, clearly enjoying my discomfort. "She's screwing your ex." The bluntness was pure Amber—no filters, no gentle euphemisms, just direct hits designed to cut through social niceties.

"Thanks for that reminder, Amber," I said dryly, fighting the urge to respond with something equally cutting about her own relationship history.

"Anytime," she replied with saccharine sweetness, her expression making it clear she was just getting started.

Before our exchange could escalate further, the doorbell rang again, saving me from having to formulate a response that wouldn't violate the spirit of holiday goodwill I was trying (somewhat unsuccessfully) to maintain.

"I should get that," I said, moving toward the door with perhaps more eagerness than the situation warranted.

"Of course," Amber agreed with that same knowing smile. "Hostess duties. So important."

I took a deep breath as I reached for the doorknob, mentally preparing myself for whoever might be on the other side. With my luck, it would be RJ himself, arriving just in time to witness my composure already beginning to fray at the edges.

But as luck would have it, it wasn't RJ. Instead, I opened the door to find Blake and his family, accompanied by the Ominos—including Cam. Blake stood at the front of the group, his easy smile so reminiscent of Hunter's despite their lack of biological connection, Tori beside him with Lindsey half-hidden behind them. Behind them stood LeAnn, Cam, and Sensei Omino, the latter looking remarkably spry despite his advanced years and the long journey.

"Merry Christmas!" Blake greeted me with characteristic warmth, pulling me into a quick hug before stepping aside to let the others enter. "Sorry we're a bit late. Someone—" he shot a meaningful look at his daughter, "—couldn't decide which shoes to wear."

"Dad," Lindsey protested with teenage mortification, though her embarrassment quickly transformed to excitement as she spotted Harley and Arissa across the room. Without waiting for formal greetings, she darted past me to join her cousins, leaving the adults to handle the social niceties.

I ushered everyone inside, closing the door against the December chill. The new arrivals quickly dispersed into the gathering—Blake gravitating toward Hunter and Trevor, who were deep in

conversation near the fireplace; Tori making her way to Ashley, the two of them having formed a friendship years ago through their shared Ranger experiences.

Mom, ever the gracious matriarch, immediately noticed Sensei Omino's arrival. Though they had met only once before at Hunter's and my wedding, she remembered him as Hunter's adoptive father and welcomed him warmly into her conversation with Niamh. The three of them quickly fell into what appeared to be a discussion of traditional holiday customs, Sensei nodding with interest as Mom gesticulated in that animated way she had when sharing family stories.

This left LeAnn and Cam standing somewhat awkwardly near the entrance, both of them observing the gathering with the slightly detached air of people who weren't entirely comfortable in the setting. LeAnn's eyes kept drifting to where Cam stood, her expression suggesting she was monitoring his reactions to the various dynamics playing out around them.

I steeled myself and approached them, determined to be the perfect hostess despite the complicated history. "Can I get you anything?" I offered, directing the question primarily to Cam in an effort to bridge the chasm of mutual dislike that had existed between us for decades.

Cam adjusted his glasses, a gesture I remembered from our Ninja Storm days as his way of buying time when uncomfortable. "Water would be fine, thank you," he replied with formal politeness that did little to mask the underlying tension.

Our relationship had always been strained, from the moment Cam reluctantly called me to train the Ninja Storm team, our professional interaction had been fraught with unspoken competition and barely concealed disdain on both sides.

"Of course," I nodded, turning to LeAnn. "And for you?"

"The same, thank you," she replied, her smile slightly warmer than Cam's though still reserved. LeAnn and I had a less antagonistic history, though we'd never been close. Her primary loyalty had always been to her brother and to the Thunder Academy, which had sometimes put her at odds with my relationship with Hunter.

As I moved toward the kitchen to fetch their drinks, I caught Hunter's eye across the room. He raised an eyebrow in silent question, having noticed my interaction with Cam. I gave a small nod to indicate everything was fine—or at least, as fine as it could be given the circumstances.

The doorbell rang again just as I reached the kitchen, and I heard Hunter moving to answer it. I paused, water glasses in hand, straining to hear who had arrived. The moment of truth had likely come—RJ and Mia would be the only remaining guests on our list.

I took another deep breath, centering myself as I had before countless performances and diplomatic missions. I could handle this. I was a professional entertainer, a veteran Ranger, and literal royalty on another planet. One dinner with my ex-husband shouldn't phase me.

And yet, as I heard the murmur of new voices in the entryway, I felt that familiar twist of anxiety in my stomach—the same feeling I'd had before every encounter with RJ since our divorce, a mixture of old hurt, lingering anger, and the determination not to let him see either.

Time to put on the performance of a lifetime.

I delivered the water to Cam and LeAnn with a polite smile that didn't quite reach my eyes, then turned my attention to the new arrivals. Hunter had ushered them into the living room, where Mia stood slightly apart from RJ, almost as if she were trying to create physical distance between him and me. The twins, Summer and Autumn, had already gravitated toward the other children, leaving the adults to navigate the complicated social dynamics.

I approached Mia first, choosing the path of least resistance. "Hey," I greeted her, keeping my tone neutral.

She met my gaze directly, her expression equally guarded. "Hey."

The simple exchange carried the weight of our complex history. We had never been best friends—not in this lifetime, anyway—but our relationship had evolved over the years from outright enemies to frenemies and then to something resembling an actual friendship before she started dating RJ. After that development, we found ourselves firmly back in frenemy territory, with a heavy emphasis on the enemy part.

I felt deeply betrayed that she could be involved with RJ after what he had done to me. From her perspective, as she'd made clear in several tense phone calls, it had happened seventeen years ago and he wasn't the same person anymore. Maybe that was true. People could change; I certainly had. But some things were unforgivable in my book, and leaving me alone in the hospital when I miscarried his child was at the top of that list. I could never forgive that, no matter how much time passed.

"Michelle, nice to see you," a familiar voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned to find Master Finn James regarding me with that particular expression of calm assessment that had always made me feel like I was being measured against some invisible standard.

I took a steadying breath. I hadn't seen him since before the annulment, and I knew he had been key in convincing RJ to go through with it—a fact that should have earned my gratitude but somehow had always felt like a rejection, as if he'd determined I wasn't good enough for his son and his legacy.

"Hello, Mr. James," I replied, my voice carrying the careful formality I reserved for diplomatic situations. "It has been a while."

"Indeed," he said, his expression unreadable. There was a moment of weighted silence between us, years of unspoken history hanging in the air.

Before either of us could continue, Niamh's voice cut through the tension. "Oh, Finn, come here," she called from across the room, where she stood with my mother and Sensei Omino. "I have some people I'd like to introduce you to."

Finn nodded politely to me before moving toward Niamh, seemingly relieved for the excuse to end our awkward exchange. I watched as he joined the group of older adults, noting with some surprise how Niamh's expression brightened at his approach. That was... interesting. I filed the observation away for later consideration.

This left me facing the moment I'd been dreading since learning of the guest list. RJ stood a few feet away, his expression carefully neutral as he watched our exchange with Finn. He looked older than when I'd been with him—silver threading through his shorter dark hair at the temples, new lines around his eyes—but still unmistakably the man I'd once believed was my soulmate. The man who had broken my heart in ways I hadn't thought possible.

Hunter appeared at my side as if sensing my need for support, his hand coming to rest at the small of my back—a gesture that was both possessive and reassuring. "RJ," he acknowledged with a curt nod that somehow managed to be just civil enough to avoid outright rudeness.

"Hunter," RJ returned the greeting with equal brevity. His eyes shifted to me, something unreadable flickering across his face. "Michelle."

"RJ," I replied, my professional smile firmly in place. "Welcome to our home."

The words felt strange on my tongue—welcoming my ex-husband into the home I shared with Hunter, with our daughters, with the life I'd built after the devastation he'd left behind. But I said them anyway, because that's what hostesses did, what diplomats did, what adults trying to navigate complicated family dynamics during the holidays did.

"Thank you for having us," he said, his tone matching mine in its careful neutrality. "Your place is... impressive."

"Thank you," I replied, desperately searching for something else to say that wouldn't sound either hostile or falsely enthusiastic. Small talk had never been my strong suit, especially when charged with emotional undercurrents.

I was saved from having to continue the conversation by Tomi, who came toddling over with perfect timing. "Mama!" she called, arms raised in the universal signal to be picked up.

I scooped her up gratefully, settling her on my hip where she immediately began playing with my necklace. "Sorry, duty calls," I said with a smile that felt more genuine now that I had my youngest daughter as both shield and comfort. "Please, make yourselves comfortable. Dinner will be ready soon."

As I moved away with Tomi, I caught Hunter's eye, silently communicating my gratitude for his presence. He gave a small nod of understanding before turning back to RJ with what I recognized as



his diplomatic expression—the one that said "I'm being polite for my wife's sake but don't push your luck."

The first hurdle had been cleared. Now there was just a multi-course dinner with twenty-six people, including my ex-husband, my husband's ex-boyfriend, and enough Ranger power in the room to level a small city if tensions escalated.

Amber

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I had to admit I couldn't help but enjoy watching Michelle squirm. For someone who maintained such perfect poise on stage before thousands, she was remarkably transparent in her discomfort around RJ. The careful distance she maintained, the slightly too-bright smile, the way she kept glancing at Hunter as if to reassure herself of his presence—all delicious tells that I filed away with perhaps more satisfaction than was strictly charitable.

My attention was diverted by Arissa approaching, accompanied by a boy around her age whose posture was almost unnaturally perfect. He carried himself with a formality that seemed at odds with typical teenage behavior, his blue eyes constantly scanning the room in what appeared to be a security assessment rather than social anxiety.

"Aunt Amber, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Arion Alexi," Arissa said, her usual composure briefly giving way to the excitement of introducing someone important to her. "Arion, this is my Aunt Amber. She is the one I told you about that makes cosmetics."

I extended my hand, taking the opportunity to study him more closely. He was handsome in a serious way, with features that suggested he'd grow into them more fully with age. "Arion, it's so nice to finally meet you. Arissa has told me a lot about you."

"It's nice to meet you as well. Arissa thinks very highly of you," he replied, his handshake firm but carefully measured, as if he was conscious of his own strength. His accent was subtle but distinctive—Eastern European with precise diction that suggested someone who had learned English formally rather than through immersion. Michelle had mentioned his family had relocated from Ukraine to Thousand Oaks, California, which aligned with the accent.

"Mom said she has a meeting with you the Monday after Christmas to discuss me and Kira promoting the spring line?" Arissa asked, her tone suggesting she was far more interested in this prospect than she was trying to appear.

"Yeah," I confirmed, already mentally drafting the contract terms. "I'm sure I can work out a deal with your parents. Kira's, on the other hand? That may be trickier." Hal had been particularly resistant to the idea of his daughter entering the modeling world, even for a limited campaign with a trusted family friend.

Arissa nodded, clearly having anticipated this obstacle. "Mom said she would talk to Aunt Kara and Uncle Hal."

"That might help," I acknowledged, though I had my doubts about Michelle's persuasive powers in this particular arena. Kara might be swayed, but Hal was remarkably stubborn when it came to protecting his children from what he perceived as the potential pitfalls of public exposure.

I glanced across the room to where Niamh was now deep in conversation with Finn James, both of them seemingly oblivious to the various social currents swirling around them. The connection I'd observed earlier appeared to be deepening, their body language suggesting mutual interest despite their attempts at casual conversation. Trevor was watching them from across the room, his expression a mixture of concern and resignation that told me he'd noticed the dynamic as well.

"Your boyfriend seems very... attentive," I observed to Arissa, returning my focus to the teenagers before me. Arion hadn't relaxed his vigilant posture, his eyes continuing to track movement throughout the room with particular focus on the entrances and exits.

"He's protective," Arissa replied with a small smile that suggested this was an understatement. "It's how he was raised."

"Military family?" I guessed, though something about his demeanor suggested more specialized training than standard military discipline.

"Something like that," Arissa hedged, exchanging a look with Arion that contained an entire conversation I wasn't privy to. "His family has a long tradition of security work."

Before I could probe further, Trevor appeared at my side, sliding an arm around my waist in a gesture that was both affectionate and slightly possessive. "Amber, love, I think your matchmaking is working a little too well," he murmured, nodding subtly toward where his mother and Finn were now laughing together over something.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied with practiced innocence, though I couldn't suppress a small smile of satisfaction. "They're just being social. It's Christmas, after all."

"Right," Trevor said skeptically. "And the fact that she's touched his arm three times in the last five minutes is just friendly holiday spirit?"

"Absolutely," I agreed, patting his chest consolingly. "Pure Christmas goodwill."

Trevor rolled his eyes but seemed to have accepted the inevitable, his initial resistance giving way to reluctant acceptance. "Just... don't encourage them too much, okay? My mother deserves to make her own choices without interference."

"Of course," I assured him, though we both knew I had every intention of creating as many "accidental" opportunities for Niamh and Finn to connect as possible. It wasn't interference if I was simply removing obstacles to a natural attraction, after all.

Arissa and Arion excused themselves to rejoin the other teenagers, leaving Trevor and me to observe the increasingly complex social dynamics unfolding throughout the room. Michelle was now engaged in what appeared to be a carefully civil conversation with Mia, both women maintaining pleasant expressions that didn't quite reach their eyes. Hunter and RJ had gravitated to opposite sides of the room, each surrounded by their respective allies in an unconscious recreation of battle lines.

"Ten euros says someone makes a scene before dessert," I murmured to Trevor, unable to resist the temptation to handicap the evening's potential for drama.

"I'm not taking that bet," Trevor replied with a small laugh. "Though I am curious about who you think the most likely culprit is."

I considered the question, assessing the various tension points around the room. "Hunter's the obvious choice—he's been looking for an excuse to punch RJ again. But my money's actually on Cam. He's been watching Hunter like a hawk all evening, and there's definitely unresolved history there."

"You think?" Trevor looked surprised. "I would have said LeAnn, actually. She's too quiet"

"Interesting dark horse candidate," I acknowledged, impressed by his observation. Trevor was remarkably perceptive. "Care to make it twenty euros?"

Before he could respond, Michelle announced that dinner was ready, her voice carrying that particular note of forced cheerfulness that suggested she was reaching the limits of her social endurance. As the group began to move toward the dining room, I caught sight of Niamh and Finn walking together, their conversation continuing uninterrupted by the shift in location.

Phase one of Operation Holiday Romance was proceeding beautifully.

We made our way to the dining room, where Michelle had arranged an impressive tableau—the long table elegantly set with what appeared to be her best china and crystal, festive centerpieces running down the middle, and enough place settings to accommodate the small army of guests she'd invited.

As everyone began finding their seats, the natural social groupings emerged with predictable clarity. The teenagers—Harley, Arissa, their 3 cousins, Arion, and a couple of others I hadn't met yet—were directed to a separate table in the adjacent sunroom, a strategic decision that would spare them the tension of the adult table while allowing them the independence they clearly craved.

The older generation gravitated to one end of the main table, with Niamh, Finn, Hunter's adoptive father, and Lea forming a quartet of elder dignity. They settled together, already deep in conversation about something that had Niamh gesturing animatedly while Finn watched her with undisguised interest.

Blake, Tori, Cam, LeAnn, and another couple I hadn't yet been introduced to claimed a section midway down the table. Blake was regaling them with some story that had Tori rolling her eyes in

that affectionate way long-married couples perfect, while Cam maintained his perpetual expression of mild disapproval at everything around him.

Jeremy positioned himself strategically between Livvie and Michelle—a buffer zone of sorts that spoke volumes about his understanding of the evening's complex dynamics. Hunter took the seat on the other side of Michelle with Tomi, creating a protective formation around Michelle that wasn't subtle in the least. Rose and Killy were settled in booster seats beside their parents, Rose already reaching for a dinner roll before Livvie gently redirected her hand. Zack and Kelly sat toward the center of the table on the other side, easily able to talk to anyone.

That left me, Trevor, Mia, RJ, and his twin daughters to complete the seating arrangement. I assessed the remaining spots with the strategic eye of a chess player evaluating potential moves. With a subtle gesture, I directed Trevor to take the seat on the other side of Hunter—they were best friends, after all, and would provide each other with comfortable conversation throughout the meal.

I settled next to Trevor with Rachel securely in her portable seat beside me, positioning Mia on my other side. This arrangement naturally left RJ and his daughters to take the remaining seats—placing him across from Michelle with only the width of the table between them. Perfect. Close enough to create the exact level of discomfort I'd been hoping for, but with sufficient distance to prevent any actual physical confrontation.

The twins, Summer and Autumn, seemed blissfully oblivious to the undercurrents of tension, already chattering to each other in that private language that twins often develop. RJ, however, was acutely aware of his position, his posture slightly too rigid as he carefully avoided direct eye contact with Michelle.

Michelle, for her part, was doing an admirable job of maintaining her hostess composure, though I caught the slight tightening of her smile as she realized the seating arrangement. Her eyes met mine briefly across the table, a flash of recognition in them that told me she knew exactly what I'd done and wasn't particularly appreciative.

I offered her my most innocent smile in return. After all, I'd simply helped people find seats at an overcrowded table—hardly my fault if the resulting arrangement happened to create interesting social dynamics.

"This looks lovely, Michelle," I commented as I looked at the first course—a winter salad with pomegranate seeds that added festive red accents to the greens. "You've outdone yourself."

"Thank you, Amber," she replied with that perfect public smile that never quite reached her eyes when directed at me. "I'm so glad you could all join us."

The subtle emphasis on "all" wasn't lost on me. Michelle was too professional to create a scene, especially at her own dinner party, but she was making it clear that she recognized my role in the current seating arrangement.

Trevor leaned closer to me, his voice pitched low enough that only I could hear. "Subtle, mo gra. Very subtle."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I murmured back, adjusting Rachel's blanket with deliberate focus. "I was simply helping everyone find seats."

"Right," he replied with fond exasperation. "And the fact that you've placed RJ directly in Michelle's line of sight is pure coincidence."

"Complete coincidence," I agreed solemnly. "Just like the fact that your mother is sitting next to Finn is pure happenstance."

Trevor sighed, though I caught the slight quirk of his lips that suggested reluctant amusement rather than genuine annoyance. "You're incorrigible."

"It's part of my charm," I replied, patting his hand consolingly.

As the first course was served and conversation began to flow around the table, I observed the various interactions with the satisfaction of a social scientist watching a particularly fascinating experiment unfold. Niamh and Finn were deep in conversation, their heads inclined toward each other in a way that suggested genuine connection rather than mere politeness. Michelle was focusing her attention almost exclusively on Jeremy and Livvie, studiously avoiding looking at RJ, who seemed equally determined to engage only with Mia and his daughters.

The careful dance of avoidance was almost comical in its intensity—a choreographed performance of "I'm not acknowledging your existence" that required more effort than simply interacting would have done.

Perfect. Nothing made for more interesting holiday gatherings than carefully managed tension. And if that tension happened to distract everyone from noticing the budding romance between Niamh and Finn? Well, that was just an added bonus to an already entertaining evening.

The first course was just the beginning. We still had the entire meal ahead—multiple opportunities for awkward conversations, loaded silences, and perhaps even the scene I'd half-jokingly predicted to Trevor earlier.

Christmas with the extended Bradley-Morris-O'Brien-O'Sullivan clan was proving to be everything I'd hoped for and more.

"So, RJ, how are you liking Ireland?" I asked, deliberately introducing a topic that would force Michelle to either acknowledge his presence or appear obviously rude by continuing to ignore him.

"It's nice. Very beautiful," he replied with careful neutrality, though I detected a genuine appreciation in his tone. "Different from Ocean Bluff, but the landscape has its own charm."

"Ever think of opening a location of JKP in Cork?" I continued, warming to my role as conversation facilitator. "As Trev will tell you, it's a great city for chefs." I smiled innocently, knowing full well I was poking at one of Trevor's particular points of professional pride.

Trevor shot me a look that clearly communicated "I know exactly what you're doing," before turning to address RJ directly. "Pizza chefs are not chefs," he stated with the particular disdain that only a Michelin-starred culinary artist could muster for what he considered a lesser form of food preparation.

"Maybe not Michelin star like you, mi corazón," I interjected smoothly, patting Trevor's hand in mock consolation, "but he makes food. And he even creates fusions like you. I've heard he'll try anything on a pizza." I was deliberately drawing parallels between them, knowing it would irritate Trevor while simultaneously elevating RJ's culinary status in the conversation.

Trevor pursed his lips, his expression suggesting he was physically restraining himself from launching into a full dissertation on the differences between actual cuisine and pizza assembly. "That is different," he insisted, his accent becoming more pronounced as it always did when he was agitated. "He didn't go to culinary school. He opened a pizza parlour. He puts pineapple on pizza." This last accusation was delivered with the gravity of someone citing a war crime.

"Hey now," Hunter unexpectedly joined the conversation, leaning forward slightly to make eye contact with Trevor past Livvie. "That may be the only thing RJ and I agree on. Pineapple pizza is great."

The table went momentarily quiet at this unexpected alliance between Hunter and RJ, however trivial the subject matter. Michelle's eyes widened slightly in surprise before she quickly masked her reaction by taking a sip of wine.

RJ, seizing the opening with evident relief at having found a safe topic, nodded enthusiastically. "Have you tried it with bacon and grilled onions? It's so much better," he said, his passion for pizza innovation temporarily overriding the social awkwardness. "The sweetness of the pineapple with the smokiness of the bacon creates this perfect contrast."

"Bacon makes everything better," Hunter agreed, though his tone remained carefully neutral despite the shared culinary preference.

Trevor looked genuinely pained by this exchange, as if hearing treasured culinary principles being violated in real time. "This is why Americans shouldn't be allowed to cook Italian food," he muttered, just loud enough to be heard.

"Oh, it gets worse," RJ continued, warming to his subject with the enthusiasm of a true pizza experimentalist. "At JKP, we have a dessert pizza with Nutella, bananas, and marshmallows."

Trevor made a sound that could only be described as a culinary professional's soul leaving his body. "That's not pizza," he protested. "That's... that's a crime against flour."

"It's our most popular dessert item," RJ countered with a small smile that suggested he was enjoying Trevor's horror almost as much as I was. "Kids love it."

"Children eat dirt if you let them," Trevor replied darkly. "Their palates are not developed."

I caught Mia's eye across the table, both of us suppressing smiles at the unexpected direction the conversation had taken. What had begun as my attempt to create tension between Michelle and RJ had somehow transformed into a passionate debate about pizza toppings that had successfully engaged Hunter and Trevor instead.

Michelle, I noticed, was watching the exchange with an expression I couldn't quite decipher—something between relief that the conversation had found safe territory and lingering wariness, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. Jeremy, ever the peacekeeper, was nodding along to both sides of the argument with diplomatic neutrality.

"I've always thought food should be fun," Mia contributed, her first substantive addition to the dinner conversation. "That's what I love about JKP—it doesn't take itself too seriously."

"Exactly," RJ agreed, his expression softening as he looked at her. "Food is about bringing people together, creating experiences. It doesn't always have to be haute cuisine to be meaningful."

Trevor opened his mouth, likely to defend the honor of fine dining, but I placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Different approaches for different contexts, mi corazón," I reminded him quietly. "Your restaurants and RJ's serve different purposes."

He subsided, though the slight furrow between his brows suggested he was mentally composing a detailed rebuttal for later.

"Well, I think both styles have their place," Michelle said unexpectedly, her diplomatic skills apparently overriding her personal feelings. "Not every meal needs to be a culinary masterpiece, but there's also value in the artistry Trevor brings to his cooking."

It was the first time she'd directly acknowledged RJ's presence at the table, however obliquely. A small but significant shift in the evening's dynamics.

RJ nodded, accepting the olive branch for what it was. "Absolutely. I've had the privilege of dining at Shamrock in Austin, and it was an exceptional experience." He turned to Trevor with what appeared to be genuine appreciation. "Your use of local ingredients while maintaining classical techniques is impressive."

Trevor, never immune to sincere culinary praise, inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Thank you. Perhaps I'll have to visit JKP next time we're in California to see these... innovations... for myself."

"You'd be welcome anytime," RJ replied, and for a moment, the tension that had permeated the table seemed to ease slightly.

I caught Mia's eye again, and she gave me the smallest of nods—an acknowledgment that perhaps this dinner wasn't going to be the disaster we'd both anticipated. The conversation had found neutral territory in food, allowing for civil interaction without venturing into the emotional minefields of shared history.

Of course, we were only on the first course. There was still plenty of time for things to get interesting.

By the time we moved on to the main course—a beautifully presented roast that showcased Michelle's commitment to holiday tradition—the conversation had settled into a deceptively comfortable rhythm. The initial pizza debate had given way to more general discussion about Irish cuisine and local restaurants, providing a safe topic that allowed everyone to participate without venturing into personal territory.

But safe topics were so boring. And I hadn't orchestrated this seating arrangement just to discuss the merits of colcannon versus boxty.

I waited until we were well into the main course and everyone was occupied with their food before casually dropping my next conversation bomb.

"Gotta tell ya, Mich," I said, "I cannot imagine you being the wife of a pizza chef, working in the kitchen of a local pizzeria." I delivered the comment with a light tone that belied its deliberately provocative nature.

Michelle's reaction was subtle but unmistakable—a slight tightening around her eyes, the briefest pause in her cutting of the roast, a controlled breath that only someone watching for it would notice. The cringe was internal, but I caught it nonetheless.

"Oh, she was great at it and came up with some great menu items," RJ responded before Michelle could, his enthusiasm for his restaurant temporarily overriding his awareness of the social minefield. "She created the MJ Speci—" He stopped abruptly, the realization of what he was saying visibly dawning on him mid-sentence.

I couldn't have scripted it better if I'd tried. The perfect opening had been handed to me on a silver platter, and I wasn't about to waste it.

"Right, MJ," I said with exaggerated thoughtfulness, "your nickname when you were Michelle James. Cute." I took a deliberate sip of wine, watching the ripple effect of discomfort spread around the table.

Hunter's glare could have melted steel, the warning in his eyes unmistakable. Trevor shot me a look that clearly communicated "behave yourself" with the particular exasperation of a man who knew his admonishment would go unheeded. Jeremy and Livvie suddenly became intensely interested in their plates, while Michelle maintained her composure through what appeared to be sheer force of will.

But I wasn't quite finished. The setup had been too perfect to stop at just one jab.

"I guess if Mia ever marries RJ, she'll be his new MJ," I observed with a calculated smirk, watching for reactions around the table.

Mia's eyes widened in genuine alarm, her fork freezing halfway to her mouth. The comment had caught her off guard—perhaps because it touched on a topic that was sensitive between her and RJ, or perhaps because she recognized the deliberate provocation for what it was. Either way, her discomfort was palpable.

RJ, to his credit, maintained his composure, though the slight flush creeping up his neck suggested he was not as unaffected as he wanted to appear. "I think we've moved beyond nicknames at our age," he said with forced lightness, clearly attempting to defuse the situation.

Michelle's expression had settled into that particular mask of pleasantness I recognized from her press conferences and red carpet interviews—the one that revealed absolutely nothing while appearing completely natural. It was her professional face, the one she deployed when emotions needed to be concealed at all costs.

"Amber," Trevor murmured beside me, his tone carrying a warning I chose to ignore.

"What?" I replied with exaggerated innocence. "I'm just making conversation. After all, we're practically family here." I gestured around the table with my wine glass. "No need for secrets or awkwardness."

"Speaking of family," Hunter interjected with deliberate emphasis, his voice carrying that dangerous edge that suggested he was reaching the limits of his patience, "did you get a chance to meet my foster father, Albert Omino?"

It was a transparent attempt to change the subject, but I decided to allow it—for now. I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do, creating just enough tension to keep things interesting without pushing so far that I'd be asked to leave. The art of social manipulation was knowing exactly how far to go before retreating to safer ground.

"Not formally," I replied, smoothly transitioning to the new topic.

As the conversation shifted to more neutral territory, I caught Michelle's eye across the table. The look she gave me was one of perfect understanding—she knew exactly what I'd been doing and was neither surprised nor particularly impressed. It was the look of someone who had dealt with far more challenging opponents than me over the years.

I raised my glass in a small salute, acknowledging the momentary standoff. Michelle might have won this round by refusing to rise to my bait, but the evening was still young. There would be other opportunities to stir the pot, especially once dessert was served and the wine had further loosened inhibitions.

And I hadn't even started on Cam and Hunter yet. Their complicated history remained unexplored territory, ripe with potential for interesting social dynamics.

All in good time. The best provocations, like the best desserts, were best saved for last.

Michelle

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To say I was furious would be an understatement. Amber knew good and well that the last time RJ was here, he had slipped up and called me MJ, which is what had led to Hunter punching him. She was deliberately poking at a wound that had barely healed, trying to provoke another scene for her own entertainment.

By the time dessert was served—a traditional Christmas pudding—my nerves were frayed to breaking point. But I maintained my composure with the practiced ease of someone who'd spent decades in the public eye. Amber thought she was good at this game, but I was the master. She may have been raised as a con artist, but I had been a professional actress since I was eight years old. She could try to get me to break, but I wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

I noticed Amber's attention shift as the dessert plates were being distributed, her gaze settling on Cam with the predatory focus of someone who'd identified her next target.

"You're awfully quiet, Cam," she observed, her tone deceptively casual. "Not enjoying the festivities?"

Cam looked up from his dessert, his expression carefully neutral behind his glasses. "Never been really good at small talk," he replied with characteristic brevity.

Amber laughed, the sound deliberately light. "Had to be hard dating a famous motocross racer then. I imagine those events were full of socializing."

I felt Hunter tense beside me, though his expression remained carefully controlled. Cam's face darkened slightly, the only visible sign that the comment had hit its mark.

"We kept our relationship private," Cam stated flatly. "I didn't go to many events."

"And that is in the past now," Hunter added with a finality that should have closed the subject. His tone carried that particular edge that most people recognized as a warning to back off.

Amber, of course, was not most people.

"Right, 'cause you guys are going to be brothers," she continued blithely, as if Hunter hadn't spoken. "I mean, it can totally happen. Look at Trev and Jeremy. They dated years ago and now they're brothers."

I fought the urge to kick her under the table, knowing it would only encourage her. The comparison was both inappropriate and deliberately provocative—Hunter and Cam's relationship had been far different than the relationship Jeremy and Trevor had shared before either of them met their spouses.

"Closer than," Jeremy interjected smoothly, clearly trying to defuse the tension. "I love Trev way more than I do Alan." He referenced his brother with a deliberate lightness that suggested he was trying to steer the conversation into safer waters.

"Well, Alan is a wanker," Trevor agreed with a small smile, playing along with Jeremy's attempt to shift the focus.

"Exactly," Jeremy nodded emphatically.

"I'm just saying, the boyfriends-to-brothers pipeline has been traveled before," Amber persisted, unwilling to let her provocation die a natural death. "Although, if Trev would have married Sosaidh..." She trailed off suggestively, referencing Jeremy's younger sister.

I glared at her across the table, no longer bothering to mask my irritation. I knew exactly what she was doing—trying to create as many points of tension as possible, stirring up old relationships and complicated histories for her own amusement. It was a game to her, watching people squirm under the pressure of social discomfort while she sat back and enjoyed the show.

"Amber," I said, my voice carrying that particular tone that had made even the most recalcitrant backup dancers fall immediately into line, "perhaps we could focus on the present rather than excavating everyone's dating history? I'm sure our guests would prefer to enjoy their dessert without a detailed relationship timeline."

Hunter's hand found mine beneath the table, a silent gesture of support and perhaps gratitude for the intervention. Cam looked visibly relieved at the prospect of being released from Amber's spotlight, while LeAnn—who had been watching the exchange with increasing tension—relaxed slightly in her seat.

"Of course," Amber replied with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I'm just fascinated by how interconnected everyone is. It's like a small-town soap opera."

"Speaking of interconnections," I pivoted smoothly, "I understand Niamh has been helping with the Christmas charity drive at the hospital. Finn, didn't you mention your foundation does similar work in California?"

The diversion worked as intended, drawing attention away from the potential minefield of past relationships and toward the safer territory of charitable endeavors. Niamh began describing her volunteer work with evident passion, while Finn listened with that particular attentiveness that suggested genuine interest rather than polite obligation.

As the conversation flowed into this new, less volatile channel, I caught Hunter's eye. The slight quirk of his eyebrow conveyed his recognition of my tactical maneuver, along with a hint of admiration for its execution. I gave him a small smile in return, a private moment of connection amid the social chaos.

Amber might be enjoying herself, playing puppet master with our complicated histories, but she had underestimated one crucial fact: this was my house, my dinner party, and ultimately my stage. I hadn't spent decades in entertainment without learning how to control a narrative, even one as potentially explosive as this holiday gathering.

The dessert plates were gradually emptied, the conversation settling into a more comfortable rhythm now that I'd redirected it away from Amber's provocations. But I remained vigilant, knowing that the evening was far from over. With coffee and after-dinner drinks still to come, there would be plenty more opportunities for tension to resurface.

And Amber wasn't the only potential source of conflict at the table. RJ had been uncharacteristically quiet since the "MJ" exchange, his attention focused primarily on his daughters and Mia. But I'd caught him watching me when he thought I wasn't looking, his expression carrying something I couldn't quite decipher—not quite regret, not quite nostalgia, but something in that unsettling space between.

Whatever it was, I had no intention of exploring it further. Some doors were better left firmly closed, especially during Christmas dinner with twenty-six people watching.

As we settled into coffee and after-dinner drinks, I decided two could play at this game. Amber had spent the evening stirring pots and provoking reactions, apparently forgetting that I was the original chaos machine long before she'd perfected her particular brand of social manipulation. She'd stirred a pot she had no idea how to control, and it was time to remind her of that fact.

I waited until everyone had settled into that particular post-meal lull when defenses naturally lowered. Then I struck with the precision of someone who knew exactly where to aim.

"So, Amber," I began, my tone deceptively casual as I stirred a touch of cream into my coffee, "are you going to miss working with Thara? She is responsible for the success of your launch, after all." I allowed a small, knowing smirk to play at the corner of my mouth, fully aware of how much this particular topic irritated her.

Amber's head snapped up, her eyes narrowing slightly at the deliberate provocation. "She most certainly is not," she shot back with immediate defensiveness. "My formulas speak for themselves."

"I'm not saying the products aren't good," I clarified with magnanimous generosity, "they are. But the Thara palette was a best seller, and she was a beautiful addition to your London launch." I took a delicate sip of my coffee before adding, "The red carpet suits her."

"She's a cat," Amber said sourly, her usual composure slipping just enough to reveal her genuine annoyance.

"A beautiful cat that people love," I countered smoothly. "Having her as the face of your launch and autumn campaign was a stroke of genius on my part. I'm so glad Lydia convinced you to get on board." The smirk widened slightly, knowing that the mention of Lydia would add salt to the wound.

"Strong-armed me into submission," Amber mumbled, her fingers tightening around her coffee cup. I caught Hunter's eye across the table, the slight quirk of his eyebrow conveying both amusement and a silent warning not to push too far. But I was enjoying the moment too much to heed the caution—after enduring Amber's provocations all evening, landing a direct hit felt satisfyingly like justice.

"The photos were spectacular," I continued, pressing my advantage. "Thara posing with the eyeshadow palette named after her, looking regal on that velvet cushion. The sales figures speak for themselves, don't they?" I glanced around the table, drawing others into the conversation. "Trevor, didn't Amber mention that the Thara collection outsold her other palettes by something like forty percent?"

Trevor, caught between loyalty to his wife and his natural honesty, cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Something like that," he conceded, earning a betrayed look from Amber.

"It was limited edition," Amber countered, her professional pride clearly wounded. "The scarcity was advantageous regardless of the... spokesmodel."

"Of course," I agreed with exaggerated understanding. "Though I can't help but notice you've approached me about using her again for the next autumn campaign. Something about 'maintaining brand continuity' and 'capitalizing on her established audience'?" I quoted her own marketing proposal back to her with deliberate precision.

Amber's eyes narrowed further, recognizing that I'd successfully turned her own social manipulation tactics against her. "The campaign concept is still in development," she said with forced neutrality. "Nothing has been finalized."

"Well, Thara's schedule is quite busy," I replied with the casual air of someone discussing a high-demand celebrity rather than a house cat. "Between her duties as my companion and her growing fan base, she's becoming quite selective about her endorsements. But I'm sure we can work something out... for the right terms."

The implication that I would leverage Thara's participation for better contract conditions hung in the air between us.

"I'm sure we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement," Amber replied, her business instincts overriding her personal irritation. "Perhaps we can discuss it after the holidays."

"Perhaps," I agreed, savoring the small victory. Amber might excel at creating social discomfort, but I had decades of experience negotiating from positions of strength in the entertainment industry. This was my territory, and she'd do well to remember that.

The conversation around us had continued throughout our exchange, most of the guests either oblivious to or deliberately ignoring the subtle power play unfolding at our end of the table. But I caught Mia watching us with knowing amusement, clearly recognizing the dynamic for what it was.

I raised my coffee cup slightly in her direction—a small acknowledgment of our shared understanding. Whatever complicated history existed between us, we both recognized Amber's particular brand of mischief-making for what it was. In that moment, a flicker of our old connection resurfaced, a reminder of the friendship that had once existed before RJ had complicated everything.

Mia returned the gesture with a slight incline of her head, her lips curving in the barest suggestion of a smile. It wasn't forgiveness or reconciliation, but it was something—a momentary truce in the ongoing tension between us.

As the dessert plates were cleared and guests began to shift in their seats, signaling the natural conclusion of the formal dinner portion of the evening, I felt some of the tension that had been building throughout the meal finally begin to dissipate. We had survived the gauntlet of potentially explosive topics—exes, past relationships, professional rivalries—with our holiday gathering intact, if not entirely harmonious.

Now we would move to the living room for more casual conversation and perhaps some music—a less structured environment where people could naturally gravitate toward those they were most comfortable with, reducing the forced proximity that had characterized the dinner table.

I caught Hunter's eye again as we began to rise from the table, his expression carrying a mixture of relief that the meal had concluded without major incident and pride in how I'd handled Amber's provocations. I gave him a small smile in return—a private moment of connection amid the social complexity surrounding us.

Whatever challenges the rest of the evening might bring, we would face them together. And if Amber decided to continue her game of social chess, she would find herself facing an opponent who had been playing at a professional level since childhood.

Soon enough, people began to disperse—either headed home or to the hotel—until all that remained was my immediate family, Andros's family, and Arion. The sudden quiet after hours of carefully navigated social tension felt almost disorienting, like stepping off a stage after a particularly demanding performance.

We settled in the living room, the adults claiming various comfortable seats while the teenagers sprawled across the floor, their earlier formality abandoned now that the extended family had departed. Thara emerged from wherever she'd been hiding during dinner and settled regally on my lap, purring with the particular smugness of a cat who had avoided unwanted socialization.

"Well, that was interesting," Ashley laughed, curling up in an armchair with her legs tucked beneath her. The casual posture was a marked contrast to her careful composure during dinner, suggesting a comfort level with our reduced group that she hadn't felt with the larger gathering.

I rolled my eyes, absently stroking Thara's silky fur. "Amber tried to play my game but forgot I'm better at it." The statement wasn't mere bravado—I'd spent decades navigating industry politics and media manipulation, skills that translated remarkably well to managing provocative dinner guests.

"Normally I wouldn't condone your chaos," Hunter said from his position beside me on the sofa, his arm draped casually across my shoulders, "but Amber did start it." The slight emphasis on "your chaos" carried a warmth that belied the criticism, a familiar acknowledgment of my tendency to create strategic disorder when necessary.

"Can we go to bed?" Harley asked from her spot on the floor, not even attempting to hide her exhaustion. The evening had clearly drained her teenage energy reserves, despite her earlier excitement about having Aaron visit.

Hunter nodded, his expression shifting to what the girls called his "Dad Mode." "Yes, but the boys have to go to their room. I don't want you guys hanging out in the bedrooms." The directive was delivered with the particular tone that brooked no argument, his protective instincts on full display.

Harley rolled her eyes with classic teenage exasperation. "I just wanna sleep." Her voice carried the particular whine of a thirteen-year-old who felt simultaneously too young to be treated as a child and too tired to argue the point.

With minimal further protest, the younger generation began to disperse—Harley, the Kay twins, Arissa, and Arion all heading upstairs to prepare for bed. Their footsteps echoed through the house, accompanied by the muffled sounds of bathroom doors closing and quiet conversations as they navigated the shared spaces.

Once they were out of earshot, I turned to Hunter with an amused smile. "You really think the girls are going to do anything with us all down here?" The question was genuine despite my teasing tone—Hunter's protectiveness sometimes bordered on the irrational, especially where Harley was concerned.

"I'm not taking any chances," he replied with the solemn determination of a father unwilling to acknowledge his daughters' growing independence. He hadn't even wanted the boys staying in the house at all, but I had made him realize that with Zachary staying at Mom's and the guest house not quite completed, there wasn't anywhere else for them. He'd relented with obvious reluctance, extracting promises about separate sleeping arrangements and open doors that had made Harley die of embarrassment on the spot.

"Trust me, Harley is safe. Aaron gets flustered holding her hand," Ashley offered with a knowing smile, her maternal insight providing a perspective Hunter clearly needed to hear. "He spent three hours choosing what to pack for this trip and made Andros practice conversation topics with him."

"And Arion would never go against the wishes of his King," I added, deliberately using Hunter's royal title to emphasize the point. "His entire identity is built around honor and duty. If anything, he's probably standing guard in the hallway right now."

Hunter's expression softened slightly, though the protective concern remained. "I know. It's just... they're growing up so fast." The admission carried a vulnerability he rarely displayed outside our private moments—the recognition that our daughters were navigating territory we couldn't fully control or protect them from.

"That they are," Andros agreed, his own parental understanding evident in his tone. "But they're good kids. Smart, responsible."

"With excellent taste in parents," I added lightly, attempting to ease the moment with humor.

"They've had pretty decent role models when it comes to relationships."

The conversation shifted to more general topics after that—plans for the coming days, comparing holiday traditions between our families, catching up on news we hadn't been able to share during the more formal dinner. It was comfortable in a way the earlier gathering hadn't been, the easy camaraderie of people who shared not just friendship but the unique understanding that came from similar life experiences.

As we talked, I found myself studying Andros and Ashley with quiet appreciation. Their relationship had weathered challenges as significant as our own—different planets of origin, Ranger responsibilities, raising children with mixed heritage. Yet they moved together with a synchronicity that spoke of deep understanding and mutual respect, a partnership forged through shared purpose rather than mere circumstance.

It reminded me, in many ways, of what Hunter and I had built—not perfect, not without conflict, but fundamentally solid in its foundation. Whatever tensions the evening had stirred with the presence of exes and old relationships, they were ultimately just echoes of a past that had shaped us rather than defined us.

As the conversation continued around me, I leaned slightly into Hunter's side, drawing comfort from his solid presence. The holiday season had just begun, with more gatherings and potential complications ahead. But for now, in this moment of relative peace with our closest friends, I allowed myself to simply enjoy the warmth of connection without the performance required by our more complex social obligations.

Tomorrow would bring its own challenges. But tonight, at least, had ended better than it began.





### "A Tale of 3 Christmas Eves"

It was Christmas Eve, and also the first time Hunter and I were taking his family to meet the Celtic Thunder Rangers. This would mark the first time in centuries that all the Thunder powers were gathered in one place. The momentous nature of this occasion did not elude me—bringing together Thunder Rangers from different traditions and lineages was historically significant in ways that transcended even our usual Ranger milestones.

The morning had dawned clear and crisp, with that particular quality of winter light that made the Irish countryside look like something from a fairy tale. As we drove through the winding country roads toward the hidden location, I watched Hunter's family react to the landscape with varying degrees of wonder and anticipation.

"I still can't believe I'm finally going to see the Irish Thunder Academy," Blake said from the backseat, his usual laid-back demeanor giving way to genuine excitement. He'd been hearing about the Celtic Rangers for years, but the opportunity to actually visit their ancestral grounds had only recently become possible.

"I still can't believe it's actually real and not a myth," LeAnn echoed, her voice carrying the scholarly reverence of someone who had spent decades studying Thunder ninja traditions. "All those stories in the scrolls, and it turns out they weren't just legends."

"It's ruins more than anything," Hunter cautioned from behind the wheel, his tone measured as always when discussing matters of Ranger significance. "We're rebuilding, but it's taking time. And please, be patient with the Riordans. They have been isolationist for years. It's really hard for them to welcome us all into their space." He glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure his family was paying attention to this important point. "And it's not the Irish Thunder Academy. They call it the Ord na Toirín, which means Order of Thunder."

I noticed the careful way Hunter said the Irish name, his pronunciation precise after months of practice. He'd taken his role as liaison between the Thunder ninja tradition and the Celtic Rangers seriously, learning not just their language but their customs and history as well. It was one of the many things I admired about him—his commitment to honoring traditions not his own.

We arrived at the designated parking area, a nondescript clearing that gave no indication of the ancient power site hidden nearby. For this first visit, we'd decided to keep the group small—just the four of us Thunder Rangers and Sensei Omio. Tori and Cam had stayed behind with the children, a decision we'd made not just for practical reasons but out of respect for the Riordans' well-known wariness of outsiders. The last thing we wanted was to overwhelm them with too many visitors at once, especially given their centuries of isolation.

Hunter and I had been to the Ord na Toirín grounds many times, so we naturally took the lead, guiding his family along a path that would have appeared random to anyone not sensitive to the subtle energy signatures that marked the way. Blake followed closely behind Hunter, while LeAnn

walked beside me, her eyes constantly scanning the landscape as if trying to memorize every detail. Sensei Omino moved with surprising agility despite his age, his expression serene but attentive.

"The entrance is concealed by ancient Celtic magic combined with Thunder energy," I explained as we walked. "It's similar to the cloaking techniques used at the Wind and Thunder Academies, but with a distinctly different energy signature."

"The integration of magic and ninja techniques is fascinating," LeAnn observed. "Our scrolls mention such combinations, but the practical applications were lost centuries ago."

"Ok, here we are," Hunter announced finally, stopping before what appeared to be an ancient oak tree, its massive trunk gnarled with age. To the untrained eye, it was simply an impressive specimen of Irish forestry, but to those attuned to the energy patterns of the Morphin Grid, the subtle shimmer of power was unmistakable.

We stepped through the holographic tree that shielded the Academy from outsiders, the familiar sensation of passing through an energy barrier washing over us like static electricity. On the other side, the landscape transformed dramatically—ruins of ancient stone structures emerged from the mist, their weathered surfaces etched with symbols that pulsed faintly with power. Standing at the entrance to this hidden realm were Saoirse and Tiernan Riordan, the Magenta and Amber Thunder Rangers, their postures suggesting a mixture of formal welcome and lingering caution.

"Welcome," Tiernan said, his deep voice carrying the particular cadence of someone raised with both Gaelic and English. His expression was guardedly friendly, his stance relaxed but alert—the bearing of a warrior who was extending trust but remained prepared for any contingency.

"Thank you for having us," LeAnn replied with appropriate formality, her training in diplomatic protocol evident in her careful tone.

Hunter stepped forward to make the formal introductions, his role as bridge between the two Thunder traditions evident in the way he positioned himself slightly between the groups. "This is Saoirse and Tiernan Riordan, the Magenta and Amber Thunder Rangers," he began, gesturing toward our hosts before turning to indicate his family. "Saoirse and Tiernan, this is my brother Blake Bradley, the Navy Thunder Ranger, my sister LeAnn Omino, the Gold Thunder Ranger, and our father and Sensei, Albert Omino."

Sensei Omino stepped forward with a formal bow that spoke of decades of Thunder ninja tradition. "It is an honor to meet you both and to be welcomed to the land of your academy. Thank you for allowing us to come."

"Yeah, Hunter and Michelle turned out to be ok, so we trusted them when they said you were ok too," Saoirse replied with characteristic directness, her Irish accent more pronounced than her husband's. Despite her casual words, I could see the careful assessment in her eyes as she studied the newcomers.

"What my lovely wife means is, welcome," Tiernan added with a diplomatic smile that suggested he was well accustomed to smoothing over his wife's blunter statements. "We would love to show you around, but please understand, we are rebuilding so much of our Academy is still in ruins from Lothor's attack."

"Of course, we would still love a tour," LeAnn said, her scholarly excitement barely contained beneath her formal demeanor. For someone who had dedicated her life to Thunder ninja history, this visit was the equivalent of an archaeologist discovering a lost civilization.

As we prepared to follow the Riordans deeper into the grounds, I caught Hunter's eye, sharing a moment of quiet satisfaction. Bringing these two branches of the Thunder tradition together had been one of our goals since discovering the Celtic Rangers' existence. After centuries of separation and the near-destruction of both academies, this reunion represented not just a sharing of knowledge but a strengthening of the Thunder legacy itself.

Whatever holiday activities awaited us later—family dinners, gift exchanges, the inevitable chaos of children high on Christmas excitement—this moment of connection between past and present, between different expressions of the same ancient power, felt like the most significant gift we could have received.

After the tour of the Academy grounds, which had been a sobering journey through partially restored training areas and ancient ruins still bearing the scars of Lothor's attack, we made our way to the one part of the complex that was essentially complete—the command center. Billy and Livvie had worked tirelessly to get the systems up and running, integrating Celtic magic with Ranger technology in ways that had initially seemed impossible, while Tiernan had personally rebuilt the physical structure.

The command center was an impressive blend of ancient and modern—stone walls carved with Thunder symbols that pulsed with subtle energy, housing state-of-the-art monitoring systems and communications equipment. The contrast shouldn't have worked, yet somehow the integration felt natural, as if the technology had grown organically from the ancient foundation rather than being imposed upon it.

We settled into the comfortable seating area that occupied one corner of the space, and Saoirse offered everyone traditional Irish tea, served in delicate cups that looked like family heirlooms. The ritual of hospitality seemed to ease some of the lingering tension, creating a moment of shared normalcy amid the weight of historical significance.

"Your land is beautiful," LeAnn observed, cradling her tea cup with evident appreciation. "Even in the rebuilding process, the Academy is lovely." Her voice carried genuine admiration rather than mere politeness, her historian's eye clearly recognizing the value of what was being preserved and restored.

"If there is anything we can do to assist in the rebuilding, please let us know," Sensei Omino offered, his tone carrying the weight of sincere commitment. "We had to rebuild our own Academy after Lothor's attack."

I noticed the slight shift in Saoirse's posture at the mention of Lothor—a barely perceptible tensing that spoke volumes about the wounds that still lingered beneath her composed exterior. Tiernan's hand moved subtly to cover hers, a gesture of support so natural it seemed almost unconscious.

"Yeah... he attacked here before California, right?" Blake asked, his question carrying the straightforward curiosity that characterized his approach to most situations.

Hunter elbowed him sharply, his expression conveying clear disapproval. "Bro, seriously?" The reprimand was quiet but pointed, reflecting Hunter's deeper understanding of the sensitivity surrounding the topic.

"It's ok," Tiernan assured us with a small smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "We are ok discussing the attack now." The careful phrasing—"now"—acknowledged the time it had taken to reach this point, the years of healing that had preceded this moment of openness.

Saoirse nodded, her expression shifting to something more distant, as if seeing not the room around us but the memories she was about to share. "My father, Ruaidhrí Larkin, was our An Seanchaí, basically the same role as your Sensei," she explained, her gaze settling on Sensei Omino with a particular recognition of shared responsibility. "He ran the Academy until Lothor's attack. We had been isolated for so long that we were caught off guard."

Her voice remained steady, but I noticed the slight tightening of her fingers around her cup, the only visible sign of the emotion beneath her composed recounting. "In his final act, my father used his power to protect me. Tiernan happened to be in the proximity of the protective shield." She glanced at her husband, a look passing between them that spoke of shared trauma and survival guilt. "He tried, but my father didn't have the strength to protect the academy. When the attack was over, everyone was gone, including my father. Tiernan and I were the only survivors, which meant it was up to us to continue the traditions of my father so they were not lost."

The room fell silent as the weight of her words settled around us. I'd heard this story before, but it never lost its impact—the magnitude of responsibility that had fallen on two young people, the last bearers of an ancient tradition they had been forced to preserve alone.

"I am so sorry for your loss," Sensei Omino said gently, reaching across the space between them to touch her hand in a gesture of compassion that transcended the formal boundaries of their newly established relationship. The simple human connection seemed to bridge centuries of separation between their traditions more effectively than any official ceremony could have done.

"Thank you," Saoirse replied, her usual directness softened by genuine appreciation. "I miss my father, but I have learned to live with the weight of the loss."

"I know what you mean," Hunter said quietly, his voice carrying the particular resonance of someone speaking from personal experience rather than theoretical understanding. The shared trauma of losing parents to Lothor's violence created a connection between them that went beyond their Thunder Ranger status—a common ground of grief and responsibility that I could observe but never fully share.

I watched the subtle shift in the room's energy as this acknowledgment of shared loss created a new depth of connection. Blake's expression had sobered, his earlier excitement tempered by the reminder of what their Ranger legacy had cost them all. LeAnn's scholarly interest had given way to something more personal, her gaze moving between her brother and Saoirse with newfound understanding.

The moment stretched, heavy with unspoken recognition of parallel journeys—two sets of Rangers left to carry forward ancient traditions after devastating loss, both rebuilding academies from ruins, both finding their way forward without the guidance of those who should have led them.

I remained quiet, recognizing that my role in this particular exchange was to witness rather than participate. As much as I was part of the Thunder Ranger legacy now, this specific bond of shared trauma and rebuilding belonged to Hunter and his family in a way I could respect but not claim as my own.

The silence was finally broken by Tiernan, who seemed to sense the need to shift the conversation toward more forward-looking territory. "We've been incorporating some of the training techniques Hunter has shared from your Academy," he said, addressing Sensei Omino directly.

This opening toward practical exchange seemed to ease the emotional weight in the room, creating space for the kind of concrete collaboration that would ultimately strengthen both traditions. As the conversation turned toward training methods, curriculum development, and the practical challenges of rebuilding, I watched the subtle indicators of growing comfort between the two groups—postures relaxing, gestures becoming more natural, the careful formality gradually giving way to genuine engagement.

This, I realized, was the true gift of our Christmas Eve visit—not just the historical significance of reuniting the Thunder traditions, but the human connections forming between people who had carried similar burdens along parallel paths. Whatever technical knowledge or training methods might be exchanged, this foundation of mutual understanding would be the real bridge between their worlds.

As Hunter caught my eye across the room, his slight smile told me he recognized it too—this moment of connection was exactly what we'd hoped for when we'd first proposed this visit. In the midst of holiday celebrations and family gatherings, this quiet exchange between all Thunder Ranger, was the most precious gift we could ask for.

"Have you considered recruiting students again?" Blake asked, his question carrying a natural progression from the discussion of training techniques. His expression held genuine curiosity rather than pressure, reflecting his understanding of the delicate balance between preserving tradition and ensuring its continuation.

Tiernan nodded, exchanging a brief glance with Saoirse before responding. "We have talked to Hunter about it." The measured response suggested ongoing conversations rather than concrete plans, a careful consideration of possibilities rather than a commitment.

"I would love to see us offer all Thunder styles here, focusing on the Celtic ones primarily, of course," Hunter added, his tone carrying the particular blend of enthusiasm and respect he'd developed in his role as liaison between the traditions. The idea clearly excited him, though he was careful to frame it as a personal hope rather than an expectation.

LeAnn leaned forward slightly, her scholarly interest visibly rekindled. "An academy that unites all six Thunder traditions? That sounds like a dream." The historian in her clearly recognized the unprecedented nature of such a possibility—bringing together lineages that had been separated for centuries, each developing their own interpretations of the original Thunder techniques.

"I'm not sure we're ready for that yet," Saoirse said, her directness tempering the growing excitement. Her expression wasn't dismissive but cautious, reflecting the weight of responsibility she carried as one of the last guardians of her tradition. The "yet" offered a concession to possibility without committing to a timeline.

Sensei Omino nodded with understanding, his expression reflecting the wisdom of someone who had navigated similar challenges of preservation and growth. "We understand. All in time," he assured them, his tone gentle but confident. "Just know the Thunder Academy will support you however you need." The offer carried the weight of formal commitment from one tradition to another, a bridge extended across centuries of separation.

"Hunter has already been a great help," Tiernan acknowledged, his gesture encompassing not just Hunter's physical assistance with rebuilding but the knowledge exchange and diplomatic efforts that had characterized his involvement. The comment carried genuine appreciation rather than mere politeness.

Saoirse seemed to consider something for a moment, her expression thoughtful before she spoke. "I think perhaps we could try adding the Crimson Insect and Violet Butterfly styles first and seeing how that goes," she suggested, her proposal offering a middle ground between maintaining isolation and embracing full integration.

I felt a small surge of pride at the mention of the Violet Butterfly style. It had been a personal journey of adaptation and creation, finding my own expression within the structured tradition of Thunder ninja techniques.

"Makes sense since Hunter and Michelle are already here," LeAnn nodded, her expression suggesting she recognized the strategic wisdom of the approach.

"The Navy Beetle and Gold Bee styles could be introduced later, once the foundation is established," Blake suggested, his casual tone belying the significance of what he was proposing—a formal reintegration of Thunder traditions that had developed independently for centuries.

"One step at a time," Tiernan said with a small smile that acknowledged both the exciting possibilities and the need for careful progression. "But the direction seems promising."

I watched the subtle interplay of expressions around the room—hope tempered by caution, excitement balanced with respect for tradition. This conversation represented far more than a simple exchange of training techniques; it was the beginning of a potential reunification that would strengthen the Thunder legacy for generations to come.

As the conversation continued around me, I found myself reflecting on how far we'd come since first discovering the Celtic Rangers' existence—from mutual wariness to this moment of shared purpose and cautious optimism. It wasn't the dramatic transformation of holiday movies, with instant trust and immediate resolution, but something more authentic and ultimately more meaningful: a careful, respectful building of connections that honored both the shared heritage and the unique developments of each tradition.

As we began preparing to leave, gathering our things and exchanging final pleasantries, Blake suddenly looked as if an idea had struck him—his expression lighting up with that particular enthusiasm he got when inspiration hit.

"What if I stayed around after the holidays to help with the rebuilding?" he suggested, the spontaneity so characteristic of his approach to life. "There's so much work to do, and I'd like to help." The offer was made with genuine sincerity rather than mere politeness, his eyes bright with the prospect of contributing to something meaningful.

"Are you sure?" Tiernan asked, his expression a mixture of surprise and cautious appreciation. "It's a lot of manual labor. I'm in construction by trade so I'm used to it, but..." He trailed off, his hesitation seeming to stem from concern about Blake's understanding of the commitment rather than reluctance to accept the help.

"If Hunter can do it, I can do it," Blake replied with a grin, the brotherly competitive streak that had defined their relationship since childhood emerging in the lighthearted challenge. The comment carried no real edge—just the familiar dynamic of siblings measuring themselves against each other.

"I'd like to stay and help too, if that's okay," LeAnn added, her scholarly reserve giving way to genuine enthusiasm. "Cam and I can stay and assist however is needed." Her offer seemed motivated by both practical generosity and academic interest—a chance to contribute while also learning more about the Celtic Thunder traditions.



Hunter and I shared a look across the room, a silent communication that spoke volumes. Cam staying in Ireland? The prospect of Hunter's ex-boyfriend remaining in close proximity for an extended period added a layer of complexity neither of us had anticipated. While the initial awkwardness of their reunion had eased into something resembling cordial respect, prolonged close quarters would be a different matter entirely.

"Someone has to go back to Thousand Oaks," Hunter pointed out, his tone carefully neutral despite the obvious concern underlying his words. The Thunder Academy couldn't simply be left without leadership indefinitely, a reality LeAnn surely recognized.

"The Academy will be fine for a while without us," LeAnn countered, her determined expression suggesting she'd already considered this objection. "We have capable instructors who can handle things temporarily."

Saoirse and Tiernan exchanged a glance that contained an entire conversation—weighing the benefits of additional help against the complications of hosting extended visitors in their still-rebuilding space. Their silent communication reminded me of Hunter and me at our most in sync, a testament to their years together as both partners and the last guardians of their tradition.

"That's generous," Saoirse said finally, her direct manner softened by genuine appreciation. "Let us consider your offer?" The phrasing was careful—acknowledging the generosity while creating space for thoughtful decision rather than immediate commitment.

"Of course," Sensei Omino nodded, his serene expression suggesting he understood the complexity of what was being proposed. "Such decisions should not be rushed."

With final farewells exchanged and promises to continue the conversation after the holidays, we made our way back through the holographic entrance and to the clearing where we'd parked. The winter afternoon was already fading toward evening, the particular quality of Christmas Eve light casting long shadows across the landscape as we piled back into my SUV for the drive home.

"You know, Le, you and Cam should go home after the holidays," Hunter said once we were underway, his tone carefully measured as he navigated the winding country roads back toward Ballincollig. "You can't just leave your students." The concern was legitimate, though I suspected it wasn't his only reservation about the proposed extended stay.

"They will be fine," LeAnn insisted from the backseat, her tone carrying the particular determination I'd come to recognize when she'd made up her mind about something. "Besides, we can just get a nice Airbnb with Blake, and it'll help with logistics."

"I think it's a great opportunity," Blake chimed in, his enthusiasm undiminished by Hunter's reservations. "Not just to help with the rebuilding, but to learn more about the Celtic Thunder techniques. This kind of knowledge exchange doesn't happen every day."

"It's not just about the Academy," Hunter countered, his eyes meeting mine briefly before returning to the road. "It's about timing."

"Perhaps a compromise," Sensei Omino suggested from his place beside Blake, his calm voice cutting through the building tension. "A shorter stay of perhaps two weeks, with the option to extend if circumstances warrant it. This would allow for meaningful contribution to the rebuilding efforts while not leaving the Thunder Academy without leadership for too long."

The practical suggestion seemed to ease some of the tension, offering a middle ground that acknowledged both the potential benefits and the legitimate concerns. Hunter's shoulders relaxed slightly, though his expression remained thoughtful as he navigated a particularly sharp turn in the road.

"We can discuss it more after Christmas," he conceded, his tone suggesting he wasn't fully convinced but was willing to consider the possibility. "Let's focus on the holiday first."

The conversation shifted to more immediate concerns after that—dinner plans for the evening, last-minute gift wrapping that needed to be done, the schedule for Christmas Day activities. But I could see the wheels turning in Hunter's mind as he drove, weighing the complex factors of having Cam remain in Ireland for an extended period against the undeniable benefits for both the rebuilding efforts and our ongoing Ranger responsibilities.

As we approached Ballincollig, the town already festive with holiday lights glowing in the early evening darkness, I reached across to place my hand on Hunter's knee—a small gesture of support and understanding. Whatever was decided about Blake and LeAnn's offer to stay, we would navigate it together, as we had so many challenges before.

The Christmas Eve visit to the Ord na Toirín had already accomplished more than we'd hoped in terms of building bridges between the Thunder traditions. Whatever complications might arise from the unexpected offers of extended help, they stemmed from genuine goodwill and shared purpose—a foundation that would serve us well in facing whatever challenges the new year might bring.

For tonight, at least, we could set aside Ranger responsibilities and potential future complications to focus on the simpler joys of Christmas Eve with family. The more complex decisions could wait until after the holiday, when clearer heads and rested spirits might find solutions that currently eluded us.

Amber

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Trevor and I were hosting a Christmas Eve dinnert—a way to bring together our closest friends before the larger gathering planned for Christmas Day at the Cantina.

"Auntie Amber!" Rose's voice echoed through the entryway as she burst through the front door ahead of her parents, making a beeline for me with the single-minded determination of a glitter-covered missile.

I laughed and caught her mid-flight, having developed a particular set of reflexes specifically for Rose encounters. "Hey, Rose. Your wings look extra sparkly tonight." The observation was genuine—her fairy wings appeared to have been upgraded with what looked like an entire craft store's worth of glitter and tiny LED lights.

Rose beamed up at me, her expression radiating pure Christmas excitement. "I Christmas Fairy," she declared with absolute certainty.

"You are a beautiful Christmas Fairy," I confirmed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and mentally calculating how much glitter would now be transferred to my carefully selected holiday outfit. Some sacrifices were worth making.

"Thanks for inviting us," Livvie said as she followed her daughter into the house, giving me a side hug that carefully avoided disturbing Rose's position in my arms.

"Mi casa es su casa, you know this," I replied with genuine warmth.

"How's Trev?" Jeremy asked as he entered with Killy in his arms, the quieter twin observing everything with his usual thoughtful expression. He handed off a bottle of wine to me with his free hand—a particularly good vintage.

I led them into the living room, where Rachel was already entertaining herself in her play area, supervised by Niamh. "Currently in a massive state of panic," I confided with a mixture of amusement and genuine sympathy for my husband. "When we agreed to host this giant Christmas dinner at the Cantina, he figured he would be cooking with Fionn and Kenzie. Niamh just told him that she and the other moms are going to be doing the cooking, so he is having a meltdown about opening his professional kitchen to 'home cooks'." I couldn't help but snicker at the memory of Trevor's expression when his mother had delivered this news—a mixture of horror and the particular helplessness that came from knowing he couldn't possibly object without appearing rude.

"Oh lord, how many 'home cooks'?" Livvie asked, her eyes widening slightly as she grasped the magnitude of the culinary territory dispute unfolding.

"All the moms: Niamh, Lea, Linda, and Jessica," I counted off on my fingers. "Finn offered to help too. RJ's Dad Finn, not our Fionn," I clarified, the similar names having already caused several confusing conversations during holiday planning.

"Bloody hell, poor bloke. It's an invasion," Jeremy said with genuine sympathy, clearly able to imagine Trevor's professional distress at the prospect of multiple amateur cooks taking over his carefully organized kitchen.

"Something like that," I agreed, accepting the glass of wine Niamh offered me with a grateful smile. "He's in there now, trying to establish some basic ground rules without offending anyone. I'm giving him space to work through his control issues."

"Wait, Fionn is coming? Is he bringing Declan?" Livvie asked, referring to Trevor's head chef and his boyfriend, who had become part of our extended circle over the past year.

I smiled, recognizing the opportunity to share some good news amid the chaos. "He did. With the divorce pending and his soon-to-be ex-wife keeping the kids from him, Declan isn't exactly welcome in Dublin. And Fionn doesn't talk to his family since he came out, so yes, they both agreed to join us." The arrangement had been Trevor's idea—a way to ensure his friend and colleague wouldn't be alone during a particularly difficult holiday season.

"This is gonna be a fun Christmas," Livvie laughed, settling onto the sofa and helping Killy arrange his small collection of toy cars on the coffee table. "Kitchen invasions, exes, and our entire extended family and their extended families."

"Fun is one word for it," Jeremy said dryly, though his expression was more amused than concerned as he watched Rose immediately gravitate toward Rachel.

I took a moment to survey the scene—my living room already filling with friends and family, the sounds of lively debate drifting from the kitchen where Trevor was undoubtedly trying to establish some semblance of culinary order, the Christmas tree glittering in the corner with presents already piled beneath it. Despite the potential for chaos—or perhaps because of it—there was something deeply satisfying about having our home filled with this particular collection of people.

"I think it's going to be perfect," I said, surprising even myself with the sincerity behind the words. "Messy and complicated and probably involving at least one minor disaster, but perfect in its own way."

"Speaking of messy and complicated," Livvie murmured, nodding toward the doorway where Mia had just arrived, RJ and his daughters close behind her. "Your matchmaking project is about to get interesting."

I followed her gaze to where Niamh had risen to greet the newcomers, her expression brightening noticeably as Finn James entered behind his son. The attraction I'd observed at our previous gathering seemed to have only intensified, judging by the way Finn immediately moved to her side, his hand brushing hers briefly in a gesture that might have seemed casual if not for the slight color that rose to Niamh's cheeks.

"Phase two proceeding nicely," I confirmed with satisfaction, earning an eye roll from Livvie and a knowing chuckle from Jeremy. "What? I'm simply observing natural attraction, not interfering."

"Right," Jeremy replied, his tone making it clear he wasn't fooled for a second. "And I suppose the mistletoe that's appeared in every doorway since I was here yesterday just spontaneously grew there?"

"Christmas tradition," I insisted with exaggerated innocence. "Nothing to do with me."

Before either of them could call me out further on my transparent matchmaking efforts, Trevor emerged from the kitchen, his expression a complex mixture of resignation and determination. "They must agreed to follow basic food safety protocols," he announced, accepting the glass of wine I immediately handed him. "And to allow me to supervise the use of my knives. It's the best compromise I can negotiate."

"Very diplomatic, mi corazón," I assured him, patting his arm consolingly. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Fine is relative," he muttered, though his expression softened as he greeted Jeremy and Livvie.

As Trevor was drawn into conversation with Jeremy about the logistics of tomorrow's larger gathering, I took the opportunity to observe the room more carefully, assessing the various dynamics at play. RJ and his daughters had settled near the Christmas tree, the twins immediately engaged by the colorful ornaments and twinkling lights. Mia was chatting with Livvie, their conversation animated in a way that suggested genuine connection rather than mere politeness.

And most interestingly, Niamh and Finn had somehow migrated to a quiet corner, their heads bent close together as they discussed something that had them both smiling. Trevor hadn't noticed yet, his back to them as he described the menu plans to Jeremy in increasingly technical detail.

Phase two of Operation Holiday Romance was indeed proceeding beautifully—perhaps even more smoothly than I'd anticipated. The natural chemistry between them was doing most of the work, requiring only minimal strategic mistletoe placement on my part.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Mia asked, appearing at my side with a knowing smile that suggested she'd caught the direction of my gaze.

"Just appreciating the holiday atmosphere," I replied innocently, though her raised eyebrow made it clear she wasn't fooled.

"Matchmaking again?" she murmured, low enough that only I could hear. "You never change, do you?"

"Why mess with success?" I countered with a small shrug. "Besides, they look good together, don't they?"

Mia followed my gaze to where Niamh was laughing at something Finn had said, her expression more relaxed and animated than I'd seen in months. "They do," she admitted. "Though Trevor might have a stroke when he notices."

"He'll adjust," I said with more confidence than I entirely felt. "Eventually."

I couldn't help but feel a surge of satisfaction at how the evening was unfolding. Despite the potential for tension—or perhaps because of the particular way we'd all learned to navigate our complicated interconnections—there was a warmth to the gathering that transcended the various complexities of our relationships.

Christmas Eve with our chosen family, in all its messy, imperfect glory, was shaping up to be exactly what I'd hoped for. And if my strategic matchmaking efforts happened to add an extra layer of holiday magic to the proceedings? Well, that was just my particular contribution to the season's festivities.

Trevor finally served dinner, the elaborate spread reflecting both his professional standards and the particular care he took with holiday meals. Despite his earlier panic about "home cooks" invading his kitchen tomorrow, tonight's feast was purely his creation—a showcase of his culinary expertise that managed to be impressive without crossing into intimidating.

We gathered around our dining table, which had been extended to its full capacity. The setting was beautiful—fine china that we rarely used, crystal glasses catching the light from the candles I'd arranged down the center of the table, and the subtle scent of pine from the fresh garlands I'd woven among the serving dishes.

"This looks amazing, mi corazón," I said with genuine appreciation as Trevor took his seat beside me. The hours he'd spent preparing this meal deserved recognition, especially given the stress he'd been under about tomorrow's kitchen invasion.

"It sure does," RJ agreed, his professional assessment carrying particular weight given his own culinary background. "The presentation is spectacular."

Trevor's expression softened slightly at the compliment, though I could still detect the underlying tension in the set of his shoulders. He was a perfectionist about his food at the best of times; serving a holiday meal to a mixed group that included both close friends and virtual strangers had ratcheted his standards even higher.

As we began to eat, the conversation flowed naturally into the kind of small talk that characterized gatherings where not everyone knew each other well—comments about the unseasonably mild weather, questions about holiday traditions, compliments on the food that Trevor accepted with the particular mixture of pride and dismissiveness that characterized his relationship with praise.

"Are you coming to midnight Mass, Jeremy?" Niamh asked during a brief lull in the conversation, her question directed across the table where Jeremy was helping Killy navigate the proper use of his fork for the roasted vegetables.

Jeremy nodded, his expression warming at the invitation that had become a holiday tradition. "Of course." Though Jeremy and Livvie weren't Catholic like the O'Sullivans—Jeremy having long ago

renounced the faith of his childhood—Easter and Christmas they would attend Mass with us, bringing the twins for Niamh's sake. It was one of those thoughtful gestures that defined their relationship with Trevor's mother, a recognition of what mattered to her regardless of their own beliefs.

"Would you like to join us as well?" Niamh continued, her invitation extending to include the James family and Mia. The offer seemed genuinely welcoming rather than merely polite, suggesting she'd been considering it before the moment arose.

"Um... I've never been to a church service," RJ admitted with a slightly awkward smile, his expression suggesting he was trying to determine the polite response to an invitation he hadn't anticipated.

"We're not Christians," Finn clarified smoothly, his diplomatic skills evident in how he navigated the potential cultural misalignment, "but, when in Ireland..." His smile was warm as he met Niamh's gaze directly. "We would love to join you."

I couldn't help but smile too, hiding my expression behind my wine glass to avoid being too obvious about my satisfaction. This was working out perfectly without me having to do anything—Niamh and Finn finding their own opportunities for connection, the natural flow of holiday traditions creating shared experiences. The best matchmaking was the kind that merely created opportunities rather than forced interactions, and this was unfolding more organically than I could have orchestrated.

Trevor, I noticed, was watching the exchange with a slightly furrowed brow, his gaze moving between his mother and Finn with dawning recognition of what was developing. I placed a gentle hand on his knee beneath the table—a silent reminder to let things unfold naturally rather than intervene.

"The church is beautiful," Livvie added, helpfully filling what might have become an awkward silence. "It was built in the 1800s, and they do the full traditional service with incense and Latin hymns. Even if you're not religious, the architecture and music are worth experiencing."

"I'd be happy to explain anything that seems confusing," Niamh offered, her expression brightening with enthusiasm. "The Catholic Mass can be a bit complex if you're not familiar with it."

"I would appreciate that," Finn replied with evident sincerity, his interest appearing genuine rather than merely polite. "I've always found different spiritual traditions fascinating, even if they're not my own."

The conversation shifted to logistics—what time to meet, where to park,—but I remained focused on the subtle interaction between Niamh and Finn. There was a natural ease to their communication, a mutual interest that transcended the specific topic at hand. Whatever connection had begun forming at our previous gathering had clearly deepened in the intervening days.

Trevor leaned closer to me, his voice pitched low enough that only I could hear. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" he murmured, his tone a mixture of resignation and lingering concern.

"Two adults enjoying each other's company?" I replied innocently, though my expression likely gave away my satisfaction at the development. "Hardly cause for alarm, mi corazón."

"You know what I mean," he countered, though there was less resistance in his tone than I'd anticipated. "My mother and RJ's father. It's... complicated."

"Life is complicated," I reminded him gently. "But connection is simple. They enjoy each other's company. What's wrong with that?"

Trevor sighed, his gaze returning to where Niamh was explaining something about midnight Mass traditions to Finn, her hands moving animatedly as she spoke. "Nothing, I suppose," he conceded reluctantly. "It's just... unexpected."

"The best things often are," I replied, squeezing his knee gently before returning my attention to the general conversation.

The meal continued, the initial formality gradually giving way to more relaxed interaction as wine flowed and shared food created natural bonds. The children's required occasional intervention—primarily to prevent Rose from conducting what appeared to be fairy magic experiments with her mashed potatoes—but overall, the evening was unfolding with remarkable smoothness given the potentially complicated mix of personalities.

I caught Mia's eye across the table at one point, her slight nod acknowledging what we were both observing—the natural chemistry developing between Niamh and Finn, the way their conversation had become increasingly focused on each other despite the larger group around them. Her expression suggested both amusement and approval.

As Trevor rose to begin clearing plates for dessert, I took a moment to appreciate the scene around me—friends and family gathered together, the warm glow of candlelight softening everyone's features, the particular magic of Christmas Eve creating a space where complicated histories could temporarily recede in favor of present connection.

Kara

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I took a deep breath as I stirred the noodles for the mac and cheese, trying to focus on the simple rhythm of the wooden spoon against the pot rather than the tension building between my shoulder blades. The last few days had me constantly on edge. When I suggested that Hal and I invite our families to Ireland for the holidays, I'd envisioned us working as a team—hosting together, sharing the responsibilities, creating new traditions.



What I hadn't anticipated was Hal strategically disappearing with his younger brother Jim at every opportunity, conveniently finding urgent "man tasks" that required immediate attention whenever my mother entered a room. I couldn't entirely blame him—my mother's particular brand of helpful criticism could wear down even the most patient soul—but his tactical retreats left me alone on the front lines of family diplomacy.

And yes, it was a lot to manage. We had my parents, my sister Alexis and her wife Maggie, Hal's mother Jessica, and Hal's brother Jim and sister-in-law Sue with their three kids. Thankfully, given the sheer number of people, everyone had stayed at the hotel in town because we simply didn't have the room in our house. The arrangement provided some necessary breathing space, but also meant that I was responsible for coordinating transportation, planning activities, and ensuring everyone had what they needed during their stay in a foreign country.

Kira and Kora had helped some, but they were teenagers with their own priorities. In their minds, showing visiting cousins around town and texting with their friends about holiday plans far outweighed helping Mom prepare for family gatherings. And my dear, sweet little Tiffy tried to help as much as a six-year-old could, but that mostly involved enthusiastic but messy attempts at stirring ingredients and setting the table with creative interpretations of proper place settings.

We were having everyone over for Christmas Eve dinner tonight, and then tomorrow we'd be joining the extended friend group at the Cantina for the larger gathering. The thought of navigating both events—one intimate but potentially fraught with family dynamics, the other massive and filled with the complicated interpersonal histories of our Irish social circle—made my stomach tighten with anxiety.

"Mom, Grandma and Grandpa are here!" Kira's voice called from the front of the house, the particular pitch of forced enthusiasm telling me she'd already been subjected to at least one critique about her outfit or hair.

I quickly wiped my hands on a dish towel and smoothed my apron, plastering on my best journalist smile—the one I'd perfected during years of on-camera work when I needed to project calm regardless of the chaos unfolding around me.

"Kara, do you need help, dear?" My mother's voice preceded her into the kitchen, the question carrying that particular tone that suggested she'd already identified several things I was doing wrong and was simply waiting for permission to correct them.

"No, I have everything well at hand," I replied with deliberate brightness, continuing to stir the macaroni with perhaps more vigor than necessary. "Dinner should be ready right on schedule."

Mom approached the stove anyway, peering into the pot with the critical eye of someone who had been cooking holiday meals since before I was born. "You're going to overcook that macaroni," she observed, her tone carrying absolute certainty despite the fact that I'd been making this particular recipe for years.

"Mom, I am timing it," I said, fighting to keep the edge out of my voice. Getting defensive would only escalate the situation, a lesson I'd learned through decades of navigating our relationship.

"And I'm looking at it," she replied with the particular logic that had characterized our interactions since my childhood—her direct observation always trumping my process or experience.

"Mom, Jesus, let Kara cook dinner," Alexis's voice cut through the tension as she walked into the kitchen, her arrival like a burst of fresh air. My younger sister had always been more direct than me, less concerned with maintaining peace at the cost of her own boundaries.

I smiled at her gratefully, momentarily abandoning the macaroni to give her a quick hug. "Hi, Alex." The childhood nickname slipped out naturally, a reminder of simpler times before adult responsibilities and complex family dynamics.

"Do not use the Savior's name in vain, Alexis," Mom scolded, her attention momentarily diverted from my apparently imperiled pasta.

Alexis rolled her eyes with the exasperation that adult children reserve for parents who still treat them like teenagers, regardless of their actual age or accomplishments. "Kara, seriously, do you need any help?" she asked, ignoring Mom's reprimand with practiced ease.

"No, can you take Mom to the living room?" I requested, trying to keep the desperation from my voice. "Hal's family should be here soon." What I didn't say, but Alexis clearly understood from my expression, was that I needed a moment of peace to finish dinner preparations without well-intentioned but undermining supervision.

"Come on, Mom," Alexis said, smoothly taking our mother's arm. "Dad probably needs rescuing from Tiffy's explanation of her Barbie collection. You know how she gets when she has a captive audience."

As they left the kitchen—Mom with one last concerned glance at the macaroni—I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. The momentary solitude felt like a gift, a brief respite in what had become an endurance test of holiday hosting.

I drained the pasta, which was, of course, perfectly al dente despite Mom's concerns, and began assembling the casserole that had become a tradition in our family. The familiar motions were soothing—grating cheese, whisking the béchamel sauce, layering the ingredients with the precision that came from years of practice.

From the living room, I could hear the murmur of conversation, punctuated occasionally by Tiffy's excited voice and my father's patient responses. The sounds of family gathering, with all its complicated dynamics and genuine affection, reminded me of why I'd wanted to host in the first place—to create memories, to establish our own traditions in this country we'd chosen to make our home.

Now if only Hal would reappear from whatever strategic retreat he'd found this time, perhaps we could actually enjoy the evening we'd worked so hard to create.

When dinner was finally ready—all dishes perfectly timed despite my mother's concerns—I wiped my hands on my apron and headed to the living room to make the announcement. Everyone had arrived while I'd been finishing the preparations, the room now filled with the chaos of extended family gathered in a space not quite designed to accommodate them all.

Alexis and Maggie were sitting on the sofa with Tiffy wedged happily between them, my daughter animatedly showing them something in a picture book that had them both nodding with exaggerated interest. Kira was in the corner with her cousins, their heads bent close together over a phone, occasionally giggling in that way teenagers do when sharing content they don't want adults to notice. Sue was engaged in what appeared to be polite conversation with my mother and Jessica, her expression carrying that slightly glazed look of someone nodding along while mentally calculating how much longer social obligation required her to remain engaged.

Conspicuously absent from the scene were my father, Jim, Hal, and Kora. The pattern was so predictable I almost laughed—the same strategic disappearance that had characterized every family gathering since we'd arrived in Ireland. I had a very good idea of where I'd find them, and it wasn't helping with dinner preparations or entertaining our guests.

I made my way upstairs to what Hal grandly referred to as his "Man Cave"—a spare bedroom we'd converted into a media room when we'd moved in, complete with a large TV, comfortable seating, and enough sports memorabilia to make it clear whose territory it was. Sure enough, as I approached the door, I could hear the distinctive sound of American sports commentary filtering into the hallway.

I opened the door without knocking to find exactly the scene I'd expected: my father, Jim, Hal, and Kora all comfortably settled in front of the TV watching SportsCenter via VPN, our two dogs sprawled across their laps in canine contentment. The contrast between the slightly tense social dynamics downstairs and the relaxed camaraderie in this room was striking—and more than a little irritating given how hard I'd been working while they enjoyed their sports sanctuary.

"Harold," I said, using his full name in the particular tone that every spouse recognizes as a warning signal.

Hal cringed visibly, looking up at me with an expression that managed to be both guilty and hopeful, like a child caught sneaking cookies who still thinks there might be a way to charm their way out of trouble. "Yes?"

I sighed, taking in the scene—my husband and daughter, my father and brother-in-law, all looking like they'd been caught in the act of something far worse than simply watching sports while I managed the holiday dinner preparations alone. The absurdity of it suddenly struck me, and I found the irritation giving way to a reluctant amusement.

"Dinner is ready," I said simply, deciding that a public shaming in front of his father-in-law and brother wouldn't actually improve my Christmas Eve. "And yes, the game can wait."

"We were just catching the highlights," Hal offered, already reaching for the remote with haste. "Lost track of time."

"Mmhmm," I replied, not bothering to hide my skepticism. "I'm sure it had nothing to do with avoiding my mother's commentary on how we're raising the girls."

My father had the grace to look slightly abashed, rising from his seat with a sheepish smile. "The dinner smells wonderful, Kara. We were just coming down."

"Of course you were," I agreed dryly, though I couldn't maintain my irritation in the face of his obvious discomfort. My father had always been my ally in navigating family dynamics, his quiet support a counterbalance to my mother's more intense presence.

Kora slipped past me with a quick, "Sorry, Mom," that suggested she at least recognized the inequity of the situation, even if she'd been happy to benefit from it. Her loyalty to her father and grandfather apparently extended to joining their strategic retreats, though I suspected it had as much to do with avoiding her cousins' questions about whether she had a boyfriend yet as it did with any interest in American sports.

As the men filed out of the room, heading downstairs to join the rest of the family, Hal lingered behind, his expression shifting to something more genuinely contrite. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, reaching for my hand. "I should have been helping you."

"Yes, you should have," I agreed, though I allowed him to take my hand, the simple contact easing some of the tension I'd been carrying. "Especially since this whole 'let's invite all our family for the holidays' idea was something we decided together."

"I know," he acknowledged, his thumb tracing a familiar pattern across my knuckles. "It's just... your mother..."

"Is exactly who she's always been," I finished for him. "And hiding upstairs with SportsCenter doesn't actually make her any easier to deal with. It just means I have to handle it alone."

Hal winced, the truth of this clearly hitting home. "You're right. I'll do better." He squeezed my hand gently. "The dinner smells amazing, by the way. And the house looks beautiful. You've done an incredible job with everything."

The simple acknowledgment of my efforts—the hours spent cleaning, decorating, cooking, and managing logistics—eased something tight in my chest. "Thank you," I said, allowing some of my frustration to dissipate. "Now let's go have Christmas Eve dinner with our families before the food gets cold and my mother decides to reheat everything her way."

Hal laughed, the sound genuine despite the very real possibility I'd just described. "Lead the way. I promise to run interference if she starts critiquing how you cooked the potatoes."

"My hero," I replied with a small smile, the humor helping to restore our usual partnership. Whatever challenges the evening might still hold—and with both our families gathered under one roof, there would undoubtedly be more—at least we would face them together.

As we headed downstairs to join the waiting family, I reminded myself of what truly mattered: not the perfect meal or flawless hosting, but the connections being formed and maintained, even with all their complicated dynamics and occasional tensions. This was our first Christmas hosting both families in Ireland, and despite the stress, there was something special about bringing these different parts of our lives together in the home we'd created.

Even if it did occasionally drive me to contemplate hiding in the Man Cave myself.

When we made it downstairs, I was surprised to see my cousin Kenzie and her girlfriend Shay had joined the gathering, their arrival having gone unannounced amid the general chaos of family interactions. Kenzie stood somewhat awkwardly near the edge of the group, her posture suggesting she wasn't entirely comfortable with the family gathering.

"Kenzie! You made it!" I exclaimed, genuinely pleased to see her despite our sometimes complicated relationship. "I thought you had to work tonight." The last I'd heard, she was scheduled for a shift at the Cantina, part of her culinary training under Trevor's demanding but educational supervision.

Kenzie accepted my hug with that particular stiffness that had characterized our physical interactions since she'd moved out. We had a somewhat strained relationship—the inevitable result of my having raised her through her high school years. Since turning eighteen, she'd kept me at arm's length, determined to establish her independence and find her own path.

"Fionn said I could leave early," she explained, referring to Trevor's head chef who had apparently taken pity on her during the holiday rush. "Since tomorrow we're closed I finished prep early."

"Well, we have plenty of food," I assured her, genuinely happy for their unexpected presence. "I'm so glad you're both here." I meant it sincerely—despite our occasional tensions, Kenzie was family, and seeing her willingly join our gathering felt like a small Christmas gift in itself.

I guided everyone to the dining room, where the table had been extended to its maximum capacity and supplemented with a card table to accommodate our unexpectedly large group. The room looked beautiful, if I did say so myself—candles casting a warm glow over the holiday table settings, the good china that we rarely used arranged precisely, Christmas crackers at each place adding a festive touch that nodded to our adopted Irish home.

We all settled into our seats, the initial moments filled with the comfortable chaos of serving dishes being passed, drinks being poured, and children being helped with their portions. For a brief, hopeful

moment, I thought we might actually have a peaceful family dinner, the holiday spirit temporarily suspending the more complicated dynamics at play.

That hope lasted approximately three minutes.

"I see you're still with... her," my mother commented to Kenzie, her tone carrying that particular blend of disapproval and forced politeness that she had perfected over decades of passing judgment while maintaining plausible deniability.

"She has a name, Aunt Linda," Kenzie replied, her voice tight with controlled irritation, "and yes, we're very happy." Her hand found Shay's beneath the table, a gesture of solidarity that didn't escape my notice.

"I promise you can say my name. I won't haunt you unless you say it three times in a row," Shay added in her thick Yorkshire accent, her expression a perfect blend of sweetness and steel. The Beetlejuice reference was delivered with such deadpan precision that I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

Kenzie snickered appreciatively, clearly delighted by her girlfriend's refusal to be intimidated by my mother's passive-aggressive tactics. Mom looked taken aback, clearly not accustomed to having her disapproval met with humor rather than defensive justification.

"Mom, you have to accept that Kenzie is happy," Alexis said softly, her tone gentle despite the firmness of her words. My sister had always been better than me at confronting our mother directly while still maintaining a tone of respect—a skill I envied but had never quite mastered.

"Accept our sweet Mackenzie is a sinner like you?" Mom countered, her expression suggesting genuine confusion at why we couldn't all see the obvious problem. "You did this to her. She caught it from you."

The table fell momentarily silent, the casual homophobia landing like a stone in still water. Even the children seemed to sense the sudden tension, their usual chatter quieting as they looked between the adults with wary curiosity.

Jessica, who had been quietly enjoying her meal beside my mother, set down her fork with deliberate precision and turned to face her. "Linda, are you serious?" she asked, her tone carrying the particular blend of incredulity and challenge that only another woman of the same generation could effectively deploy. "You think Kenzie caught being bi from Alexis? And you actually think it's a sin still?"

"In the bible..." Mom began, her expression suggesting she was preparing to launch into a familiar scriptural justification.

"Luke 6:37," Jessica interrupted smoothly, "'Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.'" Her delivery was calm but firm, the

scripture quoted with the confidence of someone who knew their Bible as well as my mother did—perhaps better.

Hal smirked slightly beside me, clearly enjoying seeing his mother go toe-to-toe with mine on biblical grounds. "Speaking of the bible, Mom," he interjected, skillfully redirecting the conversation, "will you be joining us for Midnight Mass?"

Jessica nodded, seamlessly shifting gears from theological debate to holiday planning. "Yes, of course. I can't wait to see your church here."

"Midnight Mass?" Mom asked, her brow furrowing as if we'd suggested attending a satanic ritual rather than a Christian service.

"Yes, Mom," I confirmed, keeping my tone deliberately light despite the tension still vibrating through the air. "You know they're Episcopalian. Would you like to come as well?" The invitation was genuine despite my certainty that she would find something objectionable about any denomination that wasn't Baptist.

Mom looked at me with an expression of genuine concern that might have been touching if it weren't so judgmental. "Kara Lee, I cannot believe you have abandoned your faith. We raised you to be a Baptist."

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that it was Christmas Eve and that responding with the frustration bubbling beneath my calm exterior wouldn't improve the situation. "Yes, and I'm still a Christian, just a different kind," I replied with forced patience. This was a conversation we'd had repeatedly since I'd married Hal, her inability to accept denominational differences a persistent source of tension.

"We would love to join you," Dad chimed in, his quiet voice carrying a gentle authority that sometimes succeeded in redirecting Mom when nothing else would. His simple acceptance of our invitation was both a peace offering and a subtle signal to Mom that her objections weren't shared.

"I raised my boys Episcopalian," Jessica said, turning to my mother with an expression of polite curiosity that barely masked the challenge beneath. "What exactly is wrong with that?"

The question hung in the air between them, a gauntlet thrown with perfect Southern gentility. I held my breath, wondering if we were about to witness a theological debate erupt over Christmas dinner, the turkey growing cold while our mothers battled over denominational differences.

Hal's hand found mine beneath the table, a silent gesture of support and shared exasperation. Whatever happened next, at least we were in this together—united in our determination to survive Christmas with our families, our marriage, and our sanity intact.

Though at this point, I would have settled for just one out of three.



"Mom is one of those Baptists that thinks any Christian that isn't Baptist is wrong and misguided," Alexis offered with the particular blend of affection and exasperation that characterized her relationship with our mother. Her tone was light, almost teasing, but the underlying truth of the statement was undeniable to anyone who had spent more than five minutes discussing theology with Linda Danvers.

"You realize Episcopal was the original Protestant faith, right?" Jessica countered. "Without Episcopalian there would be no Baptist." The historical accuracy of her statement was delivered with the quiet confidence of someone who had studied church history rather than simply inheriting religious opinions.

I could see my mother preparing what would undoubtedly be a passionate rebuttal, her expression shifting into the particular configuration that had preceded many a Sunday dinner theological debate throughout my childhood. Before she could launch into what would likely be a comprehensive explanation of why the Baptist tradition was the only true interpretation of scripture, I decided to intervene.

"Mom, just come with us tonight with an open mind," I suggested, attempting to redirect the conversation away from denominational debate and toward practical holiday plans. "You will see it's not that different." Even as the words left my mouth, I recognized the futility of the request—asking my mother to approach anything with an open mind was like asking water not to be wet. Her certainty about her own correctness was a fundamental law of her universe, as immutable as gravity.

"I didn't like it at first either, Grandma," Kira offered unexpectedly, her teenage voice carrying a surprising note of diplomacy. "But actually, it's pretty great. They are so nice." Her simple endorsement, free from the complicated adult dynamics at play, momentarily shifted the energy at the table.

Rather than being touched by her granddaughter's attempt at peacemaking, however, my mother fixed me with an accusatory stare. "You've converted my granddaughter too?" The question carried genuine distress, as if I'd deliberately led her beloved grandchild into some dangerous cult rather than a mainstream Christian denomination.

I sighed, feeling the familiar tension headache beginning to form at my temples. "Mom, please." The two words contained a lifetime of similar exchanges, a shorthand plea for understanding that I knew would likely go unheeded.

"Give it a rest," Alexis interjected, her patience apparently exhausted. "You're coming tonight, you're gonna be nice, and right now you're going to stop interrogating Kara and enjoy the amazing meal she cooked." Her tone had shifted from gentle persuasion to firm command, the directness that had always characterized her approach to family conflict on full display.

The table fell momentarily silent, the force of Alexis's intervention creating a brief pause in the theological standoff. I caught my father's eye across the table, his slight nod communicating both



support and a certain pride in Alexis's willingness to stand up to our mother—a quality she had inherited from him, though he expressed it far more subtly.

"The roast is particularly good, Linda," Jessica offered after a moment, providing a graceful bridge back to safer conversational territory. "Kara, you must share your recipe. Is that rosemary I taste?"

"Rosemary and thyme," I confirmed gratefully, seizing the opportunity to shift away from religious debate. "It's a Jamie Oliver recipe that I've adapted a bit for our Irish beef. The quality of the meat here is exceptional."

The conversation gradually returned to safer topics—the differences between American and Irish food, plans for Christmas Day activities, gentle teasing about who had received the best cracker prizes. The underlying tension remained, but it had receded to a manageable level, allowing the meal to proceed without further confrontation.

Under the table, Hal squeezed my hand gently, a silent acknowledgment of what we'd just navigated together. His eyes when they met mine carried both sympathy and a hint of humor—the recognition that this particular brand of holiday family chaos was something we'd tell stories about later, once the stress had faded and only the absurdity remained.

I squeezed back, grateful for his presence despite his earlier strategic retreat to the Man Cave. Whatever challenges our families presented, we were facing them as a team—perhaps not always perfectly, but with a shared understanding that had been forged through years of partnership.

As I looked around the table—at my mother now engaged in surprisingly civil conversation with Jessica about Christmas traditions, at Kenzie and Shay sharing a private joke that had them both suppressing laughter, at my children interacting with their cousins with the particular blend of familiarity and occasional eye-rolling that characterized family relationships—I felt a sudden surge of gratitude beneath the lingering stress.

This was family—messy, complicated, occasionally infuriating, but fundamentally connected by bonds that transcended disagreement and difference. The fact that we could navigate theological debates and generational divides while sharing a meal together was, in its own way, a kind of Christmas miracle—not the perfect harmony of holiday movies, but the real, imperfect connection of people who chose to remain in relationship despite their differences.

Michelle

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After we returned from the Academy, we made our way back to our house, where Cam and Tori were waiting with the kids, along with Ashley and Andros. Rather than attempting to cook after such a full day, I had ordered takeaway for dinner—a decision that seemed particularly wise given the energy we'd expended during the emotional visit to the Ord na Toirín. I figured we could all relax at home, watching Christmas movies and visiting in the comfortable familiarity of family.

I knew the O'Sullivan/O'Brien clan would be heading to Catholic Midnight Mass later, which meant RJ wouldn't be around—a small Christmas gift in itself. The Jordan family was attending their Protestant Midnight Mass, leaving just us "heathen Buddhists," as Hunter jokingly called our eclectic spiritual mix, to enjoy the evening ourselves. The thought of a relatively quiet Christmas Eve, surrounded by just our immediate circle rather than the extended chaos of yesterday's dinner, felt like exactly what we needed.

Once the food had been delivered, Hunter and Mom efficiently set everything out on the dining room table, creating an informal buffet that allowed everyone to help themselves. The spread was impressive despite its take-out origins—a mixture of traditional Irish fare from our favorite local pub and some Asian fusion dishes that had become family favorites since our move to Ballincollig. The casual approach to dinner suited the relaxed atmosphere we were trying to create after the more formal and historically significant visit to the Academy.

The teenagers—Harley, Arissa, Aaron, Ally, Lindsey, and Arion—all gravitated to the sunroom with their plates, clearly eager for some space away from adult supervision. I could hear Harley's laughter drifting back to us occasionally, the sound bringing a smile to my face.

The rest of us found comfortable spots around the living room, moving furniture slightly to accommodate our larger-than-usual group. We'd even brought Tomi's high chair into the room so she could eat with everyone, her presence a reminder of the continuity of family amid all the changes and challenges we faced. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the process of methodically tearing apart her chicken nugget before actually eating it, her small face a study in concentration.

Thara made her way around the room with characteristic feline entitlement, her royal expectations evident in the imperious way she inspected each person's plate, clearly expecting both food offerings and adoration in equal measure. Robbie, Hunter's golden retriever, was actually being a very good boy, lying near Hunter's feet with only occasional hopeful glances at people's plates. The contrast between their approaches to dinner guests—one demanding tribute as her due, the other patiently hoping for benevolence—never failed to amuse me.

"So, how was the Academy?" Tori finally asked, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled over the room as everyone enjoyed their food. Her question carried genuine interest rather than mere politeness—as Blake's wife and a fellow Ranger, she understood the significance of today's visit even though she hadn't been part of it.

"Beautiful," LeAnn replied immediately, her usual scholarly reserve giving way to genuine enthusiasm. "I know it's still a work in progress, but just the energy there... it was beautiful."

"It really is," Blake agreed, his typically laid-back demeanor infused with unusual solemnity. "There's something about standing in a place where Thunder ninjas have trained for centuries—you can almost feel the connection across generations."

"It will be even more so when we finish rebuilding," Hunter added, his voice carrying that particular tone of quiet determination that emerged whenever he discussed the restoration project. What had begun as a simple offer to help the Riordans had evolved into a deep personal commitment to restoring not just the physical structures but the living tradition they represented.

I watched him as he spoke, noticing the subtle shift in his posture, the animation in his expression that always appeared when he discussed the Academy. This project had become more than just assistance to fellow Rangers; it had become a way for him to reconnect with his Thunder ninja heritage in a deeper, more meaningful way than he had in years. Seeing him find this new dimension to his identity—not just as a Ranger, rider, or father, but as a guardian of tradition—had been one of the unexpected gifts of our move to Ireland.

"The Riordans seemed to open up more than I expected," I observed, thinking of how Saoirse had shared her father's story with a directness that hadn't characterized our early interactions.

"Especially about the attack."

Hunter nodded, his expression thoughtful. "Having Blake and LeAnn there, seeing other Thunder Rangers who had also survived Lothor's attacks—I think it created a different kind of connection. A shared experience that transcended the differences in our traditions."

"Did they seem receptive to our offer to help with rebuilding?" Cam asked, his question directed primarily at LeAnn rather than Hunter—an interesting choice that suggested he was still navigating the complex dynamics of their shared history.

"Cautiously," LeAnn replied, her diplomatic skills evident in her measured response. "They're understandably protective of their traditions, especially after nearly losing everything. But I think they recognize the value in what we could contribute, both in terms of practical assistance and in sharing knowledge."

"Saoirse mentioned possibly integrating some of our training techniques," Blake added, his expression brightening at the memory. "Starting with the Crimson and Violet styles since Michelle and Hunter are already here."

"It's a start," Hunter agreed, his tone suggesting both satisfaction with the progress and recognition of how far we still had to go. "A foundation for rebuilding not just the physical Academy but the connections between our traditions."

The conversation continued, flowing naturally between reflections on the day's visit and more general holiday topics. As I looked around the room—at Hunter's family engaged in animated discussion about training techniques, at Tomi happily demolishing her dinner with more enthusiasm than precision, at Thara now regally installed on Sensei Omino's lap as if she'd granted him a particular honor—I felt a sense of contentment that had been missing during yesterday's larger, more complicated gathering.

This was the kind of Christmas Eve I'd hoped for when we decided to stay in Ireland for the holidays—not the perfect, picture-book version from holiday movies, but something real and meaningful, centered around the connections that mattered most. Whatever challenges awaited us in the new year—Viper's continued threats, the ongoing restoration of the Academy, the everyday complexities of raising three daughters while balancing multiple careers and responsibilities—tonight was a reminder of why it was all worthwhile.

Family, in all its forms, was worth fighting for. And sometimes, the greatest gift was simply being together, sharing food and conversation without the pressure of performance or pretense.

Even if that family included one very entitled cat who was now eyeing Cam's plate with unabashed interest.

Tab 1

“Christmas of Chaos”

I surveyed the Cantina with a critical eye, mentally checking off the final details before our guests began to arrive. The normally sleek, modern restaurant had been transformed into a winter wonderland—my vision executed to perfection, naturally. Garlands of fresh pine and holly adorned the exposed brick walls, while fairy lights twinkled from every conceivable surface. The long tables had been arranged in a U-shape to accommodate our absurdly large gathering, each place setting featuring the fine china Trevor normally reserved for VIP guests, along with hand-calligraphed place cards I'd commissioned.

"Mo Gra, are you sure about this seating arrangement?" Trevor appeared at my side, his expression betraying the anxiety he'd been trying to mask all morning. "You have Michelle directly across from R.J."

"Pure coincidence," I replied with practiced innocence, adjusting Rachel's tiny Christmas dress as she squirmed in my arms. I had Lydia design her a beautiful dark red and gold dress and Trev had gotten her little black Gucci shoes. She was the most fashionable baby in Ireland. "The tables only fit together in so many configurations."

Trevor raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "And Niamh next to Finn is also coincidence?"

"Completely random," I assured him, not even attempting to sound sincere. "Now stop worrying about the seating and start worrying about your mother commandeering your kitchen."

As if summoned by my words, the kitchen doors swung open to reveal Niamh, her arms laden with containers of what appeared to be her famous cranberry sauce. She'd arrived two hours early, ostensibly to "help set up," but had made a beeline for the kitchen and hadn't emerged since.

"She's rearranging my mise en place," Trevor muttered, his accent thickening with distress as it always did when his professional domain was threatened. "My own mother, in my professional kitchen, moving things."

I patted his arm sympathetically. "She raised you on her cooking. She probably thinks she's helping."

"She's organizing by color, Amber. By color! Not function, not workflow—she's creating a rainbow of ingredients!"

Before I could offer further consolation, the front door chimed, announcing our first arrivals. Jeremy and Livvie entered, each holding one of the twins' hands, though Rose was already straining against her father's grip, her fairy wings quivering with barely contained excitement.

"Auntie Amber!" Rose broke free and launched herself toward me, a glitter-covered missile in Christmas attire.

"Careful, Rose," Jeremy cautioned, too late as she collided with my legs. "Rachel is still little."

"I be careful with baby," Rose assured him solemnly, peering up at Rachel with exaggerated caution. "I big girl now."

"Yes, you are," I agreed, crouching slightly to her level while balancing Rachel. "And as a big girl, do you think you could help me with a very important job today?"

Rose's eyes widened, her entire body vibrating with anticipation. "What job?"

"I need someone to show the other children where the special Christmas activity table is. It has coloring sheets and crafts and all sorts of things to keep everyone busy until dinner."

"I do it!" She nodded vigorously, her blonde curls bouncing with enthusiasm. "I in charge!"

"God help us all," Jeremy muttered under his breath, exchanging a look with Trevor that spoke volumes about their shared experience with Rose's particular brand of leadership.

Livvie approached with Killy, who was observing the decorated space with his usual quiet intensity. "The place looks beautiful, Amber," she said, "You've outdone yourself."

"Wait until you see the dessert table," I replied, unable to resist a small boast. "I had Kenzi design a gingerbread replica of the Cantina. It's structurally sound enough that Rose probably couldn't destroy it if she tried." I paused, reconsidering. "Actually, don't tell her that. I don't want her to take it as a challenge."

The door chimed again, and I turned to see Michelle and Hunter entering with their brood, followed closely by Andros, Ashley, and their twins. Michelle looked immaculate as always in a deep purple wrap dress that complemented her complexion perfectly, though I could detect the slight tension in her posture that betrayed her awareness of who else would be attending today's gathering.

"Merry Christmas!" I called out, moving to greet them with Rachel still perched on my hip. "Welcome to the madness."

"Amber," Michelle acknowledged with a smile that was only slightly forced. Her eyes darted around the space, clearly assessing who had already arrived. "The place looks lovely."

"Doesn't it? I had to talk Trevor out of his original 'minimalist chic' vision. Christmas requires excess." I leaned in slightly, unable to resist adding, "RJ hasn't arrived yet, in case you were wondering."

The flash of irritation in Michelle's eyes was exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for. "I wasn't," she replied coolly.

Hunter, ever the protective husband, placed a hand on the small of Michelle's back. "Where should we put Tomi's things?" he asked, deliberately changing the subject as he gestured to the diaper bag slung over his shoulder.

"There's a designated area for baby items in the corner," I explained, pointing toward a section I'd set up with playpens and changing facilities. "I thought it would be easier to have one central location for all the baby paraphernalia."

As they moved in that direction, I caught sight of Harley and Arissa exchanging glances with Aaron and Arion, the four teens already gravitating toward each other with the magnetic pull of adolescent social dynamics. They'd clearly coordinated their outfits—Harley in a stylish purple dress with combat boots, Arissa in a more traditional red velvet, and the boys in dark pants and Polo shirts that made them look older than their years.

"The teen table is set up in the alcove," I called out to them, gesturing toward a section slightly removed from the main tables but still within sight of watchful parents. "I thought you might appreciate some space from the adults."

"Thanks, Aunt Amber," Arissa replied with a genuine smile, already leading her small group in that direction.

The door chimed continuously over the next fifteen minutes as more guests arrived in rapid succession: Kara and Hal with their three daughters; Zachary, Kelly, and their children; Blake, Tori, and Lindsey; LeAnn, Cam, and Albert; the entire Jordan extended family; and finally, Fionn and Declan, who had clearly come directly through the Cantina's kitchen where Fionn normally worked alongside Trevor.

I was in the midst of directing the Jordan children toward the activity table when the door opened again to reveal Kenzie and Shay, followed by Saoirse, Tiernan, Sosaidh, and Abby.

"Welcome!" I greeted them, mentally calculating how many guests were still unaccounted for. "Saoirse, Tiernan—I don't think you've met everyone yet. Let me introduce you around once you've gotten settled."

Saoirse nodded, her expression carrying that particular blend of wariness and dignity that characterized her interactions with new people. "Thank you for including us," she said, her Irish accent more pronounced than Tiernan's. "We've brought traditional Celtic bread for the meal."

"Perfect," I replied, making a mental note to ensure it was prominently featured on the table. "Trevor will be thrilled." A small lie, but a diplomatic one—Trevor was currently in no state to be thrilled about anything related to food that he hadn't personally prepared.

The door chimed yet again, and I turned to see Niamh emerging from the kitchen at the exact moment Mia entered with RJ, his daughters, and his father. The timing couldn't have been more perfect if I'd orchestrated it myself—which, to be clear, I absolutely had not. Pure coincidence

that Finn and Niamh would have their first Christmas encounter under the strategically placed mistletoe by the entrance.

"Finn!" Niamh's voice carried a warmth that made Trevor's head snap up from across the room, his eyes narrowing as he observed his mother's reaction. "How lovely to see you again."

"The pleasure is mine," Finn replied with that particular gentlemanly charm that seemed to be a James family trait. His gaze lingered on Niamh a moment longer than strictly necessary, a fact that did not escape my notice—or Trevor's, judging by his expression.

I suppressed a smile as I watched the interaction unfold exactly as I'd anticipated. Phase two of Operation Holiday Romance was proceeding beautifully.

My satisfaction was briefly interrupted by the distinctive sound of hissing from near my feet. I looked down to see Thara, Michelle's imperious Turkish Angora, her back arched as she confronted Ellie, who had been peacefully napping under one of the tables. Kaya, Mia's equally territorial feline companion, observed the standoff from a safe distance, her tail twitching with what appeared to be feline amusement.

"No," I said firmly, pointing a finger at Thara. "Not today, Your Majesty. We are having a peaceful Christmas dinner."

Thara's yellow eyes narrowed, clearly communicating that peace had never been an option where Ellie was concerned.

Before the inevitable pet skirmish could erupt, the final group arrived—James and Aine with their newborn, accompanied by Pete, Gina, and their three children. James looked like he hadn't slept in weeks, his red hair standing on end and his shirt already stained with what I hoped was just baby formula. Aine, by contrast, appeared remarkably composed for a new mother, though the dark circles under her eyes told their own story.

"Sorry we're late," Aine apologized, adjusting the blanket around baby Keira. "Someone had a diaper situation just as we were leaving."

"James or the baby?" Pete asked with a grin, earning himself an elbow in the ribs from Gina.

"Both, actually," Aine replied with the weary humor of the truly sleep-deprived.

I glanced around the now-crowded space, mentally checking off our guest list. All sixty-eight people (and three pets) had arrived, the various social circles beginning to intermingle with varying degrees of comfort. Michelle was deliberately engaged in conversation with Livvie, pointedly ignoring RJ's presence across the room. Hunter and Cam maintained a careful distance from each other, while the teens had already formed their own exclusive enclave. The children's activity table was becoming the epicenter of controlled chaos, with Rose apparently appointing herself queen of the proceedings.

And in the kitchen, I could hear the distinctive sounds of too many cooks quite literally spoiling Trevor's meticulously planned workflow.

It was exactly the beautiful disaster I had anticipated.

"Everyone," I called out, raising my voice to be heard over the growing din of conversation. "Welcome to our Christmas celebration! Dinner will be served soon. Until then, please enjoy the appetizers circulating and make yourselves at home."

As the crowd dispersed toward various corners of the Cantina, I caught Trevor's eye across the room. His expression was a complex mixture of professional horror and resigned acceptance—the look of a man who had surrendered his kitchen to forces beyond his control.

I smiled reassuringly, adjusting Rachel on my hip. "It's going to be fine, mi corazón," I mouthed silently.

His responding look clearly communicated his doubts, but he nodded nonetheless, squaring his shoulders before disappearing back into the kitchen to assess the damage.

I surveyed the scene once more, satisfaction warming my chest despite the potential for multiple diplomatic incidents. Sixty-eight people with complicated histories, conflicting personalities, and enough collective baggage to sink a cruise ship—all gathered under one roof for Christmas dinner.

What could possibly go wrong?

I started to circulate the room, playing good hostess. I greeted everyone, but didn't stay with one person too long. I had just left Alexis and Maggie when I noticed Trev wasn't anywhere around. I spotted Fionn talking with Declan, Sosaidh, and Abby near the bar.

"Fionn, where's Trev?" I asked, adjusting Rachel on my hip as she reached for one of my earrings.

Fionn paused mid-conversation, his eyes scanning the crowded room with the practiced awareness of someone who'd spent years anticipating a chef's needs. "I haven't seen Chef in a while actually."

I looked at him and the same realization dawned on us simultaneously.

"Kitchen," we both said.

We rushed towards the kitchen, Rachel bouncing against my hip as I moved with purpose through the crowd. When we reached the pass-through window, we found Trevor standing there frozen, watching the proceedings inside with an expression of such profound distress that it would have been comical if it weren't so genuine.

"Mi Corazón? Love?" I asked carefully, placing my free hand on his arm.

"Chef?" Fionn echoed, concern evident in his voice.

"They are using my knives," Trevor whispered, his accent thicker than I'd heard it in months. "They are putting too much salt on the potatoes. One of them is making white gravy." The horror in his voice when he uttered those last words suggested a culinary sacrilege of the highest order.

Through the pass-through, I could see the chaos unfolding in Trevor's normally immaculate kitchen. Niamh was at the center island, confidently directing operations like a general commanding troops. Lea was at the stove, stirring something that smelled divine but clearly wasn't following Trevor's recipe, while Linda hovered nearby, making suggestions that were being studiously ignored. Jessica was methodically chopping vegetables with Trevor's prized Japanese knife—the one he rarely let anyone else touch—and Finn was carving the turkey with surprising expertise.

"White gravy," Trevor repeated, a slight tremor in his voice. "In my kitchen. On Christmas."

"It's just one meal, Love," I soothed, though I knew that to Trevor, there was no such thing as 'just' a meal, especially not Christmas dinner for sixty-eight people.

"Lea added rosemary to my mother's recipe," he continued, clearly not hearing me. "And Kara's mother—" he gestured toward Linda, who was now arguing with Jessica about the proper thickness of gravy—"is using margarine. Margarine, Amber!"

"I can step in," Fionn offered, already rolling up his sleeves. "Just say the word, Chef."

Trevor shook his head, a man resigned to his fate. "No. No, it's... it's fine. It's Christmas. Family traditions and all that." He didn't sound convinced of his own words. "But if anyone touches the dessert station, I will not be responsible for my actions."

I handed Rachel to him, a strategic move that I knew would force him to focus on something other than the culinary crimes being committed in his kitchen. "Here, hold your daughter while I go assess the situation."

Trevor automatically cradled Rachel against his chest, his expression softening as she patted his face with her tiny hand. It was the distraction he needed—nothing could compete with Rachel for his attention, not even the desecration of his professional domain.

"I'll be right back," I promised, exchanging a meaningful look with Fionn that clearly communicated he should keep Trevor occupied.

I pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen, immediately hit by a wall of competing aromas—some familiar from Trevor's cooking, others distinctly not. Niamh looked up as I entered, her face flushed with the heat of the kitchen and the excitement of creation.

"Amber, love! Just in time," she called out cheerfully. "Would you taste this gravy and tell me if it needs more salt?"

"It definitely doesn't need more salt," Linda interjected before I could respond. "It's already too salty. It needs more pepper."

"The salt level is perfect," Jessica countered, not looking up from her precise vegetable arrangement. "It's the consistency that needs work. Too thin."

I took a deep breath, channeling my most diplomatic business persona. This was just another negotiation, albeit one involving territorial mothers-in-law rather than corporate executives.

"Ladies," I began, my tone pleasant but firm, "everything smells wonderful. But perhaps we could consider Trevor's feelings? This is his professional kitchen, after all."

"Oh, he's fine," Niamh dismissed with a wave of her wooden spoon. "He needs to relax. I've been cooking Christmas dinner since before he could reach the stove."

"And I've been making this cornbread dressing for forty years," Linda added, her accent becoming more pronounced. "It's a family tradition."

"Which is lovely," I acknowledged, "but Trevor has been planning this meal for weeks. He has a very specific vision."

"Too specific," Lea chimed in from her position at the stove. "Christmas dinner should have soul, not just technique. He'll thank us when he tastes my gravy."

I caught Finn's eye across the kitchen, silently appealing for support. He seemed to understand immediately, setting down the carving knife and clearing his throat.

"Perhaps," he suggested with that calm authority that seemed to come naturally to him, "we could incorporate Trevor's recipes alongside our traditional contributions? A blending of families, as it were."

Niamh's expression softened as she looked at Finn. "That's a lovely thought."

"A compromise," Jessica agreed with a nod. "Traditional and modern together."

"I suppose my cornbread dressing could share the table with his fancy stuffing," Linda conceded, though her tone suggested this was a significant sacrifice on her part.

I seized the moment of consensus. "Perfect! Why don't I go get Trevor so he can show you which elements he was most excited about preserving?"

Before anyone could object, I slipped back through the doors to find Trevor still holding Rachel, who was now contentedly playing with his tie. Fionn stood nearby, apparently having been regaling Trevor with stories from the kitchen to distract him.

"Good news," I announced. "They've agreed to a compromise. Your vision with their traditional touches."

Trevor looked skeptical. "Define 'compromise.'"

"You'll have to come see," I replied, carefully extracting Rachel from his arms. "But I think you'll find it workable. And Finn is being surprisingly helpful."

"Finn?" Trevor's eyebrows rose. "My mother's... friend?"

"Yes, your mother's friend," I repeated, emphasizing the word in a way that dared him to challenge it.

"He suggested a blending of traditions, and they all seemed receptive."

Trevor sighed, straightening his tie where Rachel had crumpled it. "Fine. But I'm drawing the line at white gravy on my pommes purée."

"Naturally," I agreed, watching as he squared his shoulders and pushed through the kitchen doors with the determination of a man reclaiming his territory.

Fionn glanced at me, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Ten euros says he's completely taken over again within fifteen minutes."

"Twenty says Niamh manages to keep him in check," I countered. "Especially with Finn's help."

"You're that confident in your matchmaking?" Fionn asked, his tone suggesting he'd noticed my strategic maneuvering.

"I prefer to think of it as facilitating natural attraction," I replied primly, adjusting Rachel on my hip.

"Now, shall we go make sure the rest of our guests aren't starting any diplomatic incidents in our absence?"

As we headed back to the main dining area, I couldn't help but feel a surge of satisfaction. The kitchen situation was being managed, Operation Holiday Romance was proceeding according to plan, and so far, no one had thrown a punch or stormed out in tears.

For a gathering of this size and complexity, that counted as a Christmas miracle in my book.

Michelle

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"Keep your evil furball away from Kaya," Mia snapped as she scooped up my cat. Thara had just pounced on Kaya from atop a decorative garland, displaying the ambush skills that had made her a feared predator in our household.

Mia unceremoniously dropped Thara into my arms, her expression a mixture of irritation and protective concern as she checked Kaya for injuries.

"Oh baby girl, be good," I murmured, pressing a kiss to Thara's silky muted calico head.

Thara swished her tail and glared at Mia with unmistakable indignity, her yellow eyes narrowing to slits. The look clearly communicated that she considered herself the wronged party in this situation.

"It's hardly my fault that your cat has no sense of humor," I said, stroking Thara's fur to calm her.

"Thara was just playing."

Mia cradled Kaya protectively against her chest, checking her for injuries. "She assaulted Kaya. She stirs chaos just like her mommy."

"And Kaya has a stick up her ass just like her mommy," I shot back before I could stop myself, the childish retort escaping my lips before my diplomatic training could intervene.

"Mich..." Hunter's warning tone came from beside me, his hand finding the small of my back in that familiar grounding gesture.

"Michelle, it's Christmas," RJ interjected, stepping closer to Mia with that placating expression I'd always hated. "Can we call a truce for a day?"

"Tell that to your girlfriend," I replied coolly, my fingers still working through Thara's fur though my eyes remained fixed on RJ's.

"Companion," Mia corrected automatically, her tone suggesting this was a distinction she frequently had to make.

"Whatever," I rolled my eyes.

Hunter's hand pressed more firmly against my back, a silent reminder to maintain composure. I took a deep breath, forcing myself to remember that I was a mother, a professional, and technically royalty on another planet. I could handle one Christmas dinner with my ex-husband without descending into petty sniping.

Probably.

"I apologize for Thara's behavior," I said with careful formality, my tone making it clear I was apologizing for my cat, not myself. "She gets excited around other animals."

"Kaya will survive," Mia replied with equal stiffness. "She's tougher than she looks."

An awkward silence descended, broken only by Thara's rumbling purr as she settled more comfortably in my arms, apparently satisfied with the chaos she'd created. RJ shifted his weight from one foot to the other, that familiar nervous gesture I remembered from our marriage whenever tension rose between us.

"The Cantina looks amazing," he offered, clearly attempting to change the subject. "Amber has quite an eye for decoration."

"She does," I agreed, grateful for the neutral topic despite myself. "Though Trevor probably had to be sedated when she started hanging garlands in his minimalist space."

A ghost of a genuine smile crossed RJ's face. "Some things never change. Remember when you tried to put up that inflatable snowman at JKP and I nearly had a stroke?"

The unexpected reference to our shared past caught me off guard. For a moment, I was transported back to that first Christmas after we'd married, when I'd enthusiastically embraced holiday decorating while RJ had insisted on maintaining the restaurant's "zen aesthetic."

"You called it 'commercial holiday propaganda,'" I recalled, a reluctant smile tugging at my lips despite my determination to remain aloof.

"It was ten feet tall and played 'Frosty the Snowman' every time someone walked past," RJ defended, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that familiar way. "The customers complained."

"The customers loved it," I countered. "The only one complaining was you."

For a brief moment, the years and hurt between us seemed to thin, revealing the easy camaraderie that had once characterized our relationship before everything went wrong. Then Mia shifted closer to RJ, her hand casually finding his arm in a gesture that was simultaneously natural and deliberately territorial.

The moment shattered, reality reasserting itself with uncomfortable clarity.

"I should check on the girls," I said, stepping back slightly. "Make sure Harley isn't terrorizing the younger kids."

"And I need to find Summer and Autumn," RJ nodded, accepting the retreat for what it was. "Last I saw, they were heading toward the activity table with Rose in charge, which is slightly terrifying."

"Good luck with that," I replied, my tone cooling again. "Rose is a force of nature."

As we parted ways, Hunter's arm slid around my waist, a silent gesture of solidarity that I leaned into gratefully. "You okay?" he murmured once RJ and Mia were out of earshot.

"Fine," I assured him, though we both knew it wasn't entirely true. "Just the usual ex awkwardness, amplified by holiday stress and Amber's strategic seating arrangements."

"We could still leave," Hunter suggested, only half joking. "Grab the girls and make a run for it. I'm sure Thara could create a diversion."

I laughed despite myself, some of the tension easing from my shoulders. "Tempting, but no. We're adults. We can handle one dinner."

"Speaking of handling things," Hunter's tone shifted slightly, his gaze fixed on something across the room. "Cam is heading this way, and he has that look."

"What look?" I asked, following his line of sight to where Cam was indeed approaching, his expression suggesting he had something specific to discuss.

"The 'I've identified seventeen flaws in your security system and need to tell you about each one in excruciating detail' look," Hunter replied with a resigned sigh. "Brace yourself."

I suppressed a groan, wondering if it was too late to reconsider Hunter's escape plan. Between RJ, Mia, and now Cam, this corner of the Cantina was rapidly becoming the epicenter of interpersonal awkwardness.

"Merry Christmas to us," I muttered, plastering on my professional smile as Cam reached us. "Let the games begin."

"Michelle, your friend Livvie is insufferable," Cam declared without preamble, his glasses slightly askew as if he'd been running his hands through his hair in frustration.

I nearly spit out the wine I was sipping, caught completely off guard by the unexpected topic. "What?"

"She thinks she's God's gift to computers," he elaborated, his voice carrying that particular blend of academic disdain and personal offense I remembered all too well from our Ninja Storm days.

I couldn't help but laugh, the absurdity of the complaint momentarily overriding the awkwardness of the situation. "As opposed to you? Cam, hate to tell you, but she is the best hacker I know and rivals Billy in her tech knowledge in a way even you don't."

Cam's expression tightened, his posture becoming more rigid. "She is not as good as she thinks she is. I could hack her systems."

This time Hunter laughed in spite of himself, a genuine sound that momentarily erased the tension that had been simmering beneath the surface since Cam's arrival. "Try it. But let me watch. I love the taste of humiliation on New Year's."

"You try to hack the Tech Fairy and she will turn your systems into paperweights," I warned, unable to keep the amusement from my voice. "I really wouldn't advise it."

Cam opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by Livvie herself appearing at my elbow, a knowing smile playing at the corners of her lips. Her timing was so perfect I momentarily wondered if she'd somehow been monitoring our conversation.

"Did I hear my name being taken in vain?" she asked lightly, her accent more pronounced than usual, something I'd noticed happened when she was particularly amused or irritated.

Cam's expression suggested he'd been caught plotting a coup. "We were just discussing cybersecurity protocols," he said stiffly.

"Were you now?" Livvie's eyebrow arched elegantly. "Any particular protocols, or just general theory?"

"The modifications you made to the Celtic integration," Cam replied, recovering his composure. "They're... unorthodox."

"Unorthodox but effective," Livvie countered smoothly. "The traditional approach wasn't working, so I created a new one."



I watched their exchange with growing fascination, feeling like a spectator at a particularly intense tennis match. Hunter's hand found mine, giving it a gentle squeeze that I interpreted as equal parts amusement and warning not to escalate the situation.

"Effectiveness doesn't automatically ensure security," Cam argued, his voice taking on the lecturing tone that had driven Hunter crazy during their relationship. "Nonstandard protocols create unpredictable vulnerabilities."

"Only if you're thinking linearly," Livvie replied with maddening calm. "The Celtic energy signatures operate on principles that don't conform to conventional Grid mapping. A nonlinear approach was the only viable solution."

Cam adjusted his glasses, a gesture I recognized as his equivalent of rolling up his sleeves for battle. "I've been working with the Morphin Grid for over a decade—"

"And I've been breaking into supposedly unbreakable systems since I was fourteen," Livvie interrupted smoothly. "Sometimes an outsider's perspective is exactly what's needed."

The tension between them was palpable, two brilliant minds locked in a battle of technical egos. I caught Hunter's eye, silently communicating my amusement at watching Cam meet his intellectual match.

"Perhaps," I suggested diplomatically, "you two could continue this fascinating discussion after the holidays? When you could actually access the systems you're debating?"

"Excellent idea," Jeremy interjected, appearing beside Livvie with impeccable timing. "Besides, I need to steal my wife away. Rose has declared herself 'Christmas Fairy Queen' and is attempting to organize the other children into her royal court. Killy is the only one resisting the coup."

"That sounds like a diplomatic situation requiring immediate intervention," I agreed, grateful for the interruption. "We wouldn't want an international incident at the kids' table."

"Precisely," Jeremy nodded solemnly, though his eyes sparkled with humor. "Livvie's negotiation skills are desperately needed."

Livvie allowed herself to be led away, but not before giving Cam a parting smile that somehow managed to be both perfectly polite and subtly challenging. "We'll continue this conversation later. I'd be happy to show you the elegance of my solution... when you're ready to understand it."

Cam watched them leave, his expression a complex mixture of irritation and reluctant respect. "She's..."

"Brilliant? Infuriating? Impossible to intimidate?" I supplied helpfully. "Yes to all of the above."

"I was going to say 'unconventional,'" Cam finished, though his tone suggested my assessment wasn't entirely off the mark.

"That's Livvie," Hunter agreed, his voice carrying a warmth that spoke of genuine friendship. "She sees problems differently than most people. It's what makes her so good at what she does."

An awkward silence descended as the three of us stood there, the ghosts of our shared history almost visible in the space between us. Cam and Hunter had managed to achieve a careful civility in the years since their relationship ended, but there remained an undercurrent of unresolved tension that surfaced in moments like these.

"I should check on Sensei," Cam said finally, clearly seeking an exit from the increasingly uncomfortable situation. "He was talking with Niamh earlier, and I'm concerned they might be exchanging embarrassing stories about Le's childhood."

"That sounds like a disaster worth preventing," I agreed, offering him the graceful exit he was seeking. "We'll catch up later."

As Cam retreated across the crowded room, I turned to Hunter with a raised eyebrow. "Well, that was interesting."

"Cam challenging someone else's technical expertise?" Hunter replied with a small smile. "That's actually pretty on-brand for Christmas miracles."

I laughed, some of the tension easing from my shoulders. "True. Though I'd pay good money to see him try to hack Livvie's systems."

"It would be the shortest cyber battle in history," Hunter agreed, his arm sliding around my waist in a casual gesture that nonetheless felt like an anchor in the choppy social waters we were navigating.

I leaned into his embrace, grateful for the momentary calm in what was proving to be a Christmas gathering filled with unexpected dynamics and potential diplomatic incidents at every turn. Between RJ, Mia, and now Cam, I was beginning to think we might need a scorecard to keep track of all the interpersonal complexities swirling around us.

"How long until dinner?" I asked, glancing toward the kitchen where I could hear the muffled sounds of what seemed to be a heated debate about gravy consistency.

"Not soon enough," Hunter replied with feeling, his gaze following mine. "But at least we're all still speaking to each other. So far."

"The key words being 'so far,'" I agreed, taking another sip of my wine. "The day is still young."

Livvie

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I followed J back to the kids' area, still mentally composing the perfect technical retort to Cam's outdated perspective on Grid integration. The man was brilliant, certainly, but his rigid adherence to traditional protocols was exactly the kind of thinking that had kept the Ranger systems isolated for so

long. Some people just couldn't appreciate elegant solutions when they came from unexpected sources.

My thoughts of cybersecurity were abruptly interrupted by the unmistakable sound of a childhood power struggle in progress. Rose, predictably, was at the epicenter of the conflict, her fairy wings quivering with indignation as she faced off against Summer, one of RJ's twins.

"You're a baby, Rose, stop trying to be bossy," Summer declared with the particular confidence of a six-year-old who considers herself vastly more mature than a two-year-old.

"I not baby!" Rose yelled, her cheeks flushing crimson beneath her blonde hair, fairy wand clutched in her small fist like a weapon.

"Whoa there, mo stór, come here," J said, smoothly scooping up Rose as she tried to wiggle away, her little legs kicking in protest.

I surveyed the scene, quickly assessing the diplomatic situation. Summer stood with arms crossed, a triumphant expression on her face that suggested she felt she'd won the confrontation. Autumn, her twin, hovered nearby with an expression that was half concern, half fascination. Tomi sat on the floor nearby, contentedly stacking blocks with Killy, both seemingly oblivious to the power struggle unfolding around them. Tiffy, Arthur, and the other younger children watched with the wide-eyed interest of those witnessing their first international incident.

"What's happening here, then?" I asked, crouching down to eye level with Summer, my tone casual but firm.

"She was being bossy," Summer reported immediately, her chin lifting with righteous indignation.

"She said we all had to be in her fairy kingdom and do what she said. But I don't want to be a fairy. I want to be a ninja."

Rose, still struggling in J's arms, pointed accusingly at Summer. "She ruined fairy magic! She mean!"

"I see," I said, nodding seriously as if this were a complex negotiation between sovereign nations rather than a holiday playdate gone awry. In many ways, it wasn't so different—wounded pride, territorial disputes, and fundamental ideological differences were at the heart of most conflicts, regardless of the participants' ages.

"Rose," J addressed our daughter, his voice gentle but firm as he set her down but kept a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Remember what we talked about? Not everyone wants to play the same games."

Rose's lower lip protruded in a magnificent pout, her fairy wings drooping slightly in a perfect physical manifestation of her disappointment. "But I queen," she insisted, though with less conviction than before.

"You can be queen of the fairies," I suggested, inspiration striking. "And Summer can be leader of the ninjas. Two different kingdoms that are allies."

Summer considered this proposition, her expression thoughtful. "Like... we help each other but have different jobs?"

"Exactly," I confirmed, relieved at her quick understanding. "The fairy kingdom and the ninja clan can be friends who respect each other's different skills."

Rose's expression remained dubious, but I could see her processing this diplomatic solution. "Ninjas help fairies?" she asked cautiously.

"And fairies help ninjas," J added, seizing on the peace treaty taking shape. "With different kinds of magic."

"I have ninja magic," Summer declared, apparently warming to this new narrative. "I can disappear and fight bad guys."

"I have fairy magic," Rose countered, not to be outdone. "I make things pretty and fly."

I exchanged a glance with J, both of us recognizing the fragile peace accord forming before our eyes. These early lessons in compromise and cooperation were the foundation of all future relationships—something I'd learned through years of navigating complex technical collaborations where egos often rivaled expertise.

"Why don't you show the others how ninjas and fairies can work together?" I suggested, gesturing to the other children who had been watching the negotiations with varying degrees of interest. "You could put on a show for the grown-ups later."

This suggestion was met with immediate enthusiasm from both parties, the prospect of an audience apparently outweighing any lingering territorial disputes. Within moments, Rose and Summer were deep in planning mode, assigning roles to the other children with the efficiency of seasoned event coordinators.

"Crisis averted," J murmured as we stepped back slightly, allowing the children to organize themselves while remaining close enough to intervene if diplomatic relations deteriorated again.

"For now," I agreed, watching as Killy was reluctantly drafted into service as a "ninja-fairy guard" despite his clear preference for continuing his block tower construction. "Though I suspect we'll need to negotiate additional treaties before the day is out."

"Speaking of negotiations," J said, his tone shifting slightly as he glanced toward where I'd left Cam, Hunter, and Michelle. "How was your chat with Cam? I could feel the technical tension from across the room."

I rolled my eyes, though a small smile played at the corners of my mouth. "The man is brilliant but insufferable. He genuinely believes that because he's been working with the Grid longer, his approach must be superior—even when it demonstrably isn't."

"Sounds like someone else I know when it comes to technical certainty," J teased, nudging my shoulder gently with his.

"The difference being that I'm actually right," I countered, though I couldn't help but laugh at his accurate assessment of my own occasional technical stubbornness. "The Celtic integration works perfectly. His theoretical objections are just that—theoretical."

"Well, try not to reduce his systems to smoldering ruins before dessert, yeah?" J requested lightly. "It's Christmas, after all."

"I make no promises," I replied with mock seriousness. "But I'll at least wait until after Trevor's *bûche de Noël*. I wouldn't want to miss that for a mere cybersecurity showdown."

Our attention was drawn back to the children as Rose's voice rose in what appeared to be a passionate speech about fairy-ninja cooperation. Her small audience watched with expressions ranging from rapt attention (Tomi and Autumn) to polite confusion (Arthur) to barely concealed skepticism (Tiffany).

"Should we intervene?" J asked as Rose's gestures became increasingly dramatic, her fairy wand narrowly missing Summer's head.

"Not yet," I decided after a moment's assessment. "They're still in the planning phase. Let's see how this alliance develops."

As we watched our daughter holding court, somehow managing to incorporate ninja stealth techniques into fairy magic principles with surprising creativity, I couldn't help but reflect on the parallel negotiations happening throughout the Cantina. Adults and children alike were navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, forming alliances, establishing boundaries, and occasionally stepping on toes—all part of the intricate dance of family gatherings, especially ones as ambitious as this sixty-eight-person Christmas extravaganza.

"Ten quid says Rose has them all organized into a functioning fairy-ninja performance troupe within fifteen minutes," J wagered, his eyes crinkling with amusement as he watched our daughter in action.

"No bet," I replied with a knowing smile. "Our daughter is nothing if not persuasive when she sets her mind to something."

"Wonder where she gets that from," J mused, his arm slipping around my waist in a casual gesture of affection.

I leaned into his embrace, enjoying this moment of relative calm amid the cheerful chaos of the gathering. "Purely a mystery," I agreed solemnly, though we both knew exactly which parent had contributed that particular trait to Rose's formidable personality.

As if to prove our point, Rose clapped her hands authoritatively, bringing her newly formed fairy-ninja alliance to attention with surprising effectiveness. "Now we practice!" she announced, her voice carrying the absolute certainty of a natural-born leader.

Summer, apparently having fully embraced her role as ninja commander, began demonstrating exaggerated martial arts moves. The other children followed suit with varying degrees of enthusiasm and coordination.

"Should we warn the adults about the impending performance?" J asked as the rehearsal began in earnest, fairy wands and imaginary ninja stars flying with equal abandon.

"Where would be the fun in that?" I replied with a mischievous smile. "I think this gathering could use a little surprise fairy-ninja entertainment, don't you?"

J laughed, pressing a quick kiss to my temple. "This is why I love you. Always keeping life interesting."

"Speaking of interesting," I nodded toward where Killy was methodically constructing what appeared to be a fortress wall with blocks, creating a protective barrier between himself and the increasingly chaotic rehearsal. "Our son has the right idea. Strategic defense against Rose-chaos."

"Smart lad," J agreed with obvious pride. "Always thinking ahead."

As we continued to monitor the evolving fairy-ninja alliance, I caught sight of Cam across the room, deep in conversation with LeAnn. Even from this distance, his posture suggested he was explaining something technical with that particular intensity he brought to all things Grid-related.

I suppressed a smile, making a mental note to casually mention my latest encryption breakthrough to him later—after dinner, of course. Christmas was about joy, after all, and few things brought me more professional joy than watching brilliant but arrogant tech experts reconsider their assumptions when confronted with elegant solutions they hadn't conceived themselves.

But that would wait. For now, there was a fairy-ninja performance to supervise and a holiday gathering to enjoy—technical rivalries and all.

J and I made our way over to where Sosaidh and Abs were chatting with Declan, leaving the children to their increasingly elaborate fairy-ninja production. The adult conversation promised to be marginally less chaotic, though with this particular gathering, that wasn't guaranteed.

"Where's your better half?" I asked Declan.

Declan laughed, his Dublin accent thickening with amusement. "At the moment keeping Chef Trevor from having a mental breakdown."

"Kara went to help in the kitchen too. I offered as well but Trev said I'm not allowed in his kitchen," Sosaidh said, her expression suggesting this was a personal affront.

J laughed at his sister, the familial teasing evident in his tone. "He remembers your attempt at mac for Thanksgiving."

"I was trying to help give our American friends an authentic Thanksgiving," Sosaidh replied with dignified defensiveness, though her eyes sparkled with good humor.

"Baby, you put marshmallows in the cheese," Abs said gently, her Aussie accent contrasting pleasantly with the Irish lilt of the others.

"OK, one, I was drinking, and two, I mixed up the mac and cheese with that sweet potato thing. I can't keep those American dishes straight," Sosaidh explained, gesturing expressively with her wine glass.

"We also all saw your attempt at Christmas cookies," I added, unable to resist joining the good-natured ribbing.

"Da loved them," Sosaidh said, lifting her chin slightly.

"Speaking of that video, you have to warn me before Mary appears in one of your videos," J said, his tone shifting subtly at the mention of his estranged mother.

"Mam didn't 'appear'. She refused to let me film her. Only Da was ok being on camera," Sosaidh said, a bit confused by her brother's reaction.

"Aye, but she spoke. I heard Mary's voice and had PTSD," J said, only half joking. The tension in his jaw betrayed how deeply his mother's rejection still affected him, despite the years and distance he'd put between them.

"To be honest I don't know why you went to see them after what she tried to do at your wedding anyway," I said, my protective instincts flaring as they always did when Mary was mentioned. The woman had literally attempted to have me killed at their wedding.

"Neither do I. She makes a plan to kill my sister at my wedding and my wife is making her cookies," Abs muttered, her arm tightening around Sosaidh's waist.

"What she did was wrong and she knows it. I haven't forgiven her, but I wanted to see Da," Sosaidh replied, her expression softening as she mentioned their father. "I don't condone what she tried to do to you, Liv."

I nodded, acknowledging her sincerity. "I know. You're just too nice for your own good sometimes."

"That she is," Abs agreed, pressing a quick kiss to Sosaidh's temple, her expression a mixture of exasperation and deep affection.

"Anyway, Declan," I said, deliberately changing the subject to lighter territory, "heard you invited Fionn to move in?"

"Aye, he agreed so he is moving in after the new year," Declan confirmed, his face lighting up with genuine happiness. The transformation was remarkable—from living in the closet with Alan to being open and happy with Fionn. He looked like a man who had found unexpected joy.

"That's brilliant news," J said warmly, raising his glass in a small toast. "You two are good together."

"Thanks," Declan replied, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. "It's been... unexpected. In the best way."

"The best relationships often are," I observed, thinking of my own unlikely path to happiness with J. I never thought a birthday trip with Abs to London would lead me to meet my soulmate.

"Speaking of unexpected," Sosaidh said, her gaze shifting toward the kitchen doors, "is it just me, or are Niamh and Finn spending a lot of time together?"

We all turned to look where Trevor's mother and RJ's father were emerging from the kitchen, their heads bent close together in conversation, both laughing at something Finn had just said. The body language between them was unmistakable—the slightly prolonged eye contact, the casual but deliberate touches, the mirrored smiles.

"Amber's matchmaking again," I deduced, recognizing the strategic maneuvering of our host. "Ten quid says she engineered their kitchen collaboration."

"No bet," J replied with a knowing smile. "That has Amber written all over it."

"Trevor doesn't look thrilled," Abs noted, nodding toward where Trevor stood watching his mother and Finn with an expression that suggested he was processing complex emotions in real time.

"He'll get over it," I said confidently. "Niamh deserves some happiness. And Finn seems like a decent sort."

Our conversation was interrupted by a commotion from the children's area—the distinctive sound of Rose's "leadership" voice rising above the general din. I turned to see our daughter standing on a chair (despite our frequent reminders about safety), her fairy wings glittering as she directed her troupe of fairy-ninjas with imperious hand gestures.

"I think the performance is about to begin," J observed with a mixture of pride and trepidation.

"Should we warn people or let it be a surprise?"

"Surprise is always more fun," Sosaidh decided with a mischievous grin, "Besides, everyone could use a distraction from all the adult drama."

As if to prove her point, I noticed Michelle and RJ engaged in what appeared to be a tense conversation near the bar, while Hunter and Cam maintained a careful distance from each other across the room. The various interpersonal dynamics at play throughout the Cantina created an

invisible web of connections and tensions, a complex social network that would have challenged even the most sophisticated mapping algorithms.

"Fair point," I agreed, taking another sip of my mulled wine. "A fairy-ninja performance might be exactly what this gathering needs."

"Or the thing that pushes it into complete chaos," J added with a wry smile.

"Either way, it'll be memorable," I replied, linking my arm through his as we turned our attention to the impending children's production. "And isn't that what holidays are all about? Creating memories?"

"Is that what they're about?" J asked with mock seriousness. "I thought they were about surviving family gatherings without anyone ending up in A&E."

"That too," I conceded with a laugh. "Though with this particular group, I'd say we're doing well if we make it to dessert without anyone throwing a punch."

"Don't jinx it," Abs warned, though her tone was light. "The day is still young."

As Rose's voice rose again, now apparently issuing final instructions to her fairy-ninja ensemble, I couldn't help but feel a surge of affection for this chaotic, complicated, wonderful extended family we'd built. For all its tensions and complex dynamics, there was genuine love here—love that transcended biological connections, past conflicts, and even attempted wedding-day assassinations. And if that wasn't the true spirit of Christmas, I didn't know what was.

Kara

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I had gone into the kitchen to help with the cooking, hoping for a brief reprieve from the complex social dynamics playing out in the main dining area. Instead, I walked straight into another battlefield—my mother was arguing with Jessica and Lea. Again.

"There is nothing wrong with the way Lea mixed the pea salad," Jessica was saying, her normally calm voice carrying an edge of exasperation.

"She shouldn't even be in here. Do you even know how to cook or does your rich floozy daughter cater everything?" Mom shot back, her accent thickening as it always did when she was being particularly judgmental.

"Excuse me?" Lea said, straightening to her full height, her expression shifting from surprise to indignation.

"You heard me. Everyone knows what your daughter did from the time she was a child. What mother lets that happen?" Mom accused, her hands on her hips as she delivered this particularly low blow.

I sighed, feeling the familiar mixture of embarrassment and frustration that my mother's behavior inevitably provoked. Yes, Michelle's past as a child actress and her later career were public knowledge, and no, I didn't necessarily agree with all of it, but it certainly wasn't our business to judge—especially not during Christmas dinner preparations.

"I tried my best to keep my kids safe," Lea countered, her voice tight with controlled emotion.

"You sold your daughter and son to Hollywood and gave up the other two for adoption. Some mother," Mom continued relentlessly, wielding her wooden spoon like a weapon as she stirred the gravy with unnecessary force.

"You have no idea what my life has been so shut the hell up," Lea snapped, color rising in her cheeks.

"She's right, you have no business judging her as a mother," Niamh said as she walked back into the kitchen with Finn. She was quick to defend her best friend, stepping protectively closer to Lea.

"And Michelle is a lovely woman," Finn agreed, his calm presence a stark contrast to the tension simmering around the kitchen island.

"That's why your son annulled his marriage to her?" Mom asked with mock innocence, never one to miss an opportunity to twist the knife.

"Mother, stop," I pleaded, crossing the kitchen to take the spoon out of her hand and take over gravy duty before she could do any more damage—to the gravy or to the fragile holiday peace. "Please."

"It's hardly my fault these Catholics and heathens raise their children to be sinners," Mom said, her chin lifting with the righteous certainty that had characterized her approach to parenting, religion, and most aspects of life for as long as I could remember.

The kitchen fell silent, the only sounds the bubbling of pots and the distant hum of conversation from the main dining area. Trevor, who had been meticulously arranging a platter of canapés at the far counter, looked like he was contemplating whether professional ethics prevented him from ejecting a guest from his kitchen. Fionn, working alongside him, placed a cautioning hand on his arm.

"Linda," my father's voice came from the doorway, his tone carrying that particular blend of weariness and warning that came from decades of marriage to my mother. "Perhaps you'd like to join me in the dining room? I believe they're about to serve the appetizers."

"I'm helping with dinner, Paul," Mom replied, though she made no move to reclaim the gravy spoon from my hand.

"I think they have plenty of help in here," Dad said firmly, his eyes meeting mine in a silent apology. "Come along, now."

To my surprise and relief, Mom actually complied, though not without a parting glance at Lea that carried unspoken judgment. As Dad guided her from the kitchen, I turned to the others with an apologetic smile.

"I'm so sorry about that," I said, focusing on the gravy to avoid meeting anyone's eyes directly. "She's... well, she's Mom."

"Don't apologize for her, dear," Niamh said kindly, moving to pat my shoulder. "We all have our crosses to bear when it comes to family."

"Some crosses are heavier than others," Lea muttered, though her expression had softened slightly at my obvious discomfort.

"The important thing is that you're not her," Jessica added, returning to her vegetable arrangement with renewed focus. "You've raised wonderful daughters."

I felt a surge of gratitude for these women—all mothers who had navigated their own complex paths, making difficult choices and sacrifices along the way. Whatever their differences, they shared an understanding of the challenges of motherhood that transcended judgment.

"Thank you," I said simply, stirring the gravy with perhaps more attention than it strictly required. "I'm trying my best."

"That's all any of us can do," Niamh agreed, exchanging a look with Lea. "Now, let's focus on getting this meal ready before the natives get restless."

The kitchen settled into a more harmonious rhythm after that, with each person focusing on their assigned tasks.

I concentrated on the gravy, adding a pinch more salt and a dash of pepper, trying to find the perfect balance that would please both Southern and Irish palates—a culinary metaphor for my own life, straddling different worlds and traditions, always seeking harmony without losing authenticity.

"Is this too thick?" I asked no one in particular, lifting the spoon to demonstrate the gravy's consistency.

"It's perfect," Finn said, appearing at my side with an appreciative nod. "RJ's grandmother used to make gravy just like that for Christmas dinner."

"High praise indeed," Niamh commented, her smile warming as she glanced at Finn. The chemistry between them was palpable, a gentle current of attraction that seemed to soften the edges of the kitchen tension.

"Speaking of RJ," I ventured carefully, seizing the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity, "how is he handling being here? With Michelle and Hunter, I mean?"

Finn considered the question thoughtfully, his expression suggesting he was choosing his words with care. "He's... making an effort," he said finally. "They both are. Sometimes that's all we can ask."

I nodded, understanding the complex dynamics at play. My own friendship with Michelle had evolved over the years from initial wariness to genuine affection, despite our different approaches to life. I respected her strength and resilience, even when I didn't always agree with her choices.

"It's not easy navigating past relationships," I acknowledged, thinking of my own complicated history with Hal. "Especially during the holidays."

"The holidays have a way of magnifying everything, don't they?" Lea observed, joining our conversation as she put the finishing touches on a platter of deviled eggs. "The good and the difficult."

"That they do," I agreed, turning down the heat under the gravy to keep it warm without thickening further. "Though I have to say, Trevor and Amber have created something special here, bringing everyone together like this."

"It's a brave undertaking," Niamh said with evident pride in her son and daughter-in-law. "Sixty-eight people with all their histories and connections—it's like hosting the United Nations with more personal stakes."

"And better food," Finn added with a smile that Niamh returned immediately, their eyes meeting in a moment of connection that seemed to exist outside the bustling kitchen activity.

I observed their interaction with interest, noting the easy comfort between them despite their relatively recent acquaintance. There was something refreshingly uncomplicated about their attraction—two adults who had lived full lives, raised their children, and now found unexpected connection in their later years.

We finally finished dinner preparations and started bringing everything out to the buffet table. We had decided that serving 68 people would be insane, so we opted to let everyone fix their own plates. The long tables were laden with an impressive array of dishes—traditional Irish fare courtesy of Niamh, Southern specialties from my mother (despite her personality flaws, her cooking was undeniably excellent), and contributions from every other family represented at the gathering.

Once we had the food arranged to Trevor's exacting standards, I made my way back to the main dining area. I spotted Hal immediately—he had already fixed a plate for himself, Tiffy, and me. My husband sat at our assigned table with Tiffy in a booster seat beside him, carefully cutting her food into manageable pieces. The sight warmed my heart, a small moment of normalcy amid the chaos of this massive gathering.

I slid into my seat next to him, feeling a wave of gratitude for his steady presence. "Thank you so much, baby," I said, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

"Of course. It looks great, babe," he smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way that still made my heart skip after all these years.

"Who is going to say grace?" Mom asked loudly from the table behind us, her voice carrying that particular tone of religious expectation that had punctuated my childhood.

I sighed, bracing myself for another potential conflict—in a gathering this diverse, with so many different faith traditions (or lack thereof), Mom's insistence on a Baptist-style blessing could easily become another flashpoint.

Before anyone could respond, Amber stood gracefully, tapping her wine glass with a spoon to gather everyone's attention. The room gradually quieted, all eyes turning toward our hostess as she surveyed the gathered crowd with evident satisfaction.

"Thank you everyone for being here," she began, her voice carrying easily through the space. "I know we all have different traditions, faiths, and customs, but we are connected through someone in this room and that makes us family. I couldn't ask for a better Christmas than to spend it with everyone I love and the people they love."

Her gaze swept around the room, making eye contact with various guests in a way that somehow managed to make each person feel personally acknowledged. It was a masterful display of the social intelligence that had helped build her beauty empire.

"Thank you for allowing Trevor and I to host you at his beautiful restaurant," she continued, raising her glass slightly. "Please, help yourself to anything you want or need. Merry Christmas, Feliz Navidad, and Nollaig Shona Daoibh."

The inclusive greeting—delivered in English, Spanish, and Irish—was met with appreciative murmurs and raised glasses throughout the room. It was a perfect diplomatic solution, acknowledging the occasion without imposing any particular religious framework on the diverse gathering.

I caught Mom's expression of disapproval from the corner of my eye—clearly, she had been expecting a proper Christian blessing rather than Amber's secular toast. But to my relief, Dad placed a gentle hand over hers, forestalling any comment she might have been preparing to make.

"That was nicely handled," Hal murmured to me as conversations resumed around us and people began making their way to the buffet tables. "Your mom looks like she bit into a lemon, though."

"Amber's good at navigating social minefields," I replied quietly, picking up my fork. "And Mom will survive hearing 'Merry Christmas' instead of a five-minute prayer about our Lord and Savior."

Hal chuckled, his hand finding mine under the table in a gesture of solidarity that we'd perfected over years of family gatherings. "So how bad was it in the kitchen?" he asked, his voice low enough that Tiffany couldn't overhear. "On a scale of one to your mother disowning you?"

"About a seven," I admitted, taking a bite of the perfectly roasted turkey. "She went after Lea about Michelle's career choices and called everyone heathens. The usual."

Hal winced sympathetically. "Sorry, babe. I would have run interference if I'd known."

"It's fine. Dad eventually extracted her," I assured him. "And honestly, I think it might have actually brought Lea and Jessica closer together. Nothing builds solidarity like mutual disapproval from my mother."

"Finding the silver lining," Hal said with an approving nod. "That's my girl."

I smiled, feeling some of the tension from the kitchen confrontation finally beginning to ease. Looking around at the tables filled with people eating, talking, and occasionally laughing, I was struck by the improbable beauty of the gathering. Despite the various tensions and complicated histories, there was genuine warmth in the room—connections being formed and strengthened across unexpected divides.

At the teen table, Kira and Kora were engaged in animated conversation with Lindsey and Ally, while Harley and Aaron sat with their heads close together, occasionally feeding each other bites of food in that particularly teenage display of affection that was simultaneously sweet and slightly nauseating. Arissa and Arion maintained a more formal distance, though their evident attentiveness to each other spoke volumes about their connection.

And throughout the adult tables, the various family units had begun to intermingle—Trevor deep in conversation with Andros about something that had both men gesturing enthusiastically; Michelle and Livvie laughing together over some shared joke; Blake regaling Jeremy and Zachary with a story that had them both leaning forward with interest.

Even RJ and Hunter seemed to have reached some sort of Christmas truce, maintaining a polite distance but occasionally exchanging civil nods when their paths crossed. It wasn't friendship, but it was a far cry from the tension I'd witnessed at previous gatherings.

"It's kind of amazing, isn't it?" I said to Hal, nodding toward the scene before us. "All these people, all these complicated relationships, and somehow it's working."

"Christmas miracle," Hal agreed with a smile, before his expression turned more serious. "Though I'm keeping an eye on Aaron. He's sitting awfully close to Harley."

I laughed, nudging his shoulder gently with mine. "They're fine. Andros and Hunter are both watching them like hawks. That poor boy couldn't make a move if he wanted to."

"Good," Hal nodded firmly, his protective dad instincts clearly engaged. "I'm glad it's the Bradley girls and not ours. I'm not ready for our girls to be dating yet."

"Hate to break it to you, but I think that ship has sailed," I replied, nodding toward where Kira was now laughing at something Dekker had said, her cheeks flushing slightly as he smiled back at her. "They're growing up, whether we're ready or not."

Hal followed my gaze, his expression shifting to one of alarm. "Is Kira flirting with Dekker? When did that start? He's too old for her."

"They're the same age," I reminded him patiently. "And they're just talking. Breathe, Love."

Hal grumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "boarding school until she's thirty," but returned his attention to his meal with only occasional glances toward the teen table.

I smiled to myself, enjoying this glimpse of my normally laid-back husband in full protective-father mode. For all the complications and occasional tensions of family gatherings, there was something deeply reassuring about these familiar dynamics—the way we all instinctively sought to protect and care for those we loved, even when that protection wasn't always necessary or welcome.

As I took another bite of the delicious food—a perfect blend of different traditions and flavors, much like the gathering itself—I felt a surge of gratitude for this improbable family we'd built. It wasn't perfect, and there would undoubtedly be more diplomatic incidents before the evening was through, but it was ours—messy, complicated, and ultimately bound together by connections that transcended blood, history, and even the occasional holiday argument.

I glanced back at the teen table and noticed the unmistakable glare Kora was giving Aaron when she thought no one was looking—a look of pure jealousy barely concealed behind her usual composed expression.

"What's wrong with Kora?" I asked, though part of me already knew the answer I'd been avoiding for months.

Hal looked at me with disbelief, his fork pausing midway to his mouth. "Kara, I know you don't want to believe it, but Kora has a crush on Harley. She is hurting at the fact Harley has her first boyfriend."

"No, they are best friends, that's it," I insisted automatically, the denial coming as reflexively as breathing. Something in me knew it was more than that, but I was still struggling with the idea of my daughter not being heterosexual. I had accepted it from Alexis after some initial difficulty, and after some time I'd even accepted it with Kenzie... but accepting it with my daughter was another matter entirely.

"Kara, stop being in denial. She has had a crush on Harley for years, at least since she was 10," Hal said gently but firmly, his eyes meeting mine with the steady patience that had helped me through so many challenges over the years.

"No..." I said weakly, the protest sounding unconvincing even to my own ears.

"Kara, look at her," he said, nodding toward where Kora sat, her eyes following Harley's every movement with a longing so evident it was painful to witness.

I sighed, the last of my denial crumbling as I truly allowed myself to see what had been in front of me for years. "Maybe..." I conceded reluctantly, the single word encompassing a complex tangle of emotions I wasn't quite ready to unravel.

Hal reached under the table to squeeze my hand, his touch grounding me as it always did. "It doesn't change who she is," he reminded me softly. "She's still our Kora. Still the same brilliant, stubborn, compassionate girl she's always been."

I nodded, swallowing past the unexpected tightness in my throat. "I know that. Intellectually, I know that."

"The heart sometimes takes longer to catch up with the head," Hal acknowledged, his understanding making my eyes sting with sudden tears. "But it will. And when Kora is ready to talk to us about it, she'll need to know that we love her exactly as she is."

"Of course we do," I said immediately, the mama bear instinct overriding any lingering discomfort. Whatever internal adjustments I needed to make, my love for my daughter was absolute and unconditional.

"Then that's all that matters for now," Hal assured me, his smile gentle. "The rest will work itself out."

I took a deep breath, returning my attention to my plate though my appetite had diminished. Across the room, I caught sight of Alexis and Maggie, their heads bent close together as they shared some private joke. They looked so happy, so comfortable in their shared life. I'd come to love Maggie like another sister, appreciating the steadiness and joy she brought to Alexis's life.

Why was it so much harder to imagine the same happiness for my own daughter?

I knew the answer, though I wasn't particularly proud of it. Despite my efforts to distance myself from my mother's rigid worldview, some of those early teachings had sunk deeper roots than I cared to admit. The journey from intellectual acceptance to genuine emotional embrace was sometimes longer and more complicated than I wanted it to be.

"I just want her to have an easier path than Alexis did," I said finally, my voice low enough that only Hal could hear. "Coming out to Mom and Dad was so hard on her."

"And yet, she survived it," Hal reminded me. "She's thriving. And Kora will too, when and if she decides that's her path. She has us, she has Alexis and Maggie as role models, she has this entire extended family of people who will love and support her."

I nodded, feeling some of the tension ease from my shoulders. Hal was right, as he often was about matters of the heart. Whatever challenges Kora might face, she wouldn't face them alone. And



perhaps that was the most important gift we could give her—the knowledge that she was loved unconditionally, exactly as she was.

"When did you get so wise?" I asked Hal, managing a small smile.

"I've always been wise," he replied with mock offense. "You just don't always notice because you're distracted by my rugged good looks and charm."

I laughed despite myself, the moment of levity breaking through my introspection. "That must be it," I agreed, my appetite returning as I took another bite of the excellent food.

As our conversation shifted to lighter topics, I found myself occasionally glancing back at the teen table, seeing Kora with new eyes. The way she watched Harley, the subtle shifts in her expression when Aaron made Harley laugh—it was all so obvious now that I'd allowed myself to see it.

My daughter was in the midst of her first heartbreak, watching the girl she cared for find happiness with someone else. The realization made my chest ache with maternal protectiveness. Whatever adjustments I still needed to make in my own thinking, my daughter's pain transcended all of that.

Later, I promised myself. Later, I would find a quiet moment to let Kora know that I was here for her, that she could talk to me about anything—or anyone—that mattered to her. I wouldn't push, wouldn't demand confidences she wasn't ready to share, but I would make sure she knew that my love wasn't contingent on her fitting into any particular box.

For now, though, I would focus on getting through this elaborate Christmas dinner without any further diplomatic incidents, keeping my mother from offending anyone else, and perhaps helping Kora navigate the social complexities of the evening with her heart intact.

One parenting challenge at a time—that was all any of us could handle, especially during the holidays.

Michelle

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Mia and RJ were sitting far too close to Hunter and me, but I had to imagine that was by design. Amber's strategic seating arrangements had ensured that we couldn't completely avoid interaction, forcing a veneer of civility that felt increasingly brittle as the meal progressed.

"So, how long are you in Ireland for?" I asked Mia, aiming for a neutral topic as I took a sip of my wine.

Mia shrugged, her expression carefully casual. "Not sure. Maybe through New Year's?"

"Oh, lovely," I said, my tone conveying the exact opposite sentiment. The prospect of RJ and Mia lingering in our territory for another week made my teeth clench involuntarily.

"Speaking of New Year's," Amber interjected, leaning forward with that particular gleam in her eye that usually preceded social maneuvering, "Trev and I are going to Paris. We're leaving Tuesday. There's an apartment we want to look at as a potential vacation home, and we decided just to spend the New Year in Paris. Would you and RJ like to join us?"

I nearly choked on my wine, caught off guard by this unexpected development. Hunter's hand found my knee under the table, squeezing gently in a silent reminder to maintain composure.

"Paris? Seriously?" Mia asked, her expression brightening with genuine interest.

"Oh, yes! I'm going too because Trev can't stand the idea of being away from Ráichéal. We would love for you lot to join us," Niamh said enthusiastically, though her gaze was fixed on Finn rather than on Mia or RJ.

"I'm not sure the girls would enjoy it," RJ said hesitantly, his parental concerns momentarily overriding his response to the invitation.

"Oh, leave them with me," Kara chimed in, overhearing our conversation from the adjacent table. "They love playing with Tiffy, and she's out of school. I can watch them."

"Are you sure?" RJ asked, his expression suggesting he was genuinely considering the offer.

"Of course! It will be so much fun for them," Kara insisted with the enthusiasm of someone who genuinely enjoyed children's company.

"I have never been to Paris," Finn said, addressing RJ while casting a warm glance toward Niamh. "I would love to go."

Mia nodded, her usual reserve giving way to evident excitement. "It sounds fun."

"Then yes, we will join you. Thank you, Amber," RJ said, his decision apparently made.

I noticed Hunter shoot Trevor a look of betrayal across the table—his best friend was vacationing with RJ, of all people. The hurt in Hunter's expression was subtle but unmistakable to anyone who knew him well.

Trevor looked back at him with a helpless shrug, his expression clearly communicating that he hadn't invited RJ and that trying to keep Amber from inviting her best friend was a fight he would surely lose. The silent exchange spoke volumes about their friendship and Trevor's understanding of his position as collateral damage in the complex dynamics between Amber, Mia, and me.

"So you'll be gone for New Year's? Oh darn," I said, feigning disappointment with theatrical insincerity.

"I can see you're broken up," Mia replied dryly.

"I'll find some way to go on," I assured her, my smile not quite reaching my eyes.

"Michelle, be nice," Zachary admonished from further down the table, his big-brother tone emerging despite our adult status.

"I'm always nice. I'm a fucking joy," I said, earning a disapproving look from my mother and a poorly concealed snort of laughter from Livvie.

"Did your brother get all the tact in the family?" Mia asked, her eyebrow arching elegantly.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm tactful. I'm just also honest. It's my most charming trait."

"Is it now?" Mia challenged, her tone suggesting she could provide a comprehensive list of counterarguments.

"So, Michelle, when are you going back on tour?" Mom interjected, clearly trying to change the subject before Mia and I descended further into verbal sparring.

"Not until April," I replied, grateful for the shift despite myself. "But we're almost done filming the show for the season, so I will actually get to be at home some before the tour."

"You're going to get bored," Hunter said, his knowing smile acknowledging my notorious inability to remain idle for long periods.

"No! I mean... maybe not... ok, probably," I admitted, returning his smile with a rueful one of my own.

"Just don't start stirring chaos to entertain yourself," Jeremy warned from across the table, his expression suggesting he'd witnessed the consequences of my boredom too many times to count.

"Moi? I would never," I said, pretending to be offended while pressing a hand to my chest in mock indignation.

"Uh-huh," Livvie said skeptically, her tone carrying years of experience with my particular brand of "entertainment."

Hunter's arm slipped around the back of my chair, his fingers tracing a gentle pattern against my shoulder. The touch was both comforting and grounding—a reminder that whatever tensions swirled around us, we were facing them together.

"Perhaps you could use the time to work on new music," RJ suggested, his tone surprisingly genuine rather than confrontational. "You always said you wanted more time to compose."

The unexpected reference to our shared past caught me off guard. There had been a time when RJ had been my most enthusiastic supporter, encouraging me to pursue my songwriting even when commercial pressures pushed me toward more marketable material.

"I... yes, that's not a bad idea," I acknowledged, momentarily disarmed by the glimpse of the man I'd once known beneath the layers of history and hurt between us.

"Your last album had some of your strongest writing," he continued, his expression thoughtful. "Especially 'The Wild'—that bridge is brilliant."

I felt a complicated surge of emotions at his praise—pleasure at the recognition of my craft, confusion at receiving it from RJ of all people, and a reflexive wariness that had become my default response to anything involving my ex-husband.

"Thank you," I said finally, the words coming out more stiffly than I'd intended.

Hunter's hand stilled briefly on my shoulder, his body language shifting subtly beside me. I knew without looking that his expression would be carefully neutral, masking whatever he felt about this unexpected moment of civility between RJ and me.

"The girls loved the Christmas show in Phoenix," Mia said, smoothly redirecting the conversation. "Summer hasn't stopped talking about Harley's guitar solo."

"She's very talented," RJ agreed, his gaze shifting to where Harley sat at the teen table, deep in conversation with Aaron. "Both your daughters are. You must be proud."

"We are," Hunter said, speaking for the first time since the Paris invitation had derailed the conversation. His tone was measured but genuine, the love and pride he felt for our daughters transcending any tension with RJ. "They've worked hard."

"It shows," RJ nodded, something like respect flickering briefly in his expression as he looked at Hunter.

An awkward silence descended, none of us quite sure how to navigate this unexpected moment of almost-connection. Years of animosity and hurt couldn't be erased by a few civil exchanges, but there was something disorienting about sitting across from RJ and Mia without the usual undercurrent of hostility.

"The food is excellent," Finn observed after a moment, his diplomatic instincts apparently recognizing the need for a neutral topic. "A wonderful blend of traditions."

"It is," I agreed, grateful for the shift.

"Niamh's cranberry sauce is exceptional," Finn said, casting an appreciative glance toward Trevor's mother that carried more warmth than mere culinary admiration.

"Family recipe," Niamh replied with a smile that transformed her usually dignified features. "Been in the O'Sullivan family for generations."

"Perhaps you could share it sometime," Finn suggested, his meaning clearly extending beyond recipes.

"I'd like that," Niamh agreed, her cheeks coloring slightly in a way that made her look years younger.

"They're cute together," Hunter murmured close to my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

"They are," I agreed quietly. "Uncomplicated in a way that's kind of enviable."

"We had our uncomplicated phase," he reminded me with a small smile. "For about five minutes before aliens, ninjas, and exes got involved."

I laughed despite myself, some of the tension easing from my shoulders. "True. But would you trade it?"

"Not a chance," Hunter replied without hesitation, his eyes meeting mine with the steady certainty that had been my anchor through years of chaos and complexity.

Across the table, I caught Mia watching our exchange, her expression unreadable. For a moment, our eyes met, and I thought I glimpsed something like wistfulness in her gaze before she turned her attention back to Amber, who was enthusiastically outlining the Paris itinerary she'd apparently been planning for all of ten minutes.

"You'll love this little café near the apartment," Amber was saying, her hands gesturing animatedly. "They make the most divine pain au chocolat you've ever tasted. And there's a boutique on the corner that carries this obscure French skincare line that is amazing."

"Sounds perfect," Mia replied, her enthusiasm seemingly genuine despite our earlier tension.

I found myself studying them—Mia and Amber, RJ and Finn—trying to reconcile these versions with the people who had occupied such complicated spaces in my life. It was strange to see them simply as people enjoying a Christmas dinner, making vacation plans, sharing food and conversation like any other family gathering.

Perhaps that was the magic of holidays—the way they temporarily suspended the normal rules of engagement, creating space for connections that might not otherwise form. Or perhaps it was simply the inevitable evolution of relationships over time, the slow weathering of sharp edges into something that, if not entirely smooth, was at least less likely to draw blood.

"More wine?" Hunter offered, already reaching for the bottle to refill my glass.

"Please," I agreed, deciding that whatever philosophical insights might be gleaned from observing my ex-husband and his new partner, they would be better contemplated with additional alcohol.

As Hunter poured, his fingers brushed mine in a deliberate caress that reminded me of what truly mattered—not the past hurts or complicated histories, but the life we'd built together, the family we'd created, and the love that had proven stronger than all the challenges thrown our way.

Paris could have RJ and Mia for New Year's. I had everything I needed right here.

I was just starting to relax when I caught a familiar glint in Amber's eyes—that particular look that told me she was about to say something deliberately designed to make me vastly uncomfortable. Years of friendship with her had taught me to recognize the warning signs, but that didn't make me any better prepared for what was coming.

"So, Mia, I have to know, is that song true?" she asked, her tone deceptively casual as she swirled the wine in her glass.

"What song?" Mia asked, her brow furrowing slightly.

"The song Mich wrote after the annulment about RJ having less than average... assets," Amber smirked, her eyes dancing with mischievous delight at the bomb she'd just dropped into the middle of Christmas dinner.

"Amber Nichole!" Trevor exclaimed, his expression horrified as he glanced around at the nearby table where, thankfully, the teens were too far away to hear.

"What? Michelle is the one that wrote a song about it. I just want to know if Michelle is truthful in her songwriting," Amber said with mock shock that Trevor was calling her out, her innocence as convincing as a toddler with chocolate all over their face denying they ate cookies.

I glared at her with enough intensity that lesser beings would have burst into flame on the spot. The song in question—"God Takes Care of Your Kind"—had been written during the bitter aftermath of our annulment, a petty but cathartic revenge track that my record label had wisely convinced me to keep as an album track rather than a single.

RJ turned as crimson as Hunter's shirt, his discomfort so palpable it was almost tangible across the table. Hunter, to his credit, maintained a carefully neutral expression, though I could feel the slight tremor of suppressed laughter in his shoulder against mine.

Mia sighed, casting a long-suffering look at Amber before turning to address the table at large. "I assure you, it is not true."

"I guess bitter exes will say a lot of things," Amber continued, clearly enjoying the chaos she was creating. "I remember that TRL interview she gave back in the day saying something similar about Hunter."

I sighed deeply, memories of that infamous interview surfacing unwillingly. I hated that interview with every fiber of my being. But of course, Amber didn't know about the Rangers, so I couldn't very well tell her I'd been under Mesogog's control at the time, my words and actions influenced by an evil dinosaur's mind-altering toxin.

"We all say things we regret when we're hurt," I replied, deciding to go on the offensive rather than remain in the uncomfortable position of defending my past pettiness. "I mean, look at what you did to Brody. You practically ruined his career and marriage because you were bitter."

"Technically Livvie did that," Amber deflected smoothly, not missing a beat.

Livvie smiled from further down the table, raising her glass in cheerful acknowledgment. "Yes, some of my best work. Don't mess with the Tech Fairy or her family."

"She did it on your orders," I pointed out, refusing to let Amber wiggle out of responsibility so easily.

"And?" Amber asked, her perfectly shaped eyebrow arching in challenge.

"I'm just saying, haven't we all done and said things about exes?" I countered, leaning forward slightly. "I mean, I may have made some childish comments about size, but you nearly torpedoed the guy's life..."

The silent message in my eyes was clear: Amber did not want to do this. I would turn it back on her so fast she'd get whiplash. For all her social maneuvering and strategic provocations, Amber sometimes forgot that I had navigated Hollywood politics since childhood. I might prefer direct confrontation, but I could play the game when necessary—and I had ammunition she definitely didn't want aired at a family dinner.

Trevor, sensing the dangerous territory we were entering, cleared his throat loudly. "Who's ready for dessert? I've prepared a traditional *bûche de Noël* with chestnut cream that I think you'll all enjoy."

"That sounds wonderful," Lea interjected smoothly, her relief at the subject change evident.

Amber held my gaze for a moment longer, a silent acknowledgment passing between us that we'd reached a temporary *détente*. She nodded slightly, accepting the graceful exit Trevor had provided.

"It's his specialty," she agreed, turning her attention to her husband with genuine pride. "No one makes a *bûche* like Trevor."

As Trevor rose to retrieve the dessert, the tension at our end of the table gradually dissipated, conversation shifting to safer topics. Hunter's hand found mine under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze that conveyed both support and amusement at the near-miss social explosion.

"Well played," he murmured close to my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

"She started it," I replied quietly.

"And you finished it," Hunter acknowledged with a small smile. "Though I was kind of looking forward to seeing where that particular conversation might go."

I laughed despite myself, some of the lingering tension easing from my shoulders.

RJ, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during the exchange, cleared his throat slightly. "For what it's worth," he said, his voice pitched low enough that only those immediately around us could hear, "I forgive you for that song."

"I didn't ask for forgiveness. I still love that song and I don't regret writing it," I said in response.

Mia watched our exchange with an unreadable expression, her eyes moving between us as if trying to decipher a particularly complex code. After a moment, she turned to Amber with deliberate casualness.

"So, about Paris," she said, clearly steering the conversation back to safer waters. "What neighborhoods are you considering for your apartment?"

As Amber launched into an enthusiastic description of various Parisian arrondissements, complete with opinions on each one's relative merits and shortcomings, I felt Hunter's arm settle more comfortably around my shoulders.

"You okay?" he asked quietly, his eyes searching mine with the particular attentiveness that had always made me feel truly seen.

"Surprisingly, yes," I replied honestly, realizing it was true. "Though I reserve the right to change my answer if Amber decides to bring up any more of my embarrassing back catalog."

Hunter laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "Fair enough. Though I have to say, there's something universally cathartic about a good revenge song, even when the specifics don't apply."

"I'll put that on the album notes for the anniversary re-release," I teased. "'Helped Hunter Bradley process his breakup with Cam Watanabe despite anatomical inaccuracies.'"

"Perfect," he agreed with mock seriousness. "I'm sure that won't make family gatherings awkward at all."

As Trevor returned with the impressive bûche de Noël—a masterpiece of chocolate sponge, chestnut cream, and meringue mushrooms that drew appreciative murmurs from around the table—I found myself surveying our gathered friends and family with a strange sense of contentment despite the complex dynamics at play.

Livvie

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With dessert served and the initial tensions of the gathering having settled into a more manageable hum, J and I made our way toward a quieter corner of the Cantina where Pete, Gina, James, and Aine had claimed a small table. James was bouncing baby Keira with the anxious energy of someone diffusing a bomb rather than soothing an infant, while Aine watched with the particular expression of exhausted patience I'd come to recognize in new mothers.

"Mind if we join you?" J asked, already pulling out chairs for us without waiting for a response—the easy familiarity of old friends requiring no formal invitation.

"Please," Aine said, relief evident in her voice. "Maybe you can talk some sense into him." She nodded toward James, who was now patting Keira's back with such excessive force that the baby's tiny head bobbed alarmingly.

"Mate, she's a baby, not a football," J said, reaching over to demonstrate a gentler technique. "Like this, yeah? Supporting the head, gentle rhythm."

James adjusted his hold with visible frustration. "I'm trying, aren't I? It's not like they come with instructions."



"Actually, they do," Gina pointed out dryly. "There are literally thousands of books, websites, and classes. Pete read twelve books before Alex was born."

"Thirteen," Pete corrected with a sheepish smile. "The last one was specifically about sleep training. Fat lot of good that did us—didn't sleep properly for two years."

I settled into the chair beside Aine, noting the dark circles under her eyes and the slight tremor in her hands that spoke of profound sleep deprivation. "How are you holding up?" I asked quietly, while the men continued their parenting debate.

"I'm fine," she replied automatically, before meeting my skeptical gaze and amending: "I'm surviving. It's just..." She glanced at James, lowering her voice further. "Sometimes I feel like I have two children instead of one."

I nodded, understanding immediately. "The man-child phenomenon. Unfortunately common."

"I heard that," James protested, though his attention remained fixed on Keira, who had begun to fuss despite—or perhaps because of—his awkward ministrations.

"You were meant to," I replied cheerfully. "Consider it an intervention."

J reached over, gently extracting Keira from James's arms with the practiced ease of someone who had navigated the early days of parenthood twice over. "Here, let me show you," he said, settling the baby against his shoulder in a smooth motion that immediately calmed her fussing. "Support but don't squeeze, gentle rhythm, confident hands. Babies can sense anxiety."

"Easy for you to say," James muttered, though he watched J's technique with obvious attention. "You've had practice."

"I've had no more than you," Aine pointed out, a hint of steel beneath her tired voice. "And yet somehow I'm still the only one who can get her to sleep through the night."

"I try," James insisted, running a hand through his already disheveled red hair. "It's just... she cries when I hold her."

"Because you hold her like she's made of explosives," Pete said, not unkindly. "Babies pick up on that, mate. You need to project confidence even when you're terrified."

"The great parenting secret," Gina agreed with a knowing smile. "Fake it till you make it."

"That's the secret to most of adulthood, really," I added, accepting a small plate of Trevor's magnificent bûche de Noël from Kenzie as she passed. "No one knows what they're doing; some just hide it better than others."

James sighed deeply, the sound carrying years of accumulated insecurities. "I'm rubbish at this," he admitted, his voice dropping. "I'm trying, but I'm absolute rubbish."

"You're not rubbish," Aine said automatically, though her tone suggested this was a familiar conversation. "You're just... learning."

"Very slowly," Gina added under her breath, earning a sharp look from Aine that she met with unrepentant directness. As Aine's best friend, Gina had clearly appointed herself defender of Aine's interests, a role I could appreciate even as I recognized the added pressure it placed on James.

"Look, mate," J said, still gently rocking Keira, who had settled contentedly against his shoulder, "no one's a natural at this. I was terrified with the twins—ask Livvie."

"He was a disaster," I confirmed cheerfully. "Kept putting Rose's nappies on backward, couldn't figure out how to work the sterilizer, once spent twenty minutes trying to put Killy's onesie on upside down."

"Thanks for that, love," J said dryly. "Very supportive."

"Always," I replied with a sweet smile. "My point is, James, that everyone struggles. The difference is in how you respond to the struggle."

"Exactly," Pete agreed, leaning forward with the earnestness of someone who genuinely wanted to help. "It's not about being perfect; it's about being present. Showing up, making mistakes, learning from them, and trying again."

James looked unconvinced, his gaze fixed on Keira, who had now fallen asleep against J's shoulder. "She never does that for me," he said, a note of genuine hurt in his voice.

"Because you're too tense," Aine explained, her expression softening slightly at his evident distress. "Babies respond to calm energy. When you're anxious, she gets anxious."

"It's a vicious cycle," Gina added, her tone gentler now. "The more anxious you get about her crying, the more she cries, which makes you more anxious..."

"So how do I break it?" James asked, genuine desperation in his voice.

"Practice," J and Pete said simultaneously.

"And perhaps fewer pints before attempting bedtime routines," I suggested, having noticed the slight tremor in James's hands that suggested he'd been self-medicating his parental anxiety. "Babies aren't keen on alcohol fumes."

James had the grace to look slightly abashed at this observation. "It helps with the nerves," he muttered.

"Until it doesn't," Aine replied pointedly.

An awkward silence fell, the weight of unspoken tensions between the new parents hanging in the air. I exchanged a glance with J, a silent communication born of years together. He gave a slight nod, understanding my intention without words.

"Just so we're clear, James," I said, breaking the silence with deliberate lightness, "if you and Aine break up, we get her in the divorce. We like her more."

"Liv!" J protested, though the twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed his amusement.

"What? It's true," I continued unapologetically. "She's smart, competent, makes an excellent cuppa, and doesn't bore us with endless football statistics. No contest."

"Absolutely," Gina agreed immediately, raising her wine glass in solidarity. "Aine's my best friend. More than I can say for James."

"Gina!" Pete exclaimed, though he too was fighting a smile.

"Oh, so you're taking his side?" Gina challenged her husband, one eyebrow raised in mock outrage.

"There are no sides," Pete insisted, raising his hands in surrender. "I'm Switzerland. Neutral territory."

"Coward," Gina and I said simultaneously, then clinked our glasses together in female solidarity. James looked between us, his expression hovering between offense and amusement. "So that's how it is, then? No loyalty among mates?"

"Plenty of loyalty," J corrected, carefully transferring the sleeping Keira back to Aine's arms. "To the person who deserves it. Right now, mate, that's the woman who pushed a human being out of her body and has been keeping said human alive while you've been..." he paused, searching for a diplomatic phrasing.

"Whinging about interrupted sleep and acting like changing a nappy is advanced quantum physics?" I supplied helpfully.

"Not how I would have put it," J said with a slight wince, "but essentially accurate."

James opened his mouth as if to protest, then closed it again, his gaze shifting to Aine and their sleeping daughter. Something in his expression shifted—a moment of clarity breaking through the fog of self-pity and anxiety that had characterized his adjustment to fatherhood.

"I have been a bit of a wanker, haven't I?" he admitted quietly.

"A bit?" Aine echoed, though her tone had softened at his rare moment of self-awareness.

"A significant wanker," James amended, reaching out to tentatively stroke Keira's cheek with a gentleness I hadn't seen from him before. "I'm sorry, Aine. To both of you."

"Apologies are nice," Gina said, her protective instincts still evident despite the thawing atmosphere. "Actions are better."

"She's right," Pete added, clapping a hand on James's shoulder. "But the good news is, you can start right now. Today. This minute."

"How?" James asked, genuine uncertainty in his voice.

"Take the baby," J suggested simply. "Let Aine enjoy her dessert while it's still warm. Hold Keira properly—like I showed you—and if she wakes up, deal with it. Don't immediately hand her back."

James hesitated, clearly intimidated by the prospect, but then nodded with newfound determination.

"Alright. Yeah. I can do that."

With exaggerated care, Aine transferred the sleeping Keira to James's arms, adjusting his hold with practiced efficiency. "Support her head... there, like that," she murmured, her hands lingering until she was satisfied with his technique.

To everyone's surprise—James's most of all—Keira remained peacefully asleep, her tiny face relaxed against her father's chest. The transformation in James was immediate and striking—his posture straightened, his expression shifted from anxiety to wonder, and something like genuine confidence began to replace his earlier uncertainty.

"See? Not so terrifying," Pete said quietly, careful not to disturb the sleeping infant.

"She's not crying," James whispered, awe evident in his voice.

"Because you're not panicking," Aine explained, reaching for her untouched dessert with evident appreciation. "Babies are like dogs—they can smell fear."

"Did you just compare our daughter to a dog?" James asked, a hint of his old humor surfacing.

"If the analogy helps you understand, yes," Aine replied unrepentantly, taking a bite of the chocolate dessert with an expression of pure bliss. "God, that's good. I've forgotten what it's like to eat something while it's still the proper temperature."

I watched the interaction with a mixture of amusement and recognition, remembering the early days with the twins—the bone-deep exhaustion, the moments of terror and triumph, the way J and I had stumbled through those first months together, making countless mistakes but learning to trust each other through the process.

"It gets easier," I told Aine quietly. "Not immediately, and not all at once, but it does get easier."

"Does it?" she asked, her voice carrying a vulnerability that made her seem much younger than her thirty-eight years. "Because right now it feels like I'll never sleep properly again."

"You will," I assured her. "And then she'll start walking and talking, and you'll face a whole new set of challenges. But you'll be stronger by then, more confident. And hopefully," I added with a pointed glance at James, "you'll have a proper partner rather than a second child to manage."

"I'm right here," James protested mildly, though his attention remained fixed on Keira, his expression softening as she made a small sound in her sleep.

"Good," I replied. "Pay attention, then. This is your moment of choice, James. You can step up and be the father Keira needs, or you can continue being the man-child Aine doesn't have time for. But you should know that option two doesn't end well for you."

"Liv doesn't do gentle encouragement," J explained with a small smile. "But she's not wrong."

"Never am," I agreed cheerfully, taking a sip of my wine. "One of my many charming qualities."

"Along with your modesty," Gina added with a laugh.

"Exactly," I nodded, unperturbed by the gentle teasing. "Modesty is for people with less to offer."

The conversation shifted to lighter topics after that, the momentary intervention giving way to the comfortable banter of old friends. I watched as James continued to hold Keira, his initial stiffness gradually relaxing into a more natural posture, his gaze frequently returning to his daughter's face with growing confidence.

It was a small moment of growth, perhaps, but significant nonetheless—one of those quiet transformations that often went unnoticed amid the more dramatic dynamics playing out around the Cantina. While others navigated ex-relationships and complex family histories, here in our corner, a new father was taking his first tentative steps toward genuine parenthood.

As J's hand found mine beneath the table, our fingers intertwining in that unconscious gesture of connection we'd perfected over the years, I felt a surge of appreciation for our own journey—the challenges we'd faced, the mistakes we'd made, and the partnership we'd forged through it all.

Parenthood wasn't easy for anyone, but having the right partner made all the difference. Looking at Aine's tired but hopeful expression as she watched James with their daughter, I found myself hoping that he would rise to the occasion—not just today, in the safety of a supportive gathering, but consistently, in the countless small moments that truly defined parenthood.

For Keira's sake, and for Aine's, I hoped James would choose to grow up. But if he didn't... well, we hadn't been joking about getting Aine in the breakup. Some people were worth keeping, regardless of the relationships that initially brought them into your life.

Harley

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"This is so good," Aaron said as he took another bite of his dessert, chocolate ganache clinging to the corner of his mouth in a way that was both adorable and slightly embarrassing.

I smiled at him, resisting the urge to wipe it away with my napkin like Mom would have done. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"I admit, I was kinda upset we were coming to Ireland for the break, but it's pretty nice here," Ally admitted, her usual cool demeanor softening slightly as she looked around the decorated Cantina.

"Aw, Ally, that was almost nice," I said, unable to resist teasing her. We'd known each other since we were little, our parents' Ranger connections ensuring that.

Ally rolled her eyes at me, though there was no real annoyance behind the gesture. "Don't get used to it. It's Christmas. I'm in a good mood."

"Noted," I said with a mock-serious nod.

"What do you think of Christmas, Arion?" Arissa asked, turning to her boyfriend who sat beside her with that particular rigid posture that never quite relaxed, even in casual settings.

"Don't they celebrate Christmas in Ukraine?" Kira asked, her tone genuinely curious rather than challenging.

"Not quite like this," Arion replied carefully, his accent more pronounced than usual. "It has been a very interesting experience, but nice."

I caught the subtle glance he exchanged with Arissa—one of those silent communications they'd perfected since he'd arrived. Being from Saturn rather than Ukraine complicated even simple questions about holiday traditions, but they'd gotten good at navigating these conversations without revealing his true origins.

Kira laughed, seemingly oblivious to the underlying tension. "To be fair, most people don't celebrate quite like this."

"Yeah...we're a unique family," Kora agreed, her voice carrying a slight edge that I couldn't quite place. She'd been acting weird all evening, alternating between her usual warmth and an uncharacteristic coldness, particularly when Aaron was involved in the conversation.

I decided to try bridging whatever gap seemed to be forming between us. "Kora, you want to go to the Marina tomorrow? There's actually some ice. We can play real hockey. For a couple of months at least," I suggested. The only thing I didn't like about Ireland was there was no permanent ice rink, so I had to play roller hockey, except for two months or so out of the year when the marina sometimes froze enough for ice skating.

"Maybe, we'll see. I might be busy," Kora replied coldly, not meeting my eyes as she pushed the remains of her dessert around her plate.

"Busy? With what?" Kira asked, her tone suggesting she was as confused by her sister's behavior as I was.

Kora glared at her sister. "Stuff."

"OK, well, let me know," I said, trying to keep my tone light despite the obvious tension. Kora and I had been best friends since we met. This sudden distance between us felt wrong, like a familiar song being played slightly out of tune.

"Yeah. So, Aaron, how long are you in town for?" Kora asked, abruptly changing the subject with forced casualness.

"Just until after the new year, then we have to go home. School and stuff," Aaron replied, his hand finding mine under the table in a gesture that still gave me butterflies.

"Yeah, that's gonna be hard. Long distance is rough. Especially at our age," Kora said, her tone carrying an unmistakable hint of satisfaction that made something twist uncomfortably in my stomach.

"We'll manage. We've been friends a long time," I said, squeezing Aaron's hand gently.

"Oof...that's even worse. I hope that your friendship survives if you guys break up," Kora said, the comment landing like a small, precise dagger.

"It will, there's so much history with them," Lindsey interjected, her expression suggesting she'd picked up on the tension and was trying to diffuse it.

Aaron looked between Kora and me, confusion evident in his expression. "We're not planning on breaking up," he said, his straightforward response typical of his approach to most situations. Aaron had never been one for games or hidden meanings—one of the things I appreciated most about him.

An awkward silence fell over our end of the table, the tension palpable despite the festive atmosphere surrounding us. Dekker, who had been quietly observing the exchange, cleared his throat slightly.

"So, uh, Harley, your Christmas show in Phoenix was amazing," he said, clearly attempting to steer the conversation to safer territory. "Loch said you played guitar better than most professionals she's heard."

I shot him a grateful look, seizing the opportunity to move past the uncomfortable moment. "It was a good show. The Ryman was even better, though—there's something about that venue that's just magical."

"I still can't believe you performed at the Ryman," Ally said, her expression impressed despite her attempt to appear cool. "That's, like, legendary."

"Mom says it's the best acoustic venue in the country," I agreed, warming to the topic. Music was always safe ground for me, a space where I felt confident and in control. "The history there is incredible—you can almost feel all the artists who've performed on that stage."

As the conversation shifted to music venues and performance experiences, I found myself occasionally glancing at Kora, trying to decipher what was behind her sudden hostility. We'd always been close—sharing secrets, supporting each other, understanding each other in ways that our other friends couldn't.

This distance between us felt wrong, like a fundamental shift in the universe that I couldn't quite comprehend. Had I done something to upset her? Was she jealous of the time I was spending with Aaron? Or was it something else entirely?

Aaron seemed to sense my distraction, his thumb tracing gentle circles on the back of my hand beneath the table. When I met his eyes, his expression carried a silent question that I answered with a small shake of my head—later, not now.

"What about you, Arion?" Lochlyn asked, turning to Arissa's boyfriend who had been characteristically quiet throughout most of the exchange. "Do they have good music venues in Ukraine?"

Arion straightened slightly, his expression suggesting he was carefully formulating his response. "There are several excellent performance spaces," he said with measured precision. "Though I have not had the opportunity to attend many concerts."

"Arion's more into sports than music," Arissa supplied smoothly, the practiced ease of their cover story evident in how naturally she stepped in. "He was on the national martial arts team before his family relocated."

"That explains the posture," Howie observed with a grin. "You look like you're ready to spring into action at any moment."

A flicker of something—amusement? concern?—crossed Arion's face before he settled back into his usual composed expression. "Old habits," he acknowledged with a slight inclination of his head.

"You should see him spar with Dad," I added, remembering the impressive display I'd witnessed in our backyard last week. "Even Dad says he's never seen someone pick up techniques so quickly."

"High praise from Uncle Hunter," Dekker said with a low whistle.

I noticed Kora's expression darken again at the mention of my father, her gaze dropping to where Aaron's hand still held mine beneath the table.

Suddenly, a commotion from the children's area caught everyone's attention. Rose was standing on a chair (despite what I knew were repeated instructions from Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Livvie not to do so), her fairy wings glittering as she announced in her carrying voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen! The Fairy-Ninja Christmas Show is starting! Everyone watch now!"

"This should be good," Aaron murmured, his expression lighting up with genuine amusement. "Rose has been organizing this all afternoon."

"She's nothing if not determined," I agreed, grateful for the distraction from my complicated thoughts about Kora.

As the adults began turning their attention toward the children's area, where Rose was now directing her troupe of fairy-ninjas into position with imperious hand gestures, I caught Kora's eye across the

table. For a brief moment, her guard seemed to drop, a flash of vulnerability visible beneath her usual confidence.

Then she looked away, the moment passing so quickly I almost wondered if I'd imagined it.

I squeezed Aaron's hand once more, drawing comfort from his steady presence as we turned to watch the children's performance. Whatever was happening with Kora, I would have to address it—but not now, not in the middle of Christmas dinner with our entire extended families watching. Some conversations needed privacy and time, neither of which was available in the current setting.

For now, I would focus on enjoying the moment—Aaron beside me, my family around me, and the chaotic charm of Rose's fairy-ninja extravaganza about to unfold. The rest would have to wait for tomorrow.

Amber

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Eventually the Cantina was mostly cleared out and the only people left were Fionn, Declan, Kenzie, Shay, Trev, and myself. Trev, Fionn, and Kenzie were cleaning like crazy to ensure the restaurant was ready to open tomorrow, their professional kitchen habits making the post-holiday cleanup a study in organized efficiency. The rest of us were helping our partners clean so they didn't go insane—a Christmas gift more valuable than anything that had been wrapped and placed under a tree.

"That was an intense holiday," Declan said as he and I washed dishes, our sleeves rolled up and hands immersed in soapy water. He had removed his jacket hours ago, his dress shirt now spotted with water and various food stains from the cleanup effort.

I nodded, loading another stack of Trevor's precious china into the industrial dishwasher. "But I can't imagine any better."

"Certainly better than I would have had in Dublin," he agreed, a shadow briefly crossing his expression. The divorce and custody battle had left him estranged from his ex-wife's family, and his own parents had never fully accepted his sexuality. This gathering, chaotic as it had been, had provided him with something his biological family couldn't—unconditional acceptance.

I smiled, genuinely warmed by the transformation I'd witnessed in him over the past months. "I am so glad you and Fionn found each other. You clearly make him happy."

"Does Trev feel the same? He seems protective of Fionn," Declan replied, his hands stilling momentarily in the soapy water, a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"Oh, Trev is happy for you guys too, and he has admitted to me that he likes you fine," I assured him, deciding honesty was the best approach. "He worries about the age difference. You know, the stereotypical older man seeking a younger man in the gay community. Trev was that younger man in his Paris days."

I glanced across the kitchen to where Trevor was meticulously organizing the walk-in refrigerator, his movements precise despite the late hour and the exhaustion that must have been setting in. "He worries about Fionn like a little brother, but it's clear this is more than that. Fionn is edging on 30. He can make his own decisions, and age difference or not, you two seem to work."

Declan nodded, resuming his rhythmic washing of a particularly stubborn roasting pan. "I will admit, our age difference concerned me at first too. An 18-year age difference seemed like too much. But you're right. He's 28... hardly a kid... and now I honestly forget about the age difference most of the time."

"And that is all that matters. As long as you two are happy," I said, meaning it sincerely. Despite my tendency to meddle in others' relationships—a habit I wasn't likely to break anytime soon—I recognized genuine connection when I saw it. What Declan and Fionn had found in each other transcended the numbers on their birth certificates.

"We are," Declan replied, his voice softening as his gaze drifted to where Fionn was efficiently wiping down countertops, his sleeves rolled up. "Oh Amber, we are. I think I'm falling in love with him."

The admission carried the weight of someone who had been hurt before, who understood the risk involved in opening his heart again. At forty-six, with a failed marriage and painful custody arrangement behind him, Declan's cautious hope was all the more poignant.

"I think that's fairly obvious to anyone with eyes," I replied with a gentle smile, nudging his shoulder with mine. "And from what I can see, it's entirely mutual."

Declan's expression brightened, a hint of color rising to his cheeks that made him look younger than his years. "You think so?"

"I know so," I assured him, my expertise in reading romantic signals honed through years of strategic matchmaking. "The way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching? That's not casual interest."

Across the kitchen, Fionn looked up as if sensing our conversation, his eyes meeting Declan's with a smile that confirmed my assessment beyond any doubt. The connection between them was palpable—a quiet certainty that stood in stark contrast to some of the more complicated relationships we'd witnessed throughout the day.

"Thank you," Declan said quietly, returning his attention to the dishes. "For including me today. For making me feel like I belong."

"You do belong," I replied simply. "That's what family is about—not just blood or marriage, but choosing to be there for each other. And you're part of that now, whether you like it or not."

Declan laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "I like it very much."

"Good, because Trev could use more sane people in his social circle," I said, deliberately lightening the moment. "God knows I don't provide that."

"I heard that," Trevor called from across the kitchen, his expression mock-stern as he emerged from the walk-in. "And I resent the implication that my social circle is anything but perfectly balanced."

"Mi corazón, you're best friends with Hunter Bradley, who punched his wife's ex-husband," I reminded him. "Your brother is Jeremy O'Brien, who once tried to fight a swan because it looked at Rose wrong."

"The swan started it," Kenzie chimed in, defending him with family loyalty. "It was being aggressive."

"It was a swan," Shay countered, rolling her eyes affectionately at her girlfriend. "They're always aggressive. It's their entire personality."

"See? Chaos," I said to Declan with a theatrical sigh. "This is what you're signing up for."

"I think I can handle it," he replied with a smile that suggested he was more than ready for whatever our unconventional family might throw his way.

As we continued the cleanup, I found myself reflecting on the day—the various tensions and alliances, the unexpected moments of connection, the diplomatic incidents narrowly avoided or deliberately provoked (mostly by me, I had to admit). It had been exactly the beautiful disaster I'd anticipated when planning the seating arrangements, yet somehow even better than I'd imagined.

Niamh and Finn had clearly formed a connection that would continue beyond the holiday, judging by their lingering goodbye and exchange of phone numbers. My matchmaking instincts had been spot on there, despite Trevor's initial resistance. Michelle and RJ had managed to occupy the same space without bloodshed, which counted as a Christmas miracle by any reasonable standard. Even the children had found common ground, their fairy-ninja performance bringing the entire gathering together in shared amusement.

"What are you smiling about?" Trevor asked, appearing at my side to help load the final set of dishes into the industrial dishwasher.

"Just thinking about how well everything went," I replied, leaning against him slightly as fatigue began to catch up with me. "Sixty-eight people, countless complicated relationships, and not a single physical altercation. I call that a success."

"Your standards are concerningly low," Trevor observed dryly, though his arm slipped around my waist in a gesture of affection. "But yes, it was a good day. Exhausting, but good."

"And the kitchen survived," I added, knowing this had been his primary concern throughout the preparations.

"Barely," he replied with a dramatic shudder. "Your mother-in-law reorganized my spice rack by color, Amber. By color. It will take days to restore proper order."

"A tragedy of epic proportions," I agreed solemnly, though I couldn't quite suppress my smile.

"However will you cope?"

"With great difficulty and much complaining," Trevor assured me, pressing a kiss to my temple. "But the food was good, wasn't it? Despite the many cooks."

"It was perfect," I said sincerely, knowing how much his professional pride had been at stake. "A beautiful blend of traditions, just like our family."

Trevor's expression softened at that, his gaze sweeping across the kitchen where Fionn and Declan were now working side by side, their movements in perfect synchronization despite their relatively new relationship. Kenzie and Shay were tackling the dessert station, their heads bent close together as they whispered and occasionally laughed, sharing private jokes in the way of couples everywhere.

"I suppose there are worse things than having too many people who care about each other," he conceded, his earlier stress about the kitchen invasion giving way to appreciation for the connections that had formed and strengthened throughout the day.

"Exactly," I agreed, stifling a yawn as the long day finally caught up with me. "Though next year, maybe we limit it to fifty people. Sixty-eight was a bit ambitious, even for me."

"Next year?" Trevor echoed, his expression suggesting he was already mentally calculating the logistics of another gathering of this magnitude.

"Of course," I replied with perfect confidence. "It's a tradition now. One Christmas down, many more to go."

Trevor sighed, but the sound carried more affection than genuine exasperation. "As long as we establish clear kitchen protocols in advance. And possibly hire additional staff."

"Deal," I agreed, sealing the promise with a quick kiss. "Though I make no guarantees about the seating arrangements. Those remain my artistic domain."

"God help us all," Trevor muttered, though the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth betrayed his amusement.

As we finished the last of the cleanup and prepared to head home, I felt a deep satisfaction settle in my chest. For all its complexities and occasional tensions, the day had been a success beyond mere social maneuvering or holiday obligation. We had created something special—a gathering that transcended the boundaries of traditional family to encompass the rich tapestry of connections that defined our lives.

Niamh and Finn had found unexpected romance. Michelle and RJ had achieved a fragile truce. Hunter and Cam had navigated their complicated history with surprising grace. And throughout it all,

new bonds had formed while existing ones strengthened, creating a network of support and affection that would carry us all forward into the new year.

Not bad for one Christmas dinner, if I did say so myself. And I absolutely did.

Tab 2

# Complete Character List for Christmas Dinner

## Grandparents:

1. Niamh O'Sullivan (Trevor's mother)
2. Albert Omino (Hunter's adoptive father/Sensei)
3. Linda Danvers (Kara's mother)
4. Paul Danvers (Kara's father)
5. Jessica Jordan (Hal's mother)
6. Finn James (RJ's father)
7. Lea Morris (Michelle and Zachary's mother)

## Other Adults:

1. Michelle Morris
2. Hunter Bradley
3. RJ James
4. Mia
5. Amber O'Sullivan
6. Trevor O'Sullivan
7. Jeremy O'Brien
8. Livvie O'Brien
9. Kara Jordan
10. Hal Jordan
11. Alexis (Kara's sister)
12. Maggie (Alexis's wife)
13. Blake Bradley (Hunter's brother)
14. Tori (Blake's wife)
15. Cam Watanabe
16. LeAnn Omino
17. Andros Kay
18. Ashley Kay
19. Zachary Morris (Michelle's brother)
20. Kelly Morris (Zachary's wife)

21. Kenzie (Kara's cousin)
22. Shay (Kenzie's girlfriend)
23. Jim (Hal's brother)
24. Sue (Jim's wife)
25. Fionn
26. Declan (Fionn's boyfriend)
27. Sosaidh
28. Abby
29. Saoirse
30. Tieman
31. James
32. Aine (James's partner)
33. Pete
34. Gina (Pete's partner)

## Teens:

1. Harley (Michelle & Hunter's daughter)
2. Arissa (Michelle & Hunter's daughter)
3. Arion (Arissa's boyfriend)
4. Aaron (Harley's boyfriend)
5. Kira (Kara & Hal's daughter)
6. Kora (Kara & Hal's daughter)
7. Lindsey (Blake & Tori's daughter)
8. Ally Kay (Andros & Ashley's daughter)
9. Dekker (Zachary & Kelly's child)
10. Lochlyn (Zachary & Kelly's child)
11. Howie (Jim & Sue's child)
12. Jane (Jim & Sue's child)
13. [Pete & Gina's teen child - let's call them Alex for now]

## Kids:

1. Tomi (Michelle & Hunter's youngest daughter)
2. Summer (RJ's daughter)
3. Autumn (RJ's daughter)
4. Rachel (Amber & Trevor's baby)
5. Rose (Jeremy & Livvie's daughter)
6. Killy (Jeremy & Livvie's son)



7. Tiffy (Kara & Hal's youngest daughter)
8. Arthur (Jim & Sue's child)
9. Keira (James & Aine's newborn)
10. [Pete & Gina's younger child - let's call them Riley]
11. [Pete & Gina's youngest child - let's call them Jamie]

## **Pets:**

1. Thara (Michelle's cat)
2. Kaya (Mia's guardian/cat)
3. Ellie (Amber's dog)

Total: 68 characters

“New Year, New Home”

"Ms. O'Sullivan, the Bradleys and Jordans are here to see you," Jerrica announced over the intercom, her professional tone carrying just the right blend of efficiency and deference.

"Oh good, please send them in," I replied, bending down to settle Ellie in her plush bed beneath my desk. "You relax there. Mommy needs to close this deal so we can go to Paris and enjoy the new year."

Ellie yawned dramatically before curling into a perfect circle, her tiny body fitting precisely in the center of the designer dog bed I'd had custom-made to match my office decor. The cameras positioned discreetly around my office for "Beauty and the Chef" were currently inactive—I'd insisted on privacy for this particular meeting, despite the producers' protests about missing potentially dramatic content.

Seconds later my door opened and Michelle walked in with her usual confidence, moving as if she owned the place—a habit developed through decades in the entertainment industry. Hunter followed close behind, his tall frame making my spacious office feel suddenly smaller. Kara and Hal entered last, their expressions more reserved, suggesting they were approaching this meeting with considerably more caution than the Bradleys.

I stood to greet them, extending my hand with the practiced warmth I'd perfected through years of business negotiations. "Thank you for meeting me."

"Of course," Michelle replied as she settled into one of the chairs across from my desk. "You had to know I couldn't let Holly organize this deal without my input. I know we share her as a manager, and as much as I trust her, this is my daughter we're talking about."

"Naturally. I wouldn't expect any less," I nodded, understanding completely. When it came to our children, even the most trusted professional relationships required personal oversight.

"And Kira doesn't have a manager, and honestly, we're still unsure about this whole thing," Hal said, his protective father instincts evident in both his tone and posture as he took the seat beside Kara.

"That is why I wanted to get you all together to discuss this in person," I explained, leaning forward slightly to emphasize my sincerity. "I see the potential in Arissa and Kira. Their 'A&K Beauty' YouTube channel is growing fast, and Arissa's music career is taking off. I think this is a perfect time to bring them on as the faces of Amber Nichole's spring line."

The girls' YouTube channel had started as a casual hobby—makeup tutorials and product reviews filmed in Arissa's bedroom—but had quickly gained traction, accumulating over half a million subscribers in less than a year. Their contrasting styles and genuine friendship translated beautifully on camera, creating content that resonated with their teen audience while remaining appropriate for their age.

"The girls want to do it, and of course I have no problem with Arissa's participation, presuming the deal is fair," Michelle said, her business acumen evident beneath her casual tone. She might have been dressed in jeans and a simple purple sweater rather than her stage attire, but her negotiating skills were always at the ready.

"They are family. I would never offer anything unfair," I assured her, meaning it sincerely. "If anything, I want to go out of my way to protect them. I love them too." This wasn't just a business deal to me. I genuinely cared for those girls, having watched them grow up through our intertwined family connections.

"I don't know about Kira getting involved in the world of modeling..." Kara said, her expression reflecting the wariness of a mother who understood all too well the potential pitfalls of the beauty industry.

"She wouldn't be. Not really," I clarified quickly. "I would be on the set of every shoot to ensure it is a child-friendly environment, and all the photos would be appropriate for their age."

"And who decides what is age-appropriate?" Hal asked, his protective instincts clearly on high alert. The question wasn't confrontational so much as genuinely concerned—a father trying to navigate unfamiliar territory with his daughter's best interests at heart.

"I don't like the idea of Kira learning her looks are her greatest asset," Kara added, leaning forward slightly. "It's not true, and I'm worried that would be her takeaway."

I nodded, understanding their concerns completely. The beauty industry's history of exploiting young women and promoting unhealthy standards wasn't something I could deny, even as someone who had built her career within it. But it was precisely because I understood these pitfalls that I believed I could create something different for the girls.

"Those are valid concerns," I acknowledged, deciding that direct honesty was the best approach. "And ones I share. Let me be clear about what I'm envisioning: this wouldn't be traditional modeling. The campaign I have in mind focuses on their friendship, their creativity, and their complementary styles. It's about self-expression through makeup, not about conforming to some arbitrary beauty standard."

I reached for the portfolio I'd prepared, opening it to reveal concept boards that showed my vision for the campaign. "The Spring line is called 'Authentic You' specifically because it's about celebrating individual expression rather than promoting a single definition of beauty. Arissa and Kira embody that perfectly—they have distinct styles and approaches, but they support and complement each other."

Hunter, who had been quietly observing the exchange, leaned forward to examine the concept boards more closely. "These don't look like traditional beauty campaign shots," he observed, his tone suggesting this was a positive development.

"Exactly," I agreed, turning the portfolio so everyone could see better. "They're more editorial, more storytelling. The girls would be portrayed as creative partners, not passive models. We'd show them in their natural environments—Arisa with her music, Kira with her cheer. The makeup would be an extension of their personalities, not the focal point."

"That does sound more aligned with how the girls use makeup," Michelle acknowledged, her expression thoughtful as she studied the concepts. "Arisa sees it as part of her artistic expression, not a way to cover perceived flaws."

"Kira approaches makeup the same way," Kara added, her initial resistance softening slightly. "She sees it as an art form.."

"Exactly," I said, seizing on their understanding. "That's precisely what attracted me to them for this campaign. They approach beauty from a place of creativity and self-expression, not insecurity. They're exactly the kind of role models I want representing this line."

Hal still looked unconvinced, his protective instincts clearly warring with his desire to support his daughter's interests. "What about the actual shoot environment? The fashion industry doesn't exactly have the best reputation for how it treats young women."

It was a fair point, and one I'd anticipated. "I would personally oversee every aspect of the production," I assured him. "Limited hours, appropriate breaks, healthy food options, no diet talk whatsoever. Their parents would be welcome on set at all times." I looked directly at Kara and Hal. "In fact, I'd insist on it. I want this to be a positive experience for them, not an introduction to the problematic aspects of the industry."

"And the compensation?" Michelle asked, bringing the conversation back to business with characteristic directness.

"Fair market value, plus a percentage of sales from the line," I replied without hesitation. "The contract would include provisions for education funds, appropriate working hours, and parental approval of all final images before publication. Everything would be above board and transparent."

I pulled out the draft contracts I'd had my legal team prepare, sliding them across the desk. "I'd like you to take these home, review them with your own attorneys, and make any adjustments you feel are necessary to protect the girls' interests. This isn't a take-it-or-leave-it offer; it's a starting point for discussion."

The gesture seemed to surprise them, particularly Hal, whose expression shifted from wariness to cautious consideration. "That's... unusually accommodating," he observed.

"As I said, they're family," I replied simply. "This isn't just business for me. I want what's best for them, even if that means walking away from this opportunity if you decide it's not right for Kira."

Kara reached for the contract, her expression thoughtful. "We'll need time to review this carefully."

"Of course," I agreed immediately.

Michelle was already scanning the first few pages of her copy, her business acumen evident in the way her eyes caught on specific clauses and terms. "This looks comprehensive, but I'll have my team go through it in detail."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," I assured her with a small smile. Michelle had been navigating entertainment contracts since childhood; she knew exactly what to look for and what to protect against.

Hunter, who had been relatively quiet throughout the meeting, finally spoke up. "What about school? This can't interfere with their education."

"Absolutely," I agreed without hesitation. "We'd schedule around their school commitments, primarily on weekends and school holidays. Their education comes first."

The tension in the room had eased considerably since they'd first arrived, the initial wariness giving way to cautious consideration. I wasn't naive enough to think I'd completely won them over, particularly Hal, but I'd at least opened the door to serious discussion.

"One more thing," I added, deciding to address the elephant in the room directly. "I know you might be concerned about my reputation for being... demanding." The polite euphemism for my occasionally ruthless approach to business made Hunter snort softly. "But I want to assure you that I understand the difference between working with professional adults and working with teenagers. My expectations would be appropriate for their age and experience."

"I appreciate your candor," Kara said, her expression suggesting she was reassessing her initial impressions. "And your willingness to accommodate our concerns."

"The girls are really excited about this opportunity," Michelle added, her tone softening slightly. "Arisa hasn't stopped talking about it since you first mentioned the possibility."

"Kira too," Hal admitted reluctantly.

I smiled, genuinely touched by their enthusiasm. "They're talented girls with unique perspectives. That's exactly what this campaign needs—authentic voices who can speak to their generation without the artifice that characterizes so much of the beauty industry."

"It's that artifice that's built in that worries me," Hal said, his expression reflecting the genuine concern of a father trying to protect his daughter from an industry known for its sometimes harmful messaging.

Michelle looked to be in thought before her expression shifted, a light bulb moment visibly dawning across her face. "Kara, you guys have been trying to get Kira to find a passion that could be a career for a while?"

"Yes, something aside from being a wife and mother," Kara nodded, her voice carrying the particular determination of a woman who understood the importance of self-sufficiency. "I want her to be able to fend for herself if that doesn't work out."

"This could be perfect," Michelle said, leaning forward with growing excitement.

"Modeling? As a career?" Hal asked, skepticism evident in his tone.

"No! Beauty in general," Michelle clarified quickly. "Modeling is one small side of that. What if Amber also took Kira on as an intern to learn the business side as a summer job?"

I watched the suggestion land, seeing the immediate shift in both Kara and Hal's expressions as they considered this new dimension to the proposition.

"That's...not a bad idea," Hal said, sounding genuinely surprised, as if the suggestion had caught him completely off guard.

"She would see it's a business...and maybe decide to pursue it...I actually like the idea," Kara said slowly, her initial resistance giving way to thoughtful consideration. I could almost see her mentally recalibrating, viewing the opportunity through this new lens—not just as exposure in front of the camera, but as education behind the scenes.

"Amber?" Michelle asked, turning to me with that particular expression that suggested she'd just thrown me a perfect assist and expected me to score.

"I would absolutely be open to that," I nodded without hesitation, my mind already racing with the possibilities. This wasn't something I'd considered initially, but it made perfect sense—combining the campaign with a genuine learning opportunity that would show Kira the depth and complexity of the beauty industry beyond the superficial aspects that often drew criticism.

"She could shadow different departments," I continued, warming to the idea. "Product development, marketing, finance, sustainability initiatives. She'd get to see how a beauty brand operates from the inside out, not just the public-facing elements."

Kara's expression had transformed completely, her initial wariness replaced by genuine interest.

"That actually addresses my biggest concern—that she'd see beauty as just about appearance rather than understanding the business and creative aspects behind it."

"Exactly," I agreed, seizing on her enthusiasm. "The beauty industry is so much more than what people see in advertisements. It's chemistry, marketing psychology, supply chain management, sustainability challenges—it's a complex business that requires intelligence and creativity at every level."

"It would be good for her to take an interest in business," Hal acknowledged, his resistance visibly softening.

"She has a sharp mind," I agreed, having observed Kira's analytical tendencies during family gatherings. "She'd pick things up quickly."

"We could structure it as a proper internship," I added, seeing the opportunity to transform what had been a potential sticking point into a selling feature. "Limited hours, educational focus, appropriate supervision. She'd learn valuable skills that would benefit her regardless of what career path she ultimately chooses."

Hunter, who had been quietly observing the exchange, nodded approvingly. "That's actually brilliant. Turns a potential concern into a learning opportunity."

"And it would give her insight into female entrepreneurship," Michelle added, clearly recognizing the value of this aspect. "Seeing a woman who built and runs her own company—that's a powerful example for a teenage girl."

I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at Michelle's acknowledgment. For all our occasional friction and competitive dynamics, there was genuine respect underlying our relationship—a recognition of what we'd each accomplished in our respective fields.

"I'd be honored to mentor her," I said sincerely. "And not just in the glossy aspects of the business. I'd want her to see the challenges too—the late nights, the difficult decisions, the compromises and setbacks. The real picture, not just the Instagram version."

Kara and Hal exchanged a look—one of those silent communications that long-married couples perfect over years together. Something passed between them, a mutual recalibration of their position on the matter.

"We'd need to add this to the contract," Kara said, her tone shifting from cautious consideration to practical planning—a good sign that she was now thinking in terms of how to make this work rather than whether to proceed at all.

"Of course," I agreed immediately. "We can draft a separate internship agreement that outlines the educational components, supervision, hours, and expectations. Your legal team can review it alongside the modeling contract."

"And this would be a paid position?" Hal asked, ever practical.

"Absolutely," I confirmed. "I don't believe in unpaid internships. They're exploitative and limit opportunities to those who can afford to work for free. She would receive appropriate compensation for her time, separate from her modeling fees."

This seemed to impress them both, another small shift in the dynamic of our negotiation. I made a mental note to thank Michelle later for her brilliant pivot—she'd recognized the core of Kara and Hal's concerns and found a way to address them that benefited everyone involved.

"I think this could work," Kara said finally, her expression thoughtful but considerably warmer than when she'd entered my office. "We'd still need to review everything carefully, of course."

"Of course," I agreed. "As I said, take all the time you need. I want this to be right for everyone involved, especially Kira."

The energy in the room had transformed completely—what had begun as a potentially contentious negotiation had evolved into a collaborative planning session, all of us now focused on how to make this opportunity beneficial for both girls in ways that aligned with their parents' values and concerns.

"We'll get back to you after we've had time to review everything and discuss it with Kira," Kara said as they prepared to leave, the contract tucked securely in her bag. "But I have to admit, I'm more open to the idea than when I walked in."

"That's all I can ask," I replied, walking them to the door. "Whatever you decide, I respect your judgment as her parents. You know what's best for her."

As they filed out, Michelle lingered behind momentarily, waiting until the others were out of earshot before turning to me with a knowing smile. "You're welcome," she said quietly, her tone carrying that particular blend of smugness and camaraderie that characterized our complex friendship.

"For what?" I asked innocently, though we both knew exactly what she meant.

"For saving your deal," she replied with a raised eyebrow. "You were losing them until I suggested the internship angle."

I laughed, acknowledging the truth of her assessment with a small nod. "It was brilliant," I conceded. "And genuinely good for Kira. Thank you."

"Consider it my Christmas gift," Michelle said with a smile that suggested she'd be collecting on this favor at some point. "Besides, the girls really want to do this together. It would break their hearts if one could participate and the other couldn't."

"Always the diplomat," I observed with a knowing smile of my own.

"When necessary," she agreed, adjusting her designer bag on her shoulder.

With a final wave, she followed the others, leaving me alone in my office with the satisfying sense of a negotiation well navigated—not yet concluded, but certainly headed in the right direction.

Ellie emerged from beneath my desk, stretching languidly before hopping onto my lap, demanding attention now that the meeting was concluded.

"That went better than expected," I told her, scratching behind her ears as she settled against me. "Michelle's idea was brilliant—exactly what we needed to address their core concerns."

Ellie yawned in response, clearly unimpressed by my business acumen or Michelle's diplomatic skills.



"Everyone's a critic," I sighed, reaching for my phone to text Trevor an update. The Paris trip was still on, but I'd need to make a few calls before we left to ensure both the campaign and the newly proposed internship program were properly structured.

As I began drafting notes for my legal team about the internship agreement, I couldn't help but feel a surge of genuine excitement about the prospect of mentoring Kira. Beyond the business benefits of having both girls represent the Spring line, there was something deeply satisfying about the opportunity to share my knowledge and experience with the next generation—to show a bright young woman that beauty could be about empowerment and self-expression rather than conformity and insecurity.

It wasn't just good business; it was a chance to help shape the industry's future in a more positive direction.

A couple of days later, my family was safely ensconced in Paris, the City of Light working its timeless magic even in the crisp chill of winter. It would be so nice to ring in the new year with my husband, daughter, best friend, and mother-in-law. And of course RJ and Finn as well, whose presence added an unexpected but pleasant dimension to our holiday escape.

The twins had stayed behind with Kara, who had graciously offered to watch them. Niamh was mostly occupied with Rachel, she and Finn taking turns doting on my daughter with the particular enthusiasm of grandparents enjoying a baby without the full-time responsibilities. This arrangement left Trevor and me with ample time to show RJ and Mia around the city we both adored.

We were seated at Café de Flore, one of my favorite spots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the historic café exuding exactly the kind of authentic Parisian charm that never failed to captivate visitors. The winter sun cast a golden glow over the boulevard, warming us despite the December chill. I'd insisted on an outdoor table despite the temperature—the people-watching was simply too good to miss, and the heaters kept us comfortable enough as we sipped our espressos and watched Paris unfold around us.

"It's nice to relax. Usually when I'm in Paris I'm on tour," Mia said, her hands wrapped around her cup for warmth, her usual reserve softened by the city's romantic atmosphere. She looked different here—more relaxed than I'd ever seen her, the perpetual guardedness that characterized her in Ireland notably diminished.

"It is beautiful here, even prettier than in photos," RJ nodded, his gaze taking in the elegant Haussmannian buildings and the stylish Parisians strolling past our table. He had the wide-eyed appreciation of someone experiencing the city for the first time, a quality I found endearing.

"I love Paris. Ireland is home, but Paris will always be a close second," Trevor said, his accent thickening slightly as it always did when he spoke of places that held emotional significance for him. His years training here had shaped him profoundly, both as a chef and as a man.

I nodded in agreement, taking a sip of my perfectly prepared café crème. "There's nowhere quite like it. The energy, the history, the unapologetic commitment to beauty in all forms." I gestured toward a stylish older woman walking past, her silver hair perfectly coiffed, her simple outfit elevated by impeccable accessories. "That's what I love—the effortless elegance that seems to permeate everything."

"And the food," Trevor added with the particular reverence he reserved for culinary matters. "The respect for ingredients, for tradition, for technique."

Trevor's dedication to his craft was one of the things I loved most about him, even when it occasionally bordered on obsession.

"He's been taking notes at every restaurant we've visited," Mia observed, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Very detailed notes."

"Research," Trevor insisted. "Purely professional research."

"Of course, *mi corazón*," I agreed with exaggerated solemnity. "Just like my visits to every boutique on Rue Saint-Honoré are 'market research' and not shopping."

RJ laughed, the sound surprisingly genuine. "You two remind me of my parents," he said, his expression softening with nostalgia. "They used to tease each other the same way—like it was their own private language."

The observation caught me slightly off guard—a glimpse of personal vulnerability from RJ that I hadn't expected. In the brief time we'd spent together in Paris, I'd begun to see dimensions to him that hadn't been apparent during our more fraught interactions in Ireland. Away from the complicated dynamics with Michelle and Hunter, he seemed more relaxed, more authentic—a man with depth and humor that had been obscured by the tension of their shared history.

"The best relationships have their own shorthand," Trevor agreed, his hand finding mine on the table in an unconscious gesture of connection. "Inside jokes, shared references that no one else quite gets."

"It's what I missed most after my wife died," Finn said quietly from where he sat beside Niamh, Rachel dozing contentedly in his arms. "That private language you develop over decades together."

Niamh's hand moved to rest lightly on his arm, her expression carrying a depth of understanding that spoke to her own experience with loss. "It's like losing part of your vocabulary," she agreed softly. "All these references and jokes that suddenly have nowhere to go."

The moment of shared vulnerability created a brief, contemplative silence at our table—each of us reflecting on our own relationships and the invisible threads that connected us to the people we loved.

"Well, this got deep for a café conversation," Mia observed after a moment, though her tone was gentle rather than dismissive. "Must be the Paris effect."

"The French do have a knack for philosophical contemplation over coffee," I agreed, deliberately lightening the mood. "It's practically a national sport."

"Speaking of sports," Trevor said, seizing the transition, "we should show RJ the apartment we're considering near Luxembourg Gardens. There's a fantastic running path that circles the entire park."

"You run?" I asked RJ, genuinely curious. This was another detail about him I hadn't known—a reminder of how little we actually knew about each other despite our intertwined social circles.

"Every morning," he confirmed with a nod. "It's my meditation time. Helps clear my head before the day starts."

"Hunter's the same way," I observed without thinking, then immediately regretted the comparison as I saw RJ's expression flicker briefly. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," RJ assured me, his smile returning though perhaps not quite reaching his eyes. "We're bound to have some things in common. We both fell for the same woman, after all."

The comment hung in the air for a moment, neither awkward nor entirely comfortable—simply an acknowledgment of the complex history that connected us all, even here in Paris where we'd temporarily escaped its most immediate pressures.

"Speaking of the apartment," Niamh interjected smoothly, her diplomatic instincts as sharp as ever, "when are we viewing it? I'm dying to see if it's as beautiful as the photos."

"The agent is meeting us there at two," Trevor replied, checking his watch. "Which gives us just enough time to finish our coffee and take the scenic route through the gardens."

As we settled our bill and prepared to leave, I found myself studying Mia and RJ with newfound interest. Away from the shadow of Michelle and Hunter's history, I was beginning to see them more clearly as individuals rather than simply as extensions of a complicated past. Mia's usual reserve had softened into something more approachable, while RJ revealed glimpses of warmth and self-awareness that hadn't been apparent in our previous interactions.

Paris had a way of doing that—stripping away pretenses and allowing people to present more authentic versions of themselves. Perhaps it was the city's unapologetic embrace of beauty and pleasure, or simply the distance from our normal lives and routines. Whatever the reason, I found myself genuinely enjoying their company in a way I hadn't anticipated when planning this trip.

As we strolled toward Luxembourg Gardens, Rachel now awake and observing the city with wide-eyed fascination from her stroller, I fell into step beside Mia, leaving Trevor to discuss culinary matters with RJ ahead of us.

"I'm glad you decided to join us," I told her quietly, genuine in my sentiment despite the complicated dynamics that had characterized our friendship over the years. "It's nice seeing you relaxed like this."

Mia glanced at me, a hint of surprise in her expression before it softened into something more genuine than her usual carefully maintained composure. "It's nice being able to relax," she admitted. "No cameras, no press, no... complications."

We both knew what she meant by "complications"—the ever-present tension that surrounded her relationship with RJ due to his history with Michelle. Here in Paris, thousands of miles from that particular pressure cooker, they seemed to breathe more freely, to exist more fully as themselves rather than as characters in someone else's narrative.

"Sometimes distance provides perspective," I observed, watching as RJ laughed at something Trevor had said, the sound carrying back to us on the crisp winter air.

"Sometimes," Mia agreed, her gaze following mine to where RJ walked ahead of us. "Though we'll have to go back eventually."

"True," I acknowledged. "But perhaps with a slightly different perspective? Paris has a way of recalibrating one's outlook."

Mia smiled—a genuine expression that transformed her usually guarded features. "Is that why you're buying an apartment here? For regular recalibration?"

"Partly," I admitted with a small laugh. "Though mostly it's because Trevor gets this particular gleam in his eye whenever we're here—like he's come home to his culinary motherland. I can deny him very little when he looks at me like that."

"You two are good together," Mia observed, her tone carrying a hint of something I couldn't quite identify—not envy, exactly, but perhaps a kind of wistful appreciation. "It's nice seeing a relationship that works so well despite how different you are."

"The differences keep it interesting," I replied, genuinely touched by her observation. "And the core values align, which is what really matters."

As we reached the entrance to Luxembourg Gardens, the conversation shifted to more practical matters—the apartment viewing, dinner reservations for the evening, plans for New Year's Eve.

Paris was working its magic, it seemed—not just on the obvious couples like Niamh and Finn, whose budding romance was blossoming visibly in the romantic atmosphere of the city, but on all of us in different ways. Old tensions were softening, new connections forming, perspectives shifting in the particular light that only Paris seemed able to cast.

As we entered the gardens, Rachel let out a delighted squeal at the sight of the carousel, her tiny hands reaching toward it with unmistakable desire. Trevor immediately changed course toward the

historic merry-go-round, his expression suggesting that no apartment viewing was more important than his daughter's happiness.

I watched them go, my heart full with unexpected contentment. This impromptu Paris getaway—with its unusual combination of companions—was proving to be exactly what we all needed to close out the year and welcome the new one with fresh perspective.

Sometimes the best experiences came from the most unexpected arrangements—a lesson I'd learned repeatedly throughout my life, yet still managed to forget until moments like these reminded me anew.

When we finally made it to the apartment, I was absolutely delighted. The space unfolded before us with the perfect blend of Parisian character and modern sensibility—artistic in its structure with thoughtful multi-level design that immediately felt right.

The entry level featured a spacious living area bathed in natural light from floor-to-ceiling windows that framed a quintessentially Parisian view of the neighboring buildings with their wrought-iron balconies and slate-gray rooftops. A stunning one bedroom suite occupied one wing of this floor, ideal for guests and offering privacy from the main living spaces. But the true showstopper—and I could see Trevor's eyes widen the moment we entered it—was the kitchen.

"Mon Dieu," he whispered, running his hand reverently along the marble countertop as if greeting an old friend.

The kitchen was a chef's dream—spacious and thoughtfully designed with professional-grade appliances, a massive center island, and custom cabinetry that somehow managed to be both functional and aesthetically perfect. The selling agent didn't need to highlight this feature; Trevor's expression said everything as he examined the six-burner gas range with the intensity of someone appraising fine art.

"I take it the kitchen meets with your approval?" I asked, unable to suppress a smile at his evident delight.

"It's perfect," he replied simply, opening and closing drawers with the particular reverence he reserved for well-designed culinary spaces.

From the entry level, a spiral staircase led downward to a surprisingly spacious lower level that housed a very nice gym complete with state-of-the-art equipment, a sauna, and a luxurious shower area. The space was sleek and modern, with subtle lighting that created an atmosphere of calm sophistication.

"This is unexpected," Mia observed, running her hand along the polished wood of the sauna door. "Most Parisian apartments don't have this kind of amenity."

"The previous owner was a fitness enthusiast," the agent explained in lightly accented English. "He had it custom designed when he renovated five years ago."

Meanwhile, from the entry level, an elegant staircase curved upward to the second floor, where the master bedroom suite unfolded in a symphony of understated luxury. The space was flooded with natural light from a wall of windows that overlooked a small private courtyard, creating a sanctuary that felt removed from the bustle of the city despite being in its very heart.

Adjacent to the master suite was a third bedroom—slightly smaller but equally well-appointed—and a versatile office/sitting area that occupied the remainder of the upper floor. The architecture throughout was clean and modern, yet retained enough traditional Parisian elements to avoid feeling sterile or characterless.

The décor struck the perfect balance between contemporary and timeless—neutral tones accented with strategic pops of color, high-quality materials used throughout, and an attention to detail that spoke to thoughtful design rather than passing trends. It was very much Trev and I in aesthetic, as if someone had somehow distilled our combined tastes into architectural form.

We fell in love with it right away, exchanging glances that required no words—we both knew this was the one. As we continued the tour, I could already envision exactly how the space would work for our family. The room on the entry level would be perfect for Niamh when she visited, offering her privacy while still being part of the household. Trev and I would take the master suite upstairs, naturally, and Rachel would occupy the third bedroom next to ours. We could transform the sitting area upstairs into a playroom for Rachel as she grew, and I would claim the little desk area by the window for those inevitable moments when I needed to handle business matters even while on vacation.

It was beyond perfect for our family—spacious enough to accommodate our needs without being ostentatious, centrally located yet offering surprising privacy, and designed with an attention to detail that satisfied both Trevor's exacting standards and my aesthetic sensibilities.

"What do you think?" I asked Niamh, who had been quietly taking in the space with Rachel in her arms. Her opinion mattered to me—not just because she would be a frequent visitor, but because I genuinely valued her perspective.

"It's lovely," she replied, her expression warm as she bounced Rachel gently. "Elegant but still feels like a home. And that kitchen would make any chef happy."

"Trevor's already mentally reorganizing the cabinets," I observed with a small laugh, watching as my husband opened and closed each one with methodical precision, clearly cataloging their potential contents.

"It's a beautiful space," Finn agreed, his arm casually draped across the back of the sofa as he surveyed the living area. "Excellent light."

RJ wandered over to the windows, taking in the view of Luxembourg Gardens visible just beyond the neighboring rooftops. "The location is perfect too. Close enough to everything without being right in the tourist center."

"What do you think?" I asked Trevor directly, though I already knew the answer from the way he was caressing the kitchen countertops like long-lost lovers.

"I think we'd be fools not to take it," he replied without hesitation, a rare instance of immediate decision-making from my usually deliberative husband. "It's exactly what we've been looking for."

I turned to the agent, who had been discreetly allowing us to explore without hovering. "We'll take it," I said decisively. "Have your office draw up the papers."

"Excellent," she replied with a professional smile that didn't quite mask her satisfaction at securing the sale so quickly. "I'll arrange everything. Perhaps we can meet tomorrow to handle the preliminary paperwork?"

"Perfect," I agreed, already mentally calculating the logistics of furnishing and preparing the space for our future visits. "The sooner the better."

As the agent stepped away to make a call, Trevor moved to stand beside me, his arm slipping around my waist in a gesture of shared excitement. "So we're doing this?" he asked, his voice carrying that particular blend of exhilaration and disbelief that accompanied major life decisions.

"We're doing this," I confirmed, leaning into his embrace. "Our little Parisian pied-à-terre. For vacations, for inspiration, for escaping when Ireland gets too rainy."

"Which is always," Mia added with a small laugh, joining us by the windows. "It's a beautiful space, Amber. I can see why you fell for it immediately."

"It just feels right," I explained, finding it difficult to articulate exactly what had captured us so completely. "Some spaces have that quality—you walk in and somehow know it's meant to be yours."

"Like finding the right person," Niamh observed quietly, her gaze meeting Finn's across the room with such natural warmth that I felt a surge of satisfaction at my matchmaking success. "Sometimes you just know."

"Exactly like that," I agreed, squeezing Trevor's hand gently. "When it's right, you don't need to overthink it."

As we concluded our visit and prepared to celebrate our impulsive but perfect purchase with lunch at a nearby bistro, I found myself filled with an unexpected sense of contentment. This apartment represented more than just a vacation home or a sound investment—it was a new chapter for our family, a space that would witness countless memories in the years to come.

Rachel would grow up with Paris as her second home, absorbing the city's culture and energy from her earliest years. Trevor would have his culinary playground, a base from which to explore the markets and restaurants that had shaped his professional development. And I would have my own

slice of the city that had always inspired me, a place to recharge and reconnect with the beauty that fueled my creative vision.

As we stepped back onto the Parisian streets, the winter sunlight casting long shadows across the historic buildings, I felt a deep appreciation for this unexpected turn in our holiday plans. What had begun as a simple New Year's getaway had transformed into something far more significant—a permanent connection to a city we both loved, a foundation for future adventures, a new home to complement the one we'd built in Ireland.

Some might call it impulsive, but I preferred to think of it as decisive. When something was right, you recognized it immediately—whether it was a person, a business opportunity, or a perfectly designed Parisian apartment with a kitchen that made your chef husband's eyes light up like a child on Christmas morning.

And this, without question, was absolutely right.

The next night was our first night in our new apartment, and it surprised me how quickly it already felt like ours. Not in the way a hotel suite ever could—too polished, too temporary—but in that quiet, settling way that comes when a space fits your life without forcing you to adapt yourself around it.

Rachel was down for the night in the travel crib we'd set up in the corner of the master bedroom, her tiny chest rising and falling with the soft, steady rhythm of deep baby sleep. I lingered for a moment, watching her, taking in the sight of her in *Paris*—as if my daughter had always belonged in a city that romanticized beauty and indulgence as a form of art.

Then I slid into bed, sighing into the crisp sheets. Trev kissed my forehead and mumbled something about water, then padded out of the room and down the stairs. I was half-asleep by the time I heard the rapid thud of his footsteps returning—too fast, too heavy.

He burst back into the bedroom like he'd seen a ghost.

"Love, what's wrong?!" I sat up immediately, heart jumping, my mind cycling through worst-case scenarios in an instant: Rachel? Fire? A break-in? Trevor finding a rat in the kitchen?

Trevor sat on the edge of the bed, looking genuinely shaken—white as a sheet, eyes wide, his hands hovering in that useless, frantic way of a man who didn't know what to do with his own limbs.

"I went downstairs," he said, voice lowered as if the apartment itself might overhear, "and I heard Mam and Finn... in her room..."

For a beat, my brain refused to translate.

Then it clicked.

I choked back a laugh so hard it nearly turned into a cough. I pressed my fist to my mouth, trying not to wake Rachel. "Oh, Love," I whispered, my shoulders shaking, "I know that's not what you wanted to hear—"



Trevor shot me a glare so intense it could have curdled cream.

"—but also," I finished, unable to stop myself, "good for Mam."

His expression shifted from horror to offended disbelief, as if I'd applauded a crime.

"This is not funny," he hissed, leaning closer. "My mother. In the flat. With RJ's father. While my baby is asleep upstairs."

I bit my lip, fighting another laugh—not because I didn't understand his discomfort, but because the situation was so deeply, ridiculously *Trevor*. Michelin-starred chef. Unshakable in a crisis. Terrified by the idea that his mother might be having a sex life.

"Trev," I said softly, reaching for his hand, "your mother is a grown woman. Finn is a grown man. They're both kind, single, and clearly... interested."

"I do not need to picture any of that," he muttered, squeezing his eyes shut like that might erase the mental image.

"Then don't," I replied, still amused, but gentler now. "All you need to do is accept that Mam deserves happiness. Even if it's inconveniently audible."

Trevor looked at me like he couldn't decide whether to be grateful for my reassurance or scandalized by my phrasing.

"I just went down for water," he said miserably. "Water, Amber. And I got... trauma."

I stroked his cheek, the affection underneath my teasing settling into something warm. "Welcome to adulthood, mi corazón. Your mam is human."

"My mother is *Mam*," he corrected, as if the title itself exempted her from human needs.

"And Mam," I said sweetly, "apparently still has excellent taste."

Trevor groaned and dropped his face into his hands.

I leaned in and kissed the top of his head, careful not to jostle the mattress too much. "Come here. Lie down. I promise, the world isn't ending. Your kitchen survived Christmas, your daughter is asleep, and your mother is having what sounds like the best New Year's Eve preview of her life."

Trevor looked up again, deadpan. "If you say one more word, I'm sleeping in the gym."

"Fine," I conceded, lying back with exaggerated obedience. "No more words."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're still smiling."

"I can't help it," I whispered. "This is the funniest thing that has happened all week."

Trevor let out a long, suffering sigh and slid into bed beside me, rigid with lingering discomfort.

I curled into him anyway, because that's what I did—tease him, steady him, love him, all at once.

And somewhere downstairs, muffled by layers of expensive Parisian architecture, Niamh O’Sullivan was apparently ringing in the new year early.

Good for her.

## “Pressure Points”

The first four months of the year flew by in a blur of airports, sound checks, school runs, and half-finished cups of coffee that went cold on whatever surface I happened to abandon them on. Between my career and the girls’ budding careers, we were always busy—always moving, always planning, always bracing for the next thing.

I was back and forth between the States and Ireland for tour dates, promo obligations, and filming blocks, living out of suitcases more than I cared to admit. Hunter insisted the girls stay in Ireland and finish the school year before they did any more touring—non-negotiable Dad Law—and as much as Harley complained about missing “opportunities,” I knew he was right. They needed some stability, some structure that wasn’t dictated by venues and call sheets.

It didn’t halt their careers, though. Not even close.

Harley recorded two new songs in our studio—because apparently my thirteen-year-old now had a producer, a vision board, and a stronger work ethic than most adults I knew. She even filmed a music video that somehow managed to look professional despite being shot in Ireland with a skeleton crew. Watching her step into that space—her own artistry, her own voice—was equal parts pride and terror.

Arissa’s momentum was different but just as intense. She joined Kira for Amber’s spring campaign, and it was wildly successful—not just in makeup sales, but in what it did for their little “A&K Beauty” channel. One campaign and suddenly their subscriber count jumped into numbers that made my stomach flip in that *this is real, this is happening* kind of way. It didn’t hurt that Arissa’s music video dropped around the same time, and between the campaign, the channel, and her songs, she was getting hits that would’ve made my younger self dizzy.

And that was just the normal kind of chaos.

Because of course there was also the Ranger front.

Cobra X was still a headache for the Genesis Rangers—one of those problems that never fully went away, just changed form and waited for the next opportunity. Viper was still stalking Harley every chance he got, like a shadow that refused to detach from her no matter how many times we tried to burn it off.

And then there was SPD.

SPD was becoming something it was never supposed to be.

What was once a peacekeeping force with intergalactic oversight was rapidly turning into a military arm of the American government, and the speed of the shift was what frightened me most. Wes had become buddies with the President—because of course he had—and suddenly SPD was one political donation away from being used domestically. I’d heard the rumors: “supporting ICE with crowd control,” “stabilizing civil unrest,” “protecting national interests.”

I'd been a Ranger long enough to know exactly how that story ended.

Not all veteran Rangers agreed with it. In fact, more and more of us were starting to whisper what no one wanted to say out loud: we were on the precipice of a Ranger Civil War—and by extension, a Sailor one.

Adam would stand with SPD. And Mina would stand with Adam.

Which meant the Inner Soldiers would stand with Mina.

And then there was me.

I knew the Outers would stand with me. Even Mia—complicated history and all—wouldn't stand for SPD becoming a government-controlled weapon. Not when we'd all spent our lives trying to keep power out of hands that didn't understand what it cost.

Hunter had been hard at work with the Riordans—not just rebuilding the Ord na Toirnín, but expanding it. Reinforcing it. Protecting it. Building a sanctuary on their land for civilian Rangers—Rangers who wanted nothing to do with SPD's new agenda. A place that was hidden not just by geography and magic, but by intent.

I could feel it coming. The shift. The tightening of alliances. The way conversations changed tone whenever SPD was mentioned.

Billy agreed with me. He didn't say it dramatically—Billy never did—but he was already building contingencies. Redundant systems. Encrypted channels. The kind of security you build when you believe something is inevitable. Livvie was doing the same on the digital side, turning our tech network into something that could survive if SPD ever tried to seize control of the Grid infrastructure.

And now it was almost May.

The air felt different—like the calm before a storm, not because things were quiet, but because everything was *poised*. Like the next spark wouldn't just start a fight, it would start a war.

I didn't know what the trigger would be.

I just knew we were running out of time.

On the bright side, my TV show had been picked up for a 2nd season. Presuming I lived that long.

Yeah, I was admittedly a little bit afraid of what I knew was coming.

Back in Ireland for a rare pocket of quiet, the house felt almost too still—like it was waiting for something. I had a short break before a few more shows in the States, and for once there were no suitcases half-packed in the hallway, no call times scribbled on sticky notes, no frantic texts from my publicist. Just the soft crackle of the fire and the muted sounds of Tomi on the floor.

She was sitting cross-legged in the rug, giggling as Robbie trotted in circles around her, carefully dropping a plush toy at her feet like it was the most sacred offering. He was such a good boy with

her—gentle, patient, always aware of where her tiny hands were, like he understood she wasn't a "kid" in the abstract. She was *his* kid.

Hunter and I were on the sofa, close enough that our knees brushed, his arm draped along the back cushion behind me. He looked relaxed on the surface, but I knew him too well. Hunter could sit perfectly still and still be on alert, like his body had never forgotten what it meant to live in a world where danger could come through any door.

I stared at him for a moment, then said the thing that had been sitting like a stone in my chest for days.

"We have to figure out if we can trust Andros."

Hunter blinked, genuinely surprised. "You don't trust Andros?"

"I do," I said, and that was the problem. "And that's exactly why I'm worried."

His brow furrowed. I could see the gears turning—Hunter trying to reconcile Andros the friend with Andros the potential liability.

"Andros is the one Ranger Wes could potentially turn," I continued. "Not with threats. Not with blackmail. With logic. With the whole 'duty, protection, national security' script. He's a blind spot."

Hunter sat forward slightly, the movement small but telling. "You think Wes would use him like you use Carter."

I nodded once. "Exactly. Carter is my inside source with Wes. He's my... early warning system. Andros could become *Wes's*."

Hunter's jaw tightened as he looked past me toward Tomi and Robbie, like the mention of risk automatically brought his mind back to our kids. "Andros wouldn't sell us out."

"I don't think he would *on purpose*," I said carefully. "That's the part people never want to admit. Most betrayals don't come with villain speeches. They come with 'I'm doing what's best for Earth.' 'I'm protecting my family.' 'I'm preventing chaos.'"

Hunter exhaled slowly, and for a moment all I could hear was Tomi's delighted squeal as Robbie gently nudged her hand with his nose.

"And if Andros gets convinced SPD is the safer choice," I added, "then where he goes, the Space and Galaxy teams follow. He's not just one Ranger. He's a linchpin."

Hunter's eyes met mine, and the surprise had faded into something else—recognition. He didn't like it, but he understood it.

"You're right," he said quietly. "So how do we make sure we can trust him?"

I swallowed, because that was the question that kept me awake at night. Not whether Andros was a good man—he was. Not whether he loved his family—he did. It was whether, when the lines got drawn, he'd see SPD as a shield... or as a leash.

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "But we can't wait until Wes makes the ask. If we're going to secure Andros, it has to be before SPD forces him to choose."

Hunter nodded slowly, his expression sharpening into that familiar tactical focus—the one that meant he was done debating and ready to plan.

"Alright," he said, voice low. "What's your move?"

"We have to be careful," I said, keeping my voice even even though my stomach was already tightening. "Harley is dating Aaron, and I really don't want the kids caught in the middle of whatever the adults are about to do. That's the fastest way to blow up the next generation before they've even had a chance to live."

Hunter nodded once. He didn't love the boyfriend situation, but he understood the stakes.

"I'm thinking Billy and Jason," I continued. "They're the ones leading this with us, and Andros respects the hell out of both of them. If anyone can do a temperature check without setting off alarms, it's those two."

"Good call," Hunter agreed immediately. "Jason's great at reading people. If he gets a face-to-face with Andros, he'll know where he's at."

"Exactly. I think—"

I paused as my phone rang.

Carter.

My pulse jumped. Carter didn't call me casually anymore. Not with SPD tightening like a fist around everyone who wore a badge, carried a morpher, or had ever been on a team roster.

I answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Mich," Carter said, and his voice was controlled—too controlled. "I just got back from a meeting at SPD. Wes was there, and he pulled me aside."

Hunter's posture shifted instantly. Not dramatic, just alert—like a guard dog hearing the click of a latch.

"Okay," I said carefully. "What's going on?"

"He said he wants me to get him a meeting with you and Jason," Carter continued. "He feels like you two are going to be a problem. He wants you loyal to SPD for whatever is next."

My jaw tightened. Of course Wes wanted Jason and me boxed in. Jason was the moral center of the veteran Rangers, and I was... well. Loud. Uncompromising. Annoyingly hard to intimidate.

"He wasn't specific," Carter added, "but he made it clear he's not going to let you and Jason get in the way. I told him I didn't think you'd go for it—"

"He knows I won't," I said flatly.

"Yeah," Carter agreed. "And he knows I'm going to call you. He *expects* it. Which means we need a more secure way to talk going forward. After this call—everything I do is going to be watched."

The room felt colder.

"Okay," I said, forcing my voice back into something steady. "I'll get a secure line set up. He's right about one thing—I will be a problem for SPD. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise."

"I figured," Carter said, and there was something like grim relief in his voice—like he'd been bracing himself for me to surprise him with surrender.

"I'll talk to Hunter," I continued, keeping my eyes on my husband. "We'll figure out the next move. I'll be in touch. Stay safe."

"You too," Carter said. "Bye."

The call ended. The silence afterward felt loud—too loud—broken only by Tomi's happy babbling as Robbie gently licked her fingers and she squealed like it was the funniest thing in the world.

I lowered my phone and looked at Hunter, the weight of it settling in my chest.

"Wes is preparing," I said quietly. "He knows I'll never side with SPD."

"You never have," Hunter said, his voice calm in that way that meant he was already thinking ten steps ahead.

"And I'm not about to start now," I replied.

Hunter studied me for half a second—long enough to read the anger under my calm—then asked, "What did Carter want?"

"Wes wants him to set up a meeting with Jase and me," I said.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "He wants to try to convince you to join him."

"Exactly," I confirmed. "And I don't think he's above using Savannah, blackmail, or intimidation to do it."

Hunter's jaw tightened. "You meet with SPD and you're walking into a trap."

"I know." My voice came out flatter than I meant it to. "But we can't just hide and hope it goes away either. We need a clearer picture—who's definitely on SPD's side, who isn't, and who's still a question mark."

I pushed off the sofa. "Grab Tomi. Let's go down to the command center."

Hunter scooped Tomi up, and she immediately wrapped her arms around his neck, her toddler grip unshakable. I turned toward the hallway, and Thara—who had been asleep, curled in my lap like I was her personal throne—shot upright with offended indignation. She hopped down with a dramatic flick of her tail and followed me anyway, because of course she did. Robbie padded behind us as well, nails clicking softly against the wood floor like a steady metronome.

We headed down to the command center under my office—Billy’s hidden masterpiece. Familiar screens lit the room in cool blues and greens, the hum of systems steady, like the place itself was alive and waiting for orders.

I slid into the chair at the main terminal and opened a new file.

A spreadsheet.

Not glamorous. Not heroic. But sometimes wars start—and are won—by lists.

Hunter set Tomi on the floor with a few toys, and she immediately began stacking them with intense concentration. Thara jumped up onto the console like she owned the command center too, and I didn’t even bother fighting her. If she wanted to supervise the impending civil war, fine.

I started typing.

Names. Teams. Patterns. Alliances. Rumors. History. Which Rangers had ties to Wes, which ones had already taken SPD funding, which ones still believed SPD was a shield instead of a weapon. As I built the list, it stopped being theoretical and started looking like a map of a fracture line.

When I finally leaned back, the spreadsheet looked something like this:

| Name             | Team | Loyalty    |
|------------------|------|------------|
| Jason Scott      | MMPR | Resistance |
| Kim Scott        | MMPR | Resistance |
| Billy Cranston   | MMPR | Resistance |
| Zack Taylor      | MMPR | Resistance |
| Michelle Bradley | MMPR | Resistance |
| Rocky DeSantos   | Zeo  | SPD        |
| Aisha DeSantos   | MMPE | SPD        |



|                 |            |            |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Adam Park       | Zeo        | SPD        |
| Tonya Sloan     | Zeo        | Unknown    |
| TJ Johnson      | Space      | Unknown    |
| Justin          | Turbo      | Unknown    |
| Cassie Johnson  | Space      | Unknown    |
| Ashley Kay      | Space      | Unknown    |
| Andros Kay      | Space      | Unknown    |
| Zhane           | Space      | Unknown    |
| Karone          | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Leo Corbett     | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Mike Corbett    | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Kendrix Corbett | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Maya            | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Damon           | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Kai             | Galaxy     | Unknown    |
| Carter Grayson  | Lightspeed | Resistance |
| Dana Grayson    | Lightspeed | Resistance |
| Joel            | Lightspeed | SPD        |
| Kelsey          | Lightspeed | SPD        |

|                 |             |            |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|
| Ryan            | Lightspeed  | SPD        |
| Chad            | Lightspeed  | SPD        |
| Wes Collins     | Time Force  | SPD        |
| Jen Collins     | Time Force  | SPD        |
| Eric Myers      | Time Force  | SPD        |
| Taylor Myers    | Wild Force  | SPD        |
| Cole Evans      | Wild Force  | SPD        |
| Alyssa Evans    | Wild Force  | SPD        |
| Max Cooper      | Wild Force  | SPD        |
| Danny Delgado   | Wild Force  | SPD        |
| Merrick Baliton | Wild Force  | Resistance |
| Claudia Clarke  | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Dustin Brooks   | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Tori Bradley    | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Hunter Bradley  | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Blake Bradley   | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Cam Watanabe    | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Marah Brooks    | Ninja Storm | Resistance |
| Kapri Clarke    | Ninja Storm | Resistance |

|                 |              |            |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|
| Saoirse Riordan | Ninja Storm  | Resistance |
| Tiernan Riordan | Ninja Storm  | Resistance |
| Conner McKnight | DinoThunder  | SPD        |
| Ethan James     | DinoThunder  | SPD        |
| Kira McKnight   | DinoThunder  | SPD        |
| Trent Fernandez | DinoThunder  | SPD        |
| Sky Tate        | SPD          | SPD        |
| Sydney Tate     | SPD          | SPD        |
| Bridge Carson   | SPD          | SPD        |
| Savannah James  | SPD          | SPD        |
| Z Delgado       | SPD          | SPD        |
| Xander Bly      | Mystic Force | Resistance |
| Lacey Bly       | Mystic Force | Resistance |
| Maddie Russell  | Mystic Force | Resistance |
| Nick Russell    | Mystic Force | Resistance |
| Vida Thorne     | Mystic Force | Resistance |
| Chip Thorn      | Mystic Force | Resistance |

|                |             |            |
|----------------|-------------|------------|
| Ronny Robinson | Overdrive   | SPD        |
| Mack Hartford  | Overdrive   | SPD        |
| Dax Lo         | Overdrive   | SPD        |
| Will Aston     | Overdrive   | SPD        |
| Rose Ortiz     | Overdrive   | SPD        |
| Tyzonn         | Overdrive   | Resistance |
| RJ James       | Jungle Fury | Resistance |
| Casey Rhodes   | Jungle Fury | Resistance |
| Lily Rhodes    | Jungle Fury | Resistance |
| Dominic Hargan | Jungle Fury | Resistance |
| Theo Martin    | Jungle Fury | Resistance |
| Jayden Shiba   | Samurai     | Resistance |
| Mike           | Samurai     | Resistance |
| Mia            | Samurai     | Resistance |
| Emily          | Samurai     | Resistance |
| Antonio        | Samurai     | Resistance |
| Kevin          | Samurai     | Resistance |
| Troy           | Megaforce   | SPD        |
| Emma           | Megaforce   | SPD        |

|           |                |            |
|-----------|----------------|------------|
| Jake      | Megaforce      | SPD        |
| Gia       | Megaforce      | SPD        |
| Noah      | Megaforce      | SPD        |
| Brody     | Ninja Steel    | Unknown    |
| Preston   | Ninja Steel    | Unknown    |
| Calvin    | Ninja Steel    | Unknown    |
| Hayley    | Ninja Steel    | Unknown    |
| Sarah     | Ninja Steel    | Unknown    |
| Levi      | Ninja Steel    | Unknown    |
| Devon     | Beast Morphers | SPD        |
| Ravi      | Beast Morphers | SPD        |
| Zoey      | Beast Morphers | SPD        |
| Nate      | Beast Morphers | SPD        |
| Amelia    | Cosmic Fury    | Resistance |
| Izzy      | Cosmic Fury    | Resistance |
| Ollie     | Cosmic Fury    | Resistance |
| Javi      | Cosmic Fury    | Resistance |
| Fern      | Cosmic Fury    | Resistance |
| Aiyon     | Cosmic Fury    | Resistance |
| JJ Oliver | Genesis        | SPD        |

|                 |                          |            |
|-----------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Addy Oliver     | Genesis                  | SPD        |
| Melody Grayson  | Genesis                  | Resistance |
| Minh Kwan       | Genesis                  | Resistance |
| Kimber Park     | Genesis                  | SPD        |
| Aaron Kay       | Genesis                  | Unknown    |
| Ally Kay        | Genesis                  | Unknown    |
| Logan Collins   | Genesis                  | SPD        |
| Lindsey Bradley | Ninja Storm-<br>Next Gen | Resistance |
| Arissa Bradley  | Ninja Storm-<br>Next Gen | Resistance |
| Harley Bradley  | Ninja Storm-<br>Next Gen | Resistance |

Hunter leaned over my shoulder, scanning the list. I could feel the tension radiating off him—not panic, not fear. Calculation.

“This is... a lot of SPD,” he said quietly.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “That’s what I’ve been trying not to say out loud.”

He pointed at the block of Space and Galaxy names. “Andros, Ashley, TJ, Cassie, Zhane... all unknown.”

I nodded once. “That’s the problem. If the Space/Galaxy teams tip toward SPD, it’s not just political. It changes the balance of power.”

Hunter’s gaze dropped to Savannah’s name. “And Wes is using her as leverage.”

“He’ll use anything,” I said. “Savannah. Carter. The Grid. Public opinion. He’ll call it safety and sell it like patriotism.”

Tomi toddled over and thumped a block on my foot, announcing her presence. Robbie followed her, tail wagging, and Thara flicked her tail as if irritated that command decisions were being interrupted by a child doing child things.

Hunter looked down at our daughter, then back at the spreadsheet.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, voice low.

I stared at the names on the screen—friends, allies, people I’d bled beside, laughed with, raised families alongside. And now we were sorting them into columns like it was nothing.

But it wasn’t nothing.

It was the start of the line being drawn.

“We start with Andros,” I said. “And we do it before Wes makes his move.”

I picked up my phone. If anyone could read Andros without tipping our hand, it was Jason.

I dialed.

“Hello?” Jason answered on the second ring, his voice calm but alert.

“Jase, it’s me,” I said. “I’m sending you something. Open it when it comes through.”

Hunter hovered behind me, arms folded, watching my face the way he did when he knew I was holding back fear with strategy.

I hit send.

There was a pause—long enough that I could picture Jason sitting wherever he was, jaw set, scanning the spreadsheet like it was a battlefield map.

Finally he exhaled. “That’s about what I expected,” he said quietly. “Except Space and Galaxy…”

“Yeah,” I agreed, my throat tightening. “That’s the hole in the net. Andros is the key there.”

Jason didn’t interrupt, which meant he was listening the way he always did when it mattered—fully, with his whole attention.

“We need to make sure he isn’t going to become Wes’s inside man before Wes even asks,” I continued. “We secure Andros, we secure Space and Galaxy. If Andros tilts SPD, a whole block moves with him—whether they mean to or not.”

“And the rest?” Jason asked.

“Tonya’s still unknown,” I said. “But if I’m being honest, I suspect she’ll side with Rocky and Aisha out of loyalty. And I don’t know the Ninja Steel team well enough to predict their allegiances. I’m not going to pretend I have a read on people I’ve only met twice.”

Jason made a low sound of agreement. “Fair.”

"But you?" I pressed. "You're in Angel Grove. You see Andros. You're someone he respects. I need you to do a pulse check—quietly. No accusations. No 'pick a side' speeches. Just... feel him out."

Jason was silent for a beat, and I could almost hear him shifting into that mode—the one where he stopped being my friend and became what he'd always been at his core: a leader preparing to hold a line.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll talk to him. Face-to-face. No comms. No paper trail."

Relief loosened something in my chest, but only slightly. This wasn't solved—it was just moving.

"Thank you," I said. "And Jase?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful," I added. "Wes is watching. And if he already suspects you and me, he'll be watching you even harder."

Jason's voice didn't change, but it hardened. "Let him watch. Doesn't mean he gets to decide what we do."

I closed my eyes briefly, absorbing the steadiness in that statement like a lifeline.

"Alright," I said. "Call me after. But not on your usual line. I'll send you the new secure channel once Billy finishes the routing."

"Got it," Jason replied. "Tell Hunter I said hi."

"I will," I said, then hung up.

I set the phone down and looked up at Hunter. His expression was unreadable—controlled, but intense.

"Well?" he asked.

"We're moving," I said. "Jason's going to get eyes on Andros."

Hunter nodded once, a small motion that carried the weight of what was coming. "Good."

Behind us, Tomi giggled at something Robbie did—some tiny, innocent sound that didn't belong in a room where we were preparing for a war.

And that—more than anything—was what made my hands shake as I turned back to the screen.

I forced myself to breathe, to re-anchor in logic and planning, but the tremor in my fingers didn't go away. Not when the spreadsheet in front of me looked less like data and more like a list of people who might one day be aiming at my family.

I swallowed. "There's something else worrying me."

Hunter's gaze sharpened instantly. "What's that?"

"Rocky," I said.



His expression didn't change, but I felt the air in the room tighten. Hunter and I didn't talk about Rocky often. Not because we'd moved on, but because the subject always led back to a place that still hurt—especially for Harley.

"Rocky's married to Aisha," I continued. "Aisha is SPD, so obviously they're going to side with Wes. That part is predictable. But... beyond that—Rocky was coming unhinged at Thanksgiving over Harley. He didn't take her rejection of him as a father well."

"He isn't her father," Hunter said simply. No heat. Just truth.

"No," I agreed, voice quieter now. "He's not. But he thought he was for eight years. And... he was, in every way that mattered, for eight years."

Hunter's jaw flexed. "And then he pushed her away when he married Aisha and adopted Tamara."

"Yes," I said, because that part was still a knife. "He made a new family and expected Harley to just... slot into it when it was convenient. Harley didn't want to be a guest in her own life."

Hunter stared at the screen like he was looking through it. "He doesn't see it that way."

"No, he doesn't," I said, frustration sharpening my tone. "He blames us for 'turning her against' him. He thinks I'm a bad mother. And you remember what he did when her paternity came out."

Hunter's eyes flicked to mine. "Yeah. He tried to convince me to take Harley away from you and never let you see her again."

The memory hit like a cold wave. Rocky, furious and righteous, acting like he was protecting Harley from me—as if I was the danger, as if my love was something toxic.

"And he still feels that way," I said. "The threats he made against you at Thanksgiving... I don't think that was just talk anymore. Not with SPD behind him. Not with Aisha whispering in his ear and Wes's machine giving them permission."

Hunter's voice dropped. "Mich. What are you saying?"

I hated saying it out loud. I hated that the thought had even formed in my mind, because once you named a fear like that, it stopped being a nightmare and started being a possibility.

"I'm saying I wouldn't put it past him to use his SPD connections to try to take custody of Harley."

Hunter's brows knit. "He has no legal standing. He's not her legal parent. He's not her biological parent."

"I know," I said, and the fact that he was right didn't comfort me at all. "Which is why I think he'd go through SPD. They don't see Harley as a thirteen-year-old girl. They see her as a young Ranger and the Princess of Saturn. A powerful asset."

Hunter went utterly still.

"If Rocky and Aisha convince them I'm corrupting that asset," I continued, voice tight, "if they frame it as me being unstable, or emotionally compromised, or a security threat—"

Hunter finished it, the words bleak. “Then SPD can take her into custody under the reasoning they’re protecting her powers from being compromised.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “Exactly.”

The command center suddenly felt too small, the walls too close. The screens hummed like they were counting down to something.

“Hunter,” I said, and I hated the way my voice cracked, “I can’t lose our girl.”

He stood, crossed the space in two strides, and tilted my chin up with his fingers—gentle, but firm enough that I had to look at him. His eyes were steady. Grounded. The kind of steady that had carried me through monsters and wars and grief and everything else life had thrown at us.

“You won’t,” he said, low and absolute. “I promise.”

Then he pulled me into his chest, arms wrapping around me like a shield.

I closed my eyes and let myself breathe against him, trying to borrow his certainty for a moment—trying to believe that promises could still hold weight in a world where institutions were turning into weapons.

“Rocky won’t get near her,” Hunter said, his voice low against my hair. “I really don’t want to have to kill anybody... but I will.”

He tried to land it with a trace of humor, the kind of dark half-joke people make when the truth underneath is too sharp to say plainly. But I knew Hunter. When it came to me and our daughters, there was no bluff in him. If someone crossed that line, he wouldn’t hesitate—not because he was reckless, but because he was *certain*.

I pulled back just enough to look at him. “I know.”

His eyes searched mine, like he was making sure I understood the depth of what he was offering: not comfort, but commitment. Protection. Consequence.

I swallowed, steadying myself. “Which is why we need allies with power—real power. You know Mia and RJ are going to be some of our strongest allies here. Whatever else is messy between us... they’re a couple that rivals our power.”

Hunter’s face tightened immediately, the reflexive dislike flashing through him before he smoothed it away. A grimace, quick and controlled.

“Yes,” he admitted, like the word tasted bad. “I know.”

I watched the war play out in his expression—pride versus jealousy, duty versus rage, the simple fact that RJ was someone I once loved. Hunter had never been threatened by my past in an insecure way; he was threatened by it in a *protective* way, because he knew exactly what RJ had done to me. He’d never forgiven him. He probably never would.

“We do what we have to,” I said quietly.

Hunter exhaled through his nose, the sound sharp. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll be civil to RJ.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Civil is... a start.”

“That’s all you’re getting,” he muttered, then reached up and brushed his thumb across my cheek, softening again. “But I’ll do it. For Harley. For all of them.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “For all of them.”

“We’re not losing anyone,” he said. Not a promise this time. A statement. A decision.

And somehow, hearing it like that—spoken like a line he’d drawn in his own soul—made my ribs loosen enough for a real breath.

“MOM! DAD!” Harley’s voice carried down the stairs, sharp enough to cut through the hum of the command center.

Hunter and I froze.

We didn’t know who she might have with her—Kora, Kira, a friend from school, half the neighborhood—so we moved fast. Hunter scooped Tomi without even thinking, and I flicked the monitors to their most boring-looking screens. Then we were up the stairs, into my office, and I slid the passage shut behind us with the familiar soft click of hidden mechanisms.

“Office!” I called, forcing my voice into something normal—something that sounded like a mom who’d been writing emails, not plotting against SPD.

Harley walked in alone, cheeks flushed from running, phone already in her hand like a weapon.

“There you are,” she said, breathless. “Okay—did you see the *Daily Mail* today?”

I sagged inwardly. “God, no. What now?” I rubbed my forehead. “Who am I sleeping with this time?”

Harley made a face of immediate disgust. “Ew. No. This time it’s about *me*.”

Hunter’s eyebrows rose. “That’s new.”

“They’re saying I ripped off your music video when I made mine,” Harley blurted, shoving her phone toward me like she couldn’t stand holding the accusation any longer.

I took the phone and skimmed the headline. It was exactly the kind of lazy, inflammatory tabloid framing I’d been dealing with since I was a child—bold font, false certainty, and enough insinuation to stir a comment section into a frenzy.

I exhaled slowly and set the phone down on my desk.

Harley stood there, tense and furious, trying to look unaffected and failing. She had my stubbornness and Hunter’s temper, which was a hell of a combination when you were thirteen and being publicly accused of something you didn’t do.

I eased myself into the chair behind my desk. Harley and Hunter took the seats opposite me—Hunter’s posture careful, contained, but I could see the protective anger in the way his jaw was set.

"Har," I said gently, "I did tell you this would happen."

"I know," she snapped, then softened immediately, guilt flickering across her face. "I'm not snapping at you. I'm just—ugh."

"I know," I repeated. "When you asked me if I minded you paying homage to the video I did for *'Probably Wouldn't Be This Way,'* I said yes. I also said the media—especially the *Daily Mail*—wouldn't call it homage. They'd call it copying. They'd call it 'desperate for attention.' They'd call it anything that gets clicks."

Harley's throat bobbed as she swallowed, her eyes bright with frustration. "But it's not the same video. It's just... a couple shots are similar. It's my song. My concept. My vision." Her voice cracked slightly on the last word, and that did something painful to my chest. "I just thought yours was the most romantic video you ever did, and I wanted to use that idea. Like... the vibe."

"And you did," I said firmly. "And it's a great video."

Hunter nodded once. "It is. We've watched it about sixteen times."

Harley shot him a look. "Dad."

"What?" he said, unrepentant. "It's good."

I let myself smile for a beat, then sobered again. "Baby, you have to understand something. The media isn't analyzing your work in good faith. They're not trying to understand intent. They're trying to make a headline that makes people angry enough to share it."

Harley slumped into her chair, hands twisting in her lap. "It just feels... unfair."

"It is unfair," I agreed immediately. "And it sucks. But if this is what you want—music, public life, the whole thing—you have to learn to let some of it roll off. Because you've seen what they write about me. They can be brutal. And they don't care about the truth if the lie makes money."

Harley's mouth twisted. "Like how they still write that you're having an affair with Uncle Jeremy?"

"Exactly," I said without hesitation. "And we all know that couldn't be further from the truth."

Hunter made a low noise in his throat. "If anything, Jeremy's having an affair with Hal."

Harley snorted despite herself, the sound involuntary.

"That's my point," I said softly. "They build narratives. They repeat them until people believe them. And you cannot let strangers on the internet define you."

Harley stared at my desk for a moment, her shoulders still tense. "So what do I do?"

I leaned forward slightly, meeting her eyes. "You do what you've always done. You make good art. You stay respectful. You don't spiral into trying to prove yourself to people who don't matter."

Hunter added, voice quiet but steady, "And if you want, we can have Holly reach out and shut it down through official channels. Not a fight. Just... clarify it. Control the narrative."

Harley looked between us, the anger still there, but something steadier starting to build underneath it—resolve.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Okay. I can do that.”

I nodded, feeling a flicker of pride so strong it almost hurt. “Good. Because this is the first time. It won’t be the last.”

She groaned. “That’s terrifying.”

“It is,” I said honestly. Then I softened. “But you’re not alone. You’ve got us. Always.”

Harley’s expression tightened for a moment—like she was fighting the urge to look like she cared too much—then she nodded once, sharp and quick.

“Okay,” she repeated, quieter this time.

And for a moment—just a moment—the world outside my office, outside the headlines, outside SPD and the looming fracture lines—fell away.

It was just my daughter. Needing me.

And that, at least, was something I could handle.

Harley shifted in her chair, picking at the cuff of her sleeve the way she did when she was working up to something she already knew she wasn’t going to like hearing.

“Mom,” she began, voice quieter now, “why can’t I go on tour with you when you go back out?” She hesitated, then rushed the rest out like ripping off a bandage. “I want to be on stage and... I miss Aaron.”

I sighed, because this was the part nobody glamorized when they talked about “young love” and “famous families.” Long-distance was hard enough for adults. For teenagers—especially teenagers with hormones and schedules and a first boyfriend who made her feel seen—it was torture.

“I know,” I said gently. “But you and Aaron both have school. That comes first. You’ll see him when you join me for the summer tour.”

Harley slumped. “Ugh, I know. That’s like a month away.”

“Yes,” Hunter said, cutting in with his calm Dad Voice, “a month you still have to focus on school.”

Harley rolled her eyes so hard I was surprised they didn’t get stuck.

Hunter’s head tilted, slow and deliberate. “Excuse me?”

Harley froze, realizing too late she’d done the thing he hated most—disrespect with no effort to hide it.

“Sorry, Dad,” she muttered, not quite meeting his eyes. “I just hate school.”

"I know," Hunter said, and the firmness didn't soften, but the warmth did creep in at the edges. "But it's important. And you know the deal. I agreed to let you make music and build a career on the condition you stay in school—in person—and it comes first."

"Yeah, yeah," Harley mumbled, the words automatic and half-hearted.

Hunter's eyebrows lifted again, warning. Not anger. Just *don't push me*.

Harley sighed dramatically, then corrected herself with exaggerated obedience. "Yes, sir."

"Thank you," Hunter said, satisfied.

I fought a smile. Hunter could be terrifying when he wanted to be, but he was also predictable, and Harley knew exactly where the boundaries were. She just liked testing them for sport.

I shifted the conversation before it could spiral into a lecture. "Where's your sister?"

"At Kira's," Harley said, relief evident at the change in topic. "Filming a new video, I think."

Hunter's mouth twitched. "Of course she is."

I nodded slowly, already picturing Arissa in full production mode—ring light out, tripod positioned, Kira recruited as co-star and editor, probably making a spreadsheet for upload schedules if she had five minutes of downtime.

"Alright," I said, standing. "I'll text Kara and make sure they're not about to burn the house down with a contour tutorial."

Harley stood too, lingering near the desk. "So... I'm not in trouble anymore?"

Hunter crossed his arms. "You weren't in trouble. You were reminded."

Harley made a face. "That's the same thing."

"It is not," Hunter said calmly.

"It is," Harley insisted.

I stepped between them before we ended up in a philosophical debate about Dad Semantics. "Okay. Everyone's fine. No one is grounded. Yet."

Harley's eyes widened. "Yet?"

Hunter's lips quirked. "Don't tempt fate."

She huffed, but the tension had eased. She leaned forward and kissed my cheek quickly—like she didn't want to be caught doing something soft—and then, after a half-second of hesitation, did the same to Hunter.

"Love you," she muttered, already turning toward the door.

"Love you too," Hunter called after her.

I watched her leave, my heart doing that complicated mom thing—pride and worry and tenderness all at once.

Then I looked at Hunter and let out a breath. “A boyfriend in Angel Grove. A tour schedule. And a kid who hates school.”

Hunter nodded gravely. “We’re living the dream.”

“Yeah,” I said, voice dry. “A very specific nightmare dream.”

But even then, I couldn’t fully hide my smile. Because for all the chaos, for all the stress, she was still Harley—bright, stubborn, passionate.

And she was still ours.

Hunter didn’t smile for long. He rarely did when the conversation turned from parenting stress to *threat assessment*.

“You know we need to discuss this summer tour,” he said.

I turned back toward him. “What about it?”

“It’s in the States,” he replied, and the way he said it made the words feel heavier than geography. “SPD has reach there.”

I felt my stomach tighten. “If they’re going to try to take Harley,” I said quietly, “the States is exactly where they’d want her.”

“Exactly,” Hunter said. “And they’ll use anything they can as justification. If they can frame your schedule as unstable—too much travel, too many public appearances, too many security variables—they’ll use it like a weapon.”

“A summer tour isn’t unstable,” I argued automatically, then stopped because I understood what he meant even if I didn’t like it. “But... I get it.”

Hunter watched me, waiting. He knew I was already building a plan in my head; he also knew the plan would probably involve people, logistics, and at least one move that made him grind his teeth.

“So we don’t make it *just* a tour,” I said. “We make it a family trip. We invite Aaron and his family—assuming Andros is with us. And we bring Jason and Kim too. I’d like to see Rocky try to pull something if the protective perimeter includes you, Andros, and Jason.”

Hunter’s eyes narrowed slightly. Not at the strategy—at the one unavoidable implication.

“So you want her boyfriend on tour with her.”

“Not just hers,” I said quickly, because I could already see where this was going. “I figured Arion could come too. He’s the son of our head royal guard. We know he’s loyal, and he’s already protective of Arissa.”

Hunter blinked. Once. Slowly. Like his brain needed a second to process the full insanity of my proposal.

"You want me," he said carefully, "to be okay with both of my teenage daughters having their boyfriends on tour with them."

"Arisa is fourteen," I reminded him, "and Harley will be fourteen this summer. They're not babies, Hunter."

Hunter's stare told me I'd chosen the wrong argument.

"And it wouldn't just be tour," I added, shifting tactics. "During the break between legs, we take a proper vacation. We go to the beach house in Australia. Get the girls out of the spotlight for a minute. Let everyone breathe. I bet the O'Briens would even join us for that."

Hunter's expression flickered—just for a second—at the mention of the beach house. He loved Australia. He loved anything that resembled peace.

"Sounds amazing," he said flatly, which was Hunter-speak for *I hate this but I can't find the flaw fast enough to shut it down*.

I waited.

He sighed through his nose. "Fine."

I raised my eyebrows. "Fine?"

He pointed at me like he was laying down law. "Aaron and Arion cannot be on the same bus as the girls."

I bit back a laugh. "That's your condition?"

"That is my condition," he said, dead serious. "Because if I have to sit in a moving vehicle for hours watching teenage boys breathe near my daughters, I will drive the bus into the ocean."

"Fair," I agreed, trying—and failing—to keep my face neutral.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "You're smiling."

"I'm not smiling," I lied.

"You are," he insisted.

"I'm smiling because I love you," I corrected smoothly.

He muttered something, then leaned in and kissed my forehead—quick, grounding, like he was sealing the agreement even as he hated it.

"And Michelle?" he added, voice low.

"Yes?"



“If SPD makes a move, none of this matters. Tour, vacation, any of it. We pull the girls and we disappear.”

My smile faded.

I nodded once. “Agreed.”

Hunter held my gaze a moment longer, then finally released a breath, as if letting himself pretend—just for a second—that we were talking about normal parenting problems.

Boyfriends. Tour buses. School schedules.

Not custody threats and militarized Ranger agencies.

But both of us knew the truth.

We were planning a summer tour like it might be the last season of normal we got.

“Life is Strange”

By the time I left the office, it was fully dark outside—Cork’s damp spring air clinging to the pavement and my nerves like a second skin. The kind of night where the streetlights looked softer than they should, the city somehow quieter even though the traffic still hummed and the pubs were still full. It had been one of those days where I’d done a thousand things and still felt like I was behind.

Spring campaign metrics. Supplier approvals. Packaging proofs for the summer drops. A call with Lydia that had been equal parts productive and emotionally draining—because collaborating with Lydia was always like negotiating with a beautiful hurricane.

And then there was the *summer* campaign.

The concept had been sitting on my desk for three weeks now, taunting me. Summer family vacation vibes. Effortless. Sunlit. Soft makeup. Easy hair. The kind of campaign that made people buy the fantasy as much as the product.

And if I was honest, there was one face that would sell that fantasy in a way no model on Earth could replicate: Michelle.

Which meant I’d have to work with Michelle.

Again.

Not impossible. Just... complicated in a way that had nothing to do with business and everything to do with interpersonal landmines, history, and the fact that Michelle Morris could be delightful one minute and terrifying the next.

My phone buzzed in my coat pocket as I stepped onto the sidewalk.

**GINA:** *We’re at the snug. Aine’s already ordered wine. Come now before she starts spiraling.*

I sighed and turned toward the pub without even thinking. Some decisions weren’t decisions anymore—just habits. Rituals. The quiet ways women kept each other upright.

The snug was tucked behind the main bar, small enough that you could actually hear each other without shouting. When I walked in, Gina looked up immediately and waved me over, her dark hair piled in a messy knot that suggested she’d been too tired to perform the last few steps of professionalism after clocking out. Aine sat across from her, shoulders slightly rounded, hands wrapped around a wine glass like she needed the warmth more than the alcohol.

Two empty napkins sat on the table—signs of the kind of “I’m fine” snacking that wasn’t actually eating.

“Finally,” Gina said, sliding her phone away. “I thought you’d gotten trapped in the office and eaten by invoices.”

“I almost did,” I replied, dropping into the seat beside her. “Jerrica tried to save me. I told her I’d promote her to Chief of Staff if she brought me a coffee and a flamethrower.”

Aine managed a small smile. It didn't reach her eyes.

"Alright," I said, cutting straight through the bullshit the way I always did. "Talk to me. What happened today?"

Aine's fingers tightened around her glass. "Nothing," she said automatically.

Gina's expression went flat. "That's a lie."

Aine blinked, the faintest crack in her composure. "He texted me," she admitted.

I didn't ask who *he* was. There was only one.

"And?" Gina prompted, already leaning forward like she was ready to throw hands in a public space if necessary.

Aine swallowed. "He asked if Kiara was asleep yet."

"And you told him to come over and be a father?" Gina said, her voice sharp.

Aine's gaze dropped. "I told him she was awake."

I felt something hot and protective tighten in my chest. It wasn't just James being useless—that was predictable. It was Aine trying to make space for him anyway, like she could love him into being better.

"And did he come?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Aine shook her head once. A quiet movement. A mother's resignation.

"He said he was busy."

Gina let out a sound that was half laugh, half swear. "Busy doing what? Developing a personality?"

Aine gave a weak huff of amusement, but her eyes glossed just slightly, and I saw the exhaustion underneath it. Not physical exhaustion—though that was there too. This was the bone-deep kind. The kind that came from being emotionally alone while raising a child with someone who was supposed to be beside you.

I reached across the table and covered Aine's hand with mine. "You don't have to keep proving you're worth showing up for," I said, voice quieter now. "You're not the problem."

Aine's throat bobbed. "I know. I *know* that. And I still feel like I'm failing."

Gina's jaw clenched. "You're not failing. He is."

Aine blinked hard, fast, like she was trying to keep herself together. "I just—" Her voice caught. She paused, took a breath, then tried again. "I don't want Kiara growing up and thinking that's normal. That her mam is... optional."

The words landed on the table between us like something fragile and sharp.

I sat back slightly, choosing my next sentence carefully, which was not my usual instinct. Normally I was the woman who said the thing everyone else was too polite to say. But Aine didn't need a blade right now. She needed a hand.

"You're not optional," I said firmly. "And neither is Kiara."

Gina nodded, eyes shining with anger and love in equal measure. "And if James can't figure that out, we'll figure it out for him."

Aine gave a small, exhausted laugh. "How? Are you going to threaten him?"

"I'm not *not* going to threaten him," Gina replied, dead serious.

I lifted my glass toward Aine. "We're not going to let you drown," I said. "Even if he insists on being an anchor."

Aine's mouth trembled. "Thank you."

"Don't thank us," I said. "We're selfish. We like you."

Gina snorted. "We like you more than him."

Aine's laugh this time was real—brief, but real. "That's not exactly a high bar."

"True," I conceded. "But it's still the truth."

For a moment, the tension eased. The snug felt warmer. The noise from the main bar blurred into something distant.

Then Gina tilted her head and looked at me the way she did when she was about to change subjects with surgical precision.

"So," she said, "tell me you didn't just come from the office with that look on your face for *nothing*."

I rolled my eyes. "What look?"

"The one that says you're about to do something ambitious and slightly dangerous and call it 'strategic,'" she replied.

Aine's expression shifted—curious now, grateful for the distraction. "What are you planning?"

I hesitated, then decided there was no point pretending. These two knew me too well.

"I'm considering Michelle for the summer campaign," I admitted. "Possibly Harley and Arissa too. Family vacation vibe. Big push. Big exposure."

Gina's eyebrows shot up. "That's... huge."

Aine blinked slowly. "That's also... complicated."

"Yes," I said flatly. "Thank you for summarizing my life."

Gina leaned back, studying me. "Do you think she'll say yes?"

"I think Michelle will do anything that benefits her daughters," I replied. "The question is whether she'll want to do it with me."

Aine's lips quirked. "Because you're you."

"Because I'm me," I agreed without shame.

Gina lifted her glass. "Well. If you're about to invite Michelle Morris into your life again, then you're going to need wine. Lots of it."

"Agreed," I said, and for the first time all day, the knot in my chest loosened slightly.

Outside, Cork kept moving. Inside, in a little snug with two women who wouldn't let their friend fall apart, I let myself exhale.

Not because things were fixed.

But because I wasn't alone.

And neither was Aine.

Gina signaled the bartender for another round like she owned the place—which, to be fair, was the only energy I respected after a day like this.

Aine's phone lit up on the table, face down. She stared at it as if it were a venomous insect.

"Is that him?" I asked, already knowing.

Aine didn't look up. "Yeah."

Gina's expression darkened. "If he's asking for pics again—"

"He's not," Aine said, voice flat. Then she flipped the phone over so we could see.

**JAMES:** *u awake*

I blinked slowly. "That's... all?"

Aine nodded once. "That's his version of effort."

Gina made a sound of disgust. "Tell him no. Tell him you're asleep and so is his chance at being a decent man."

Aine's mouth twitched like she almost wanted to laugh, but the humor didn't stick. "If I say the wrong thing he disappears for a week. And then he comes back like nothing happened."

"Because it works," Gina snapped. "Because you keep letting him reset the clock."

Aine flinched—not at Gina's tone, but at the truth underneath it.

I lifted my hand slightly, palm out. Not a "stop" exactly. More like *let's not break her while we're trying to hold her up*.

"Alright," I said, voice calm but firm. "Aine, what do you want? Not what you wish he'd become. Not what you're hoping will happen if you just hold on long enough. What do you want—today, right now?"

Aine swallowed. Her eyes shone, but she didn't let the tears fall. She was stubborn like that—Irish stubborn, the kind that made survival look like composure.

"I want him to show up," she said quietly. "I want him to come home and act like we matter. Like... like Kiara is his *family*. Like I'm not just the woman who had his baby."

Gina reached across the table and squeezed Aine's forearm. "You do matter."

"I know," Aine whispered. "And I still feel stupid for wanting him."

"Wanting love doesn't make you stupid," I said. "But staying in a situation where you're begging for the bare minimum? That's where it starts costing you."

Aine's gaze dropped to the phone again. Her thumb hovered over the screen, hesitating.

Gina leaned in, tone softer now. "What are you going to text back?"

Aine inhaled slowly. "I don't know."

"Here," I said, extending my hand. "Give me the phone."

Aine looked startled. "Amber—"

"Trust me," I said, and held her gaze until she finally slid the phone across the table.

I didn't type. Not yet. I just read the message again, let myself feel the particular kind of anger it triggered—the entitlement of it, the casualness, the complete absence of care.

Then I set the phone down, folded my hands, and looked at Aine.

"This is what we're going to do," I said. "You're going to reply honestly, but not emotionally. Clear. Calm. Unarguable. You're not going to chase him and you're not going to start a fight."

Gina nodded. "Boundaries. Like a grown-up."

"Exactly," I said. "Because if James only respects drama, then he doesn't respect you. We're going to see whether he can handle a straightforward expectation."

Aine's throat bobbed. "Okay."

I slid the phone back to her, and finally spoke the words she needed to send—even if it made her hands shake.

"Text him: *Kiara is awake. If you want to see her, come over now and help settle her. If not, don't text me at midnight.*"

Gina's eyes widened in approval. "Oof. That's clean."

"It's merciful," I corrected. "Which is more than he deserves."

Aine stared at the phone for a long moment, then typed with slow precision. She read it once. Twice. Then hit send before she could overthink it.

The relief in her shoulders afterward was immediate—tiny, but real.

“Good,” Gina said, lifting her wine. “Now we drink. And we talk about literally anything else before I drive to his flat and key his car.”

“Gina,” Aine scolded weakly, though her mouth was curving at the edges.

“I’m not kidding,” Gina replied, dead serious.

I took a sip of my wine and allowed myself the indulgence of a brief, private thought: *God, I love women.*

Not in the romantic sense—though I appreciated beauty in all its forms—but in the sense of solidarity. The way we held each other up with truth and humor and ferocity. The way we could be gentle and brutal in the same breath if it meant protecting someone we loved.

I leaned back slightly, letting the warmth of the wine settle in my chest. “Alright,” I said. “Now that we’ve handled James’s midnight nonsense—Gina, are you going to tell Aine what you told me last week?”

Gina went still.

Aine looked between us. “What did she tell you?”

Gina shot me a look that could have qualified as workplace violence. “Amber.”

“Oh come on,” I said innocently. “It’s relevant.”

“It’s not relevant,” Gina snapped.

“It absolutely is,” I countered. “Because if we’re talking about men being disappointing, we might as well diversify the portfolio.”

Aine’s eyebrows lifted. “Gina?”

Gina exhaled hard and stared into her glass like it might save her. “Pete wants another baby.”

Aine blinked. “He does?”

Gina nodded, lips pressed thin. “He thinks it’ll be ‘nice.’ Like adding another child to our lives is the same as adding a throw pillow to the sofa.”

I winced sympathetically. “Men love to romanticize the part where they hold the baby for photos.”

Aine let out a short laugh. “Oh my God.”

“And I love Pete,” Gina continued quickly, as if the statement needed to be on the record. “I do. He’s a good man. He’s a good dad. But I’m still tired, Amber. I’m tired in my bones. And he’s talking about babies like it’s a hobby.”

Aine's expression softened in understanding. "Have you told him you're not ready?"

"I told him I'm thinking about it," Gina said, and the resentment in her voice was aimed mostly at herself. "Because I didn't want to disappoint him."

I pointed at her. "No."

Gina frowned. "No?"

"No," I repeated. "We are not doing that thing where we protect a man's feelings by lying about your own. That's a fast track to resentment, and resentment kills marriages faster than infidelity."

Aine nodded slowly, absorbing that like it was gospel.

Gina stared at me for a moment, then gave a reluctant smile. "You're terrifying."

"I'm efficient," I corrected.

Aine's phone buzzed again.

All three of us froze.

Aine looked down.

**JAMES:** *k*

Gina let out a laugh that had no humor in it whatsoever. "K."

Aine stared at the message, her face blank in the way it got when she was trying not to break.

I reached across the table and took her hand again, grounding her. "Okay," I said quietly. "That tells us everything we needed to know tonight."

Aine swallowed. "Yeah."

Gina's jaw set. "He's not coming."

"No," I agreed. "He isn't."

Aine blinked hard, once, then lifted her glass with a shaky hand. "To boundaries," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

I raised mine. "To boundaries."

Gina clinked hers to ours. "And to the day James learns women are people."

Aine let out a wet laugh, and this time the tears finally slipped free—but she didn't wipe them away in shame. She just let them fall, shoulders trembling, while Gina and I sat close and held the space around her steady.

Outside, Cork kept moving.

Inside, in the snug, the three of us did what women have always done:

We told the truth.



And we stayed.

My phone vibrated against my thigh—another little pulse of life demanding attention. I glanced down, expecting a production question or a late-night email from Jerrica.

Instead, it was Trevor.

**TREVOR:** *Amber, I am losing my mind. Mam and Finn....*

I closed my eyes for a beat, equal parts amused and sympathetic. Poor Trev. Four restaurants, a Michelin-star kitchen, and he could handle a full dining room in crisis—but one hint that his mother had an active sex life and he folded like a soufflé in a draft.

I typed back without hesitation:

**ME:** *Mi corazón, she is a grown woman. She is caring for Rachel for free. And you're in the house she owns.*

A moment later I added—because I couldn't resist:

**ME:** *Also, you survive worse every day. Like customers who ask for ketchup.*

I set my phone down, but it buzzed again almost immediately. This time it was from Aine's direction—her phone lighting up, her gaze flicking to it, shoulders tensing. I didn't ask. I didn't need to. We'd already seen enough of James for one night.

Instead, I did what I always did when I couldn't fix something directly: I mobilized.

I opened a new text thread and messaged Livvie.

**ME:** *Hey. Your husband's bestie is a prick.*

Gina snorted when she saw my screen. "Who?"

"Wait for it," I murmured, watching the typing bubbles appear almost instantly—Livvie always replied fast when she sensed chaos.

**LIVVIE:** *Which one? All three of his best friends are pricks.*

I actually laughed out loud, the sound short and sharp, startling Aine into a faint smile through her exhaustion.

**ME:** *Facts. But I meant James. At the pub with Aine and the pendejo is at it again. Treating her like an afterthought. Have Jeremy talk to him.*

The response came so quickly I could practically hear Livvie's voice in my head, accent sharpening with rage.

**LIVVIE:** *Bloody fucking hell. That prick. On it.*

I exhaled, a small release of tension. Not because I believed Jeremy could magically transform James into a decent partner overnight—but because the burden wasn't sitting on Aine's shoulders alone anymore.

That mattered.

I tucked my phone away and reached for my wine again, turning back to the table where Gina had shifted closer to Aine, their knees almost touching beneath the table in quiet solidarity.

“Alright,” I said, voice gentle but firm. “No more phone checking for five minutes. We’re here. We’re present. We’re not letting men ruin our night.”

Gina raised her glass. “Hear, hear.”

Aine let out a tired, real little laugh—small, but it counted.

And we stayed.

Livvie

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After Amber texted me, I went looking for J and found him exactly where I expected—sprawled on the living room floor with the twins, pretending he wasn’t being used as human furniture.

They were three now, somehow bigger every day, legs longer, opinions louder. It still didn’t make sense to me how time moved so fast with children—like you blinked and they’d changed shape.

Killy was trying to watch a show with J, sitting neatly with his little blanket folded just-so on his lap like a tiny old man. Rose, meanwhile, was climbing on J as if he were a jungle gym built specifically for her entertainment, her fairy wings still strapped on despite the fact that it was bedtime-adjacent and she’d already used up her daily allotment of chaos hours.

“Ro Ro, STOP,” Killy said, voice sharp with frustration. “Want to watch show.”

“It’s boring,” Rose declared, bouncing on J’s back. “Da! I want the glitter puck!”

I felt my eye twitch.

I could have killed Amber and Trev for that gift. For Rose’s birthday they’d bought her the entire set of Half Magic Glitter Pucks—as if giving a toddler who genuinely believed she was a fairy *literal jars of glitter* was a reasonable choice.

Amber had thought it was bloody brilliant. *And funny.*

I kept the pucks hidden in my bathroom. Rose could only use them once in a while, under strict supervision, with a towel down and the vacuum already plugged in. None of that stopped her from asking like it was her constitutional right.

“Not tonight, mo stór,” J said patiently, trying to lift Rose off him without starting a wrestling match.

“I WANT FAIRY DUST!” Rose screamed, as if she’d been denied oxygen.

“Excuse you, Róisín Donalín,” I said, using her full name in the tone that meant I wasn’t about to negotiate with a tiny terrorist.

Rose immediately dropped to the floor and pouted with theatrical suffering, her bottom lip protruding so far it practically qualified as a separate facial feature.

J looked up at me, exhausted already. "Please tell me that's not about glitter."

"Worse," I said, stepping around Rose and sinking onto the edge of the sofa. "Amber just texted. James is being a right wanker again."

J's expression shifted—his eyes narrowing, mouth flattening. He was tired of trying to make James grow up. We all were.

"Oi," he said. "What this time?"

"He's treating Aine like shite," I replied, keeping my voice low enough that the twins wouldn't pick up on tone even if they didn't understand the words.

J exhaled slowly, the sound full of restrained anger. "What do you want me to do?"

"Talk to him," I said simply. "I tried, but he doesn't listen to me. He just..." I trailed off, because the truth tasted awful. "He doesn't take women seriously."

"I know," J said, voice tight. "I know. Should I invite him to the pub for a pint? Get him away from... whatever nonsense he's doing and talk to him like a person?"

"Probably a good start," I agreed. "Text him. Tell him to meet you after we get the twins to bed."

"NO!" Rose shrieked instantly, as if she'd heard the word *bed* and interpreted it as a personal attack. "I don't wanna go bed!"

"Ro Ro, shhhhh!" Killy cried, hands clamped dramatically over his ears. "Too loud!"

"Ki Ki, shut up!" Rose snapped back.

"Not nice!" Killy insisted, voice trembling with outraged morality.

"Okay, both of you—stop," I said, switching into Mum Voice. Calm. Controlled. Dangerous.

The twins froze for half a second—long enough to prove they absolutely understood tone—then Rose immediately tried a different tactic.

"But Mummy," she whined, crawling toward me on her knees like a tiny Victorian orphan. "I need fairy dust. For... for my magic."

Killy sat up straighter. "Fairy dust not for night. Night is for sleep."

Rose pointed at him. "You not boss of me!"

Killy pointed back. "I boss of rules!"

"Oh my God," J muttered, rubbing his face. "They're unionizing."

“Right,” I said, standing. “New rule. If you two want to keep watching the show, you will both use inside voices, you will both stop climbing on your father, and you will both accept that fairy dust is not happening tonight.”

Rose opened her mouth.

I lifted one finger.

She closed it again, pouting so hard she looked like she might implode.

Killy nodded solemnly, satisfied. “Good.”

J shot me an appreciative look that said *thank you for being the scary one*.

I leaned down and kissed the top of his head. “Go on then. Put them to bed. I’ll make you tea and draft your text to James before you decide to commit murder.”

J grunted. “Love, I’d do it for Aine. Not even joking.”

“I know,” I said quietly. “That’s why you’re going to talk instead.”

Rose tugged on my sleeve. “Mummy?”

“What,” I said, already bracing.

“Can I have glitter puck tomorrow?”

I stared at her.

Killy whispered, “Say no.”

J whispered, “Say no.”

I exhaled. “We’ll discuss it with the United Nations.”

Rose beamed like she’d won.

“Go,” I told J, pointing toward the stairs. “Before she negotiates herself into a full craft store.”

J scooped Rose up under one arm, Killy under the other like two squirming sacks of chaos, and headed for bedtime.

As they disappeared up the stairs, I grabbed my phone from the coffee table and opened a new message to James.

Because if that man-child was going to keep hurting Aine, he was going to learn something very quickly:

It wasn’t just Aine he was disappointing anymore.

It was all of us.

I stared at the blank message thread for a second, thumbs hovering over the screen.

James.

The human embodiment of wasted potential. Tall, charming when he wanted to be, and emotionally allergic to accountability. The kind of man who thought being “a good guy” was something you *were*, not something you *did*.

I typed anyway—not to him, but to J, because J was the only one James reliably listened to. Barely.

ME: *Text him this: “Meet me at Murphy’s at 9. No excuses. We need a chat about Aine and Kiara.”*

I hit send and set my phone down before I could spiral.

In the kitchen, I filled the kettle and turned on the hob, the familiar routine grounding me. Tea was a ritual in our house the way morphers were for Rangers—except, you know, normal. Human. Something I could control.

I pulled out J’s favorite mug—the chipped one with *World’s Okayest Da* on it that Jeremy pretended to hate but secretly adored—and then grabbed my own.

The kettle began to hiss.

Behind me, the house creaked the way old Irish houses did, as if it had opinions. The wind tapped lightly against the windows. Outside, Ballincollig was quiet. Inside, the only sound for a moment was the rising boil of water and the distant, muffled rumble of J’s Dad Voice upstairs.

“Róisín,” I heard him say, firm but exhausted. “Pyjamas. Now.”

“Nooooo,” Rose wailed. “I a fairy. Fairies no pyjamas.”

“Fairies absolutely wear pyjamas,” J said, without missing a beat. “They’re just... invisible ones.”

A pause.

Then Rose, in a smaller voice: “I want sparkly invisible ones.”

“Killy,” J added, “stop telling your sister she’s going to get sent to fairy jail.”

A second pause.

Then Killy’s tiny, indignant voice: “She breaking rules.”

“I’m the da,” J reminded him. “I do consequences.”

I smirked despite myself. The twins were going to run the world one day, and we were all just living in it.

The kettle clicked off. I poured the water, the steam curling up, then carried both mugs into the living room and set them on the coffee table.

That was when my phone buzzed again.

J’s reply.

J: *On it. He’ll come. Or I’ll drag him.*

A small exhale left me. Good. One more moving piece in place.

I checked the time. 8:14.

Plenty of time to get the twins asleep, let J cool off, then send him out to do what men sometimes needed to do with other men: say the thing plainly, face-to-face, without cushioning it.

Footsteps thudded overhead. Then the familiar sound of Rose's tiny feet stampeding down the hallway.

Oh no.

A second later, she appeared at the top of the stairs, hair half-brushed, fairy wings still on, holding something in her hands like contraband.

"Rose," I called, already suspicious. "What is that?"

She froze mid-step. "Nuffin."

Killy appeared behind her, solemn and outraged like a little courtroom witness. "Mummy," he said, voice deadly serious. "She got the puck."

I stood up so fast my knees cracked. "How did you get the puck?"

Rose lifted her chin. "Fairy magic."

"Fairy magic my arse," I muttered, moving toward her. "Give it here."

Rose clutched the glitter puck to her chest like a dragon protecting treasure. "I need it! For my spell!"

"You know what you need?" I said, voice sweet in that way that meant I was about to ruin her life.

"To go to bed without glittering the entire upstairs."

Rose's lip wobbled. She was about to deploy the Big Cry.

Before she could, J appeared behind them in the doorway, arms crossed, expression exhausted.

"How did she get it?" he demanded.

Killy pointed immediately. "She climbed."

J's eyes widened. "She climbed *again*?"

Rose tried to back away slowly, like retreating might help.

I held out my hand. "Rose."

She hesitated.

J said, very quietly, "Róisín Donalín."

Rose's whole body sagged in defeat. She shuffled forward and dropped the glitter puck into my palm like she was surrendering a beloved pet.

"Thank you," I said, then turned and marched it straight to the kitchen.

When I came back, Rose was sitting on the bottom step, wings drooping, face crumpled in melodramatic misery.

Killy sat beside her, posture straight, satisfied with justice.

J leaned down, scooped Rose up, and kissed her cheek. "Tomorrow," he said, "we can do fairy dust. With Mummy. At the table. With the towel down."

Rose sniffed. "And vacuum?"

"And vacuum," J confirmed gravely.

She perked up instantly. "Okay."

I looked at J. "You're enabling her."

He gave me a tired smile. "I'm surviving her."

"Same," I said, and softened enough to kiss his cheek. "Bed. Both of you."

As J carried Rose upstairs and Killy followed with determined little steps, I sat back down and let the quiet return.

For about thirty seconds.

Then my phone buzzed again—this time an unknown number.

I frowned.

Then I read the first line of the text and my blood ran cold.

UNKNOWN: *Livvie O'Brien. We need to talk about your involvement with Ranger systems.*

My stomach dropped.

Because only one kind of person opened a conversation like that: someone who thought they had authority, leverage, or both.

And no matter how hard I tried to keep my life normal—tea, toddlers, glitter pucks—the world didn't care.

It always found a way back in.

I forced my hands steady and typed.

ME: *Who is this?*

The reply came instantly, like he'd been waiting with his finger over the screen.

UNKNOWN: *My name is Wesley Collins. I'm the head of SPD.*

I stared at it for half a second, then let my annoyance rise to the surface—because fear was useful, but anger was fuel.

ME: *You mean you're the purse strings. Sorry, I'm not interested.*

Then I blocked the number.

No hesitation. No spiral. No polite back-and-forth. I wasn't a Ranger, sure, but I was a woman who'd spent her entire life learning what happened when you entertained men who believed they were entitled to your time.

I screenshotted the entire exchange, forwarded it to Billy, and added the most concise question I could manage.

ME: *Friend of yours?*

Billy's response popped up almost immediately.

BILLY: *Dammit. Livvie, I'm sorry. I knew Wes was going to be an issue, but I didn't think he was escalating this fast.*

A cold prickling ran up my arms.

ME: *How does he even know I exist?*

A pause. Then:

BILLY: *Great question. I'm guessing his own security experts got into my backend systems—which means we need to partition and secure them. SPD is escalating fast.*

My jaw clenched. "Backend systems" was Billy-speak for *our house just got scoped*.

ME: *Michelle mentioned SPD... not a great organization according to her.*

Billy's reply came slower this time, like he was choosing his words.

BILLY: *Depends which Ranger you ask. But at the moment? Yeah. Not great.*

I exhaled through my nose, the kind of breath that wasn't calm so much as controlled.

ME: *Okay. Logging in now. I'll help with the security protocols. And you can fill me in on who this Wesley is outside of being the CEO of WesCo—because clearly that is not the whole story about this guy.*

Billy's reply came instantly again.

BILLY: *Not even close. I'll fill you in once we're secure.*

I set my mug of tea aside untouched and stood.

Upstairs, I could hear Rose's bedtime negotiation resuming at full volume. J's soothing voice. Killy's stern little objections. The familiar chaos of our life.

And down here, on my phone, was a message from a man in power who had just announced—without invitation—that he knew my name.

Fine.

If SPD wanted to play in my lane, then they were going to learn something very quickly:

I didn't do intimidation.

I did encryption.

I went straight to my office, shut the door, and logged in. The familiar glow of my monitors felt like stepping into armor—cold light, clean lines, systems that behaved the way you told them to.

I pulled on my headset, fingers already moving, and joined the secure line Billy and I had set up months ago. Not the usual one—this was the one we only used when we didn't want anyone else even sniffing the signal.

A soft tone sounded in my ear.

"Tech Fairy here," I said, slipping into the code name like it was muscle memory.

"Blue Wolf online," Billy replied.

"Okay," I said, opening a diagnostics window and watching the handshake sequence run. "Are we secure?"

"As much as we can be for the moment," Billy said. I could hear keys clicking on his end too—fast, precise. "I'm thinking we partition this using the Triforian protocol. SPD has it, but it's more secure than the Aquitarian one, clearly."

I snorted quietly. "You're thinking small, Wolf. We need a protocol SPD doesn't have."

There was a beat of silence, then Billy's voice warmed with recognition. "Saturnian."

"Saturnian," I confirmed, already pulling up a library of code I kept in a drive that wasn't connected to anything remotely public. "SPD has no intel there. Saturn views SPD as hostile."

"Good call, Fairy," Billy said. "That'll buy us time."

"Good," I replied, routing the first partition and encrypting it with a key that would look like meaningless static to anyone who didn't know what they were seeing. "Now—who is Wesley Collins?"

My tone stayed casual, but my stomach was tight.

"I know him as the rich kid turned CEO of WesCo," I continued, "and I knew he had Ranger connections from the files I hacked into."

Billy sighed. "Don't remind me."

I smirked despite myself. Hacking into Billy Cranston's private systems and discovering the Rangers was still the hack of my career—even if it had landed me in the world's most dangerous volunteer IT position.

"Right," I said briskly. "Anyway. Wesley."

“Wes was Time Force Red,” Billy said, and just the way he said it told me there was weight there. “His father founded the Silver Guardians, which Wes has since... evolved. He’s essentially folded them into what he’s calling SPD Earth Elite and SPA.”

“And he’s texting civilians about ‘Ranger systems,’” I said, voice sharpening. “Which means he’s either arrogant, stupid, or deliberately testing boundaries.”

“Wesley Collins isn’t stupid,” Billy said flatly.

“So arrogant, then,” I replied.

Billy didn’t disagree. “He’s also very friendly with the current U.S. President.”

“The same one turning ICE on his own citizens?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“That would be the one,” Billy confirmed, and there was quiet disgust in his voice. “They want to start using SPD against civilians. That’s why Michelle and I have been so worried.”

“Bloody hell,” I muttered, watching the partition complete and beginning the next. “Civilians have no chance against a Ranger.”

“I know,” Billy said, and the exhaustion in him sounded older than it should. “And therein lies the problem. Wes thinks he’s doing what’s right—keeping order. But he doesn’t understand that money, regulations, handbooks... that’s everything being a Ranger goes against. It always has been.”

My hands didn’t pause, but my mind did. “So you genuinely think—”

“I fear we’re headed for a Ranger civil war,” Billy said quietly. “And Livvie... I’m going to need your help. From a cybersecurity perspective, we need to make sure SPD can’t seize access to anything that connects to Ranger tech or the Grid.”

I felt the words settle like a stone in my chest.

“As long as my kids aren’t involved,” I said carefully, “you know I’ll do what I can.”

“I promise,” Billy said quickly. “No more trying to monitor Killy.”

I stopped typing for exactly one second. “You promised before.”

A beat. A sigh.

“I know,” Billy said, and he sounded genuinely ashamed. “I’m sorry. I promise. Livvie, there’s too much at stake. We need you.”

I stared at the code scrolling across my screen, the hard logic of it the only thing keeping my emotions from boiling over.

“Fine,” I said finally. “But we do it my way. Saturnian protocol, segmented networks, and nothing connected that doesn’t have to be. If SPD wants access, they can pry it out of my cold, dead router.”

Billy gave a short, humorless laugh. “That’s why you’re the Tech Fairy.”

“And Billy?” I added, voice lowering. “Wes texted me directly. He wasn’t subtle. That means he’s either already inside... or he wants me to know he *could* be.”

“I know,” Billy said. His voice hardened, the scientist turning into something else—something like a soldier. “We’re going to treat it as a breach. Full lock-down. And Livvie...”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

I didn’t soften. Not yet. Not when the stakes were this high.

“Less talking,” I said. “More encrypting.”

And I went back to work.

The door to my office opened quietly and J slipped in, moving with the careful softness of someone who’d just gotten two small children to sleep and didn’t want to tempt fate. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching me—headset on, screens full of code, posture locked in that particular way that meant I’d shifted into problem-solving mode.

“Love, you okay?” he asked gently.

I didn’t look up right away. My hands were still moving, keys clicking in precise bursts. “Aye,” I said, then amended, because lying to him was pointless. “Well. As okay as I can be. Billy needs my help, so I’ll be a bit.”

J nodded, accepting it without argument. He never tried to pull me out of a task when he knew it mattered—one of the thousand quiet reasons I loved him. “Okay,” he said. “The kids are asleep. For now, anyway.”

I huffed a small laugh. “Give it ten minutes and Rose will wake up demanding fairy dust and a legally binding treaty.”

J’s mouth twitched. “Wouldn’t surprise me.”

He shifted, sliding his jacket on. “I’m headed out to meet James.”

Oh, right. The wanker. The midnight texter. The man who needed someone to explain, slowly and with diagrams if necessary, that women were people and his daughter was not a hobby he could pick up when convenient.

“Okay,” I said, finally glancing at him. “Love you. And tell James he’s a cunt for me.”

J laughed—quietly, because the twins were upstairs and bedtime was a fragile illusion. “Oh, trust me,” he said, stepping closer to kiss my forehead. “I will.”

“Good,” I murmured, catching his wrist briefly before he pulled away. “Be firm. Not cruel. He’ll shut down if you go too hard.”

J gave me a look that said he already knew that, but appreciated the reminder anyway. “I’ll do it right,” he promised.

Then he turned and slipped out, the front door clicking shut a moment later.

The house fell into that rare kind of silence that only exists after children finally go down—quiet enough that you can hear your own thoughts, and sometimes that’s the most dangerous sound of all.

I turned back to my monitors, jaw tight.

If SPD thought they could use power against the powerless—if they thought they could turn Rangers into a domestic weapon and call it “order”—then they had another thing coming.

Because I didn’t have a morpher.

I didn’t have a zord.

But I had systems. And I had skills. And I had a line I wasn’t willing to let them cross.

I adjusted my headset, cracked my knuckles, and kept building the walls.

Jeremy

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When Billy was involved, I knew Michelle was involved. That was just the rule of the universe at this point.

I dialed Michelle as I walked to the pub, hands shoved in my jacket pockets against the damp Cork air.

“Hey!” Michelle answered, her voice warm in that way it always was when I called—like no matter what chaos was happening in her life, she had space for me.

I couldn’t explain Michelle Morris-Bradley even if I tried. We’d first met years ago when she walked into my salon in Austin like she owned the building and tried to diva-demand her way into my chair. I told her she could either make an appointment or wait like everyone else to see if someone cancelled.

She wasn’t used to being told no.

She waited anyway. Sat there like a queen in exile, sunglasses on, foot tapping, clearly planning revenge.

Then a cancellation came through.

She got in my chair, I did her hair, and she tried to flirt and seduce me like it was a sport.

It didn't work—not because she wasn't gorgeous, but because I wasn't interested. But somewhere in the middle of banter and blowouts, we became best mates. She was high maintenance, meddled in everyone's lives, and had a terrible habit of assuming she knew what was best for people...

Okay, sometimes she did it to entertain herself.

But she had a good heart. Genuinely. And I loved her deeply—not the way I loved Liv, but the way I loved Sosaidh. Like a sister you didn't choose but somehow got anyway.

"Alright," I said the moment she finished greeting me. "What have you gone and got my wife into now? She's working with Billy."

Michelle sighed. "Okay. I didn't get her into anything. But I'm guessing Billy reached out for her help." That wasn't reassuring.

"Jeremy," Michelle continued, and her tone shifted—less playful, more serious. "We're headed for a Ranger civil war. It's bad. Really bad."

I stopped walking. "Civil war? What are you talking about?"

"You've heard me talk about SPD," she said, "and how much I loathe everything they stand for."

"Aye," I replied, because I'd heard plenty.

"Well it's gotten worse," she said. "It's not just ideological differences anymore. They're turning on civilians. And I can't let that happen. There's a faction of Rangers standing up to them."

A cold feeling settled in my stomach. "And Billy has gotten my wife involved."

"For cybersecurity purposes?" Michelle hesitated for half a beat—just long enough to be honest. "Probably. Yeah."

"Bloody hell," I muttered, rubbing my forehead. "Fine. I can't stop her. But you best keep my kids out of this—especially Killy."

"I promise, Jeremy," Michelle said immediately. "Killy will have nothing to do with this."

I didn't fully believe anyone could promise that, not in their world, but I let her keep talking.

"Besides," she added, "I actually think Billy was wrong. What he picked up on wasn't Killy having a Grid connection. It was Killy having a connection to Celtic magic—which has nothing to do with SPD anyway."

"Whatever it is," I said sharply, "keep my son out of it."

"Promise," Michelle repeated, and this time there was steel under it. When Michelle promised something about kids, she meant it.

I started walking again, jaw tight. "Okay. I'm at the pub in a minute. I need to talk to James."

A soft exhale on her end. "Good. He needs it."

“And you,” I added, because if the world was ending, at least I could control hair. “You need your hair done before you go back on the road. Salon tomorrow at ten? You can tell me exactly what’s going on then.”

“Okay,” she agreed, sounding relieved at the normalcy of it. “Ten. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I said. “Goodnight.”

I hung up and pushed into the pub.

James was already there at our normal table, pint in hand, looking far too relaxed for a man who’d just detonated his own relationship.

“Jeremy! Hey mate!” he said, standing up like he expected a hug.

I walked straight up to him and gave him my best look. “Fuck off, you eejit. Sit down. You need to hear this.”

James blinked, then sat back down slowly. “What have I done now?”

“What haven’t you done?” I snapped, sliding into the seat across from him. “James, you absolute cunt—you’ve got a beautiful daughter and a beautiful girlfriend and you’re fucking it up. Again. It was bad enough you cheated on her.”

James rolled his eyes like I was being dramatic. “Aye, but did I really? It was just oral. She just sucked me off. She wasn’t even hot.”

I stared at him.

Just... stared.

Then I exhaled through my nose and spoke very carefully, like he was an explosive device and I had to cut the right wire.

“Fuck me,” I muttered. “James. We’ve been over this.”

He opened his mouth again, like he was about to justify it.

I held up a hand. “No. Stop. Think.”

James frowned, like thinking was a personal inconvenience.

“How does it make you feel,” I continued, voice low, “to picture another bloke kissing Aine? Shagging her? Making her laugh? Being there for Kiara the way you’re not?”

James’s face tightened immediately. “It makes me angry.”

“Good,” I said. “That means you *do* care.”

James scoffed. “Jeremy, I do care about her, but she just... she’s so needy.”

I leaned forward, eyes hard. “Fucking hell. Are you serious?”

James shrugged like he didn’t understand why this was a problem.

"She's not needy," I said, voice sharp now. "She's a woman whose boyfriend cheated on her after she had his baby. She's exhausted. She's lonely. She wants to feel like you give a shit. Because here's the thing, James—women are people."

James blinked at me like I'd just introduced a revolutionary concept.

"And if you keep treating her like she's optional," I continued, "she's going to stop waiting for you to act like a partner. And then you won't just lose Aine—you'll lose your daughter's everyday life too. You'll be the bloke she sees twice a month and doesn't trust."

James's mouth opened, but for once he didn't have a quick comeback.

Good.

Maybe something was getting through.

James sat there staring at his pint like it might offer him guidance. For a man who'd spent most of his life talking, he'd gone quiet in that stubborn, sulky way that meant he was thinking—badly, but thinking.

I didn't soften. Not yet. Softening was how James slid out of consequences.

"You've got two options," I said. "You can grow up. Or you can keep doing whatever this is and watch Aine slowly stop giving a shit about you."

James's eyes flicked up. "She won't."

"Oh, she will," I said, voice flat. "She's not your mum. She's not obligated to love you through your bullshit."

He frowned like the concept offended him. "I didn't ask her to get pregnant."

I leaned back in my chair and stared at him with a calmness that was almost worse than shouting. "No, you didn't. You also didn't *not* ask her."

James's mouth opened, then closed again. He wasn't clever enough for word games.

"I'm trying," he insisted finally. "I told her I'd... I'd do better."

"Yeah?" I asked. "And what did you do today?"

He hesitated. "I texted her."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Texted her."

"Aye," he said, defensive now. "I asked if Kiara was asleep."

"Right," I said. "And when she told you she was awake?"

James shifted in his seat, eyes darting away. "I was busy."

"Busy doing what, James?" I asked. "Be specific."

He bristled. "I was out with the lads."

I nodded slowly, letting the silence stretch until he had to sit in it. "So, just to be clear: your girlfriend is home with a newborn, and you're out with the lads."

"It's not like she wants me there," he muttered. "Every time I go over, she looks at me like I'm... like I'm in the way."

I leaned forward. "You are in the way."

James's eyes snapped up. "What?"

"You're in the way of her healing," I said, voice steady. "Because you're not acting like a partner. You're acting like a guest who shows up, disrupts the routine, expects praise for holding the baby for ten minutes, and leaves the second things get hard."

His face reddened. "That's not fair."

"It's accurate," I corrected. "Fair would require you to be putting in equal effort. You're not."

James took a long drink of his pint like it was courage. "I don't know what you want me to do."

That at least sounded honest.

I exhaled. Fine. We'd start with basics. Like teaching a grown man how to be a decent boyfriend the way you taught a toddler not to lick electrical outlets.

"I want you to show up," I said. "Not for the fun bits. For the boring bits. The exhausting bits. The bits that prove you're not just there when it suits you."

James frowned. "Like what?"

"Like this," I said, counting on my fingers. "Tomorrow. You finish work, you go to Aine's, you take Kiara for two hours so Aine can shower, eat, and close her eyes without listening for the baby. You do it without acting like you deserve a medal."

James blinked. "Two hours?"

"Aye," I said. "Two hours. You're her father, not a babysitter."

He looked genuinely panicked now. "What if she cries?"

"She will," I said. "Babies cry. You don't hand her back the second she does. You figure it out."

James stared at me like I'd asked him to disarm a bomb. "I'm not good at that."

"No one is," I snapped. "That's why it's called learning."

He rubbed his face. "I didn't plan any of this, Jeremy."

I leaned in closer, voice dropping. "Neither did Aine. And she still gets up every night. She still keeps your child alive. She still tries to make space for you in her life even though you've given her every reason not to."

James swallowed, eyes flicking down again. "I'm not... I'm not used to this."



"I know," I said, softer now—not kind, but honest. "You were a player. One-night stands. Disposable women. That's your history."

His shoulders stiffened. "I wasn't—"

"You were," I cut in. "And that's fine. I'm not here to shame you for your past. I'm here to tell you your past habits are going to destroy your future if you don't change them."

James went quiet again, jaw working.

"And here's the part you really need to hear," I continued. "Aine wasn't meant to be your one-night stand. She's the mother of your child. And if you keep treating her like she's just... the woman who got pregnant... she will eventually believe you."

His voice came out small. "I do care."

"Then act like it," I said. "Because caring isn't a feeling, James. It's behavior."

He stared at his pint for a long time. Then, finally: "I don't know how to be a boyfriend."

It was the first truly honest thing he'd said all night.

I nodded once. "Okay. That's workable."

James looked up, hope flickering. "It is?"

"Aye," I said. "Because 'I don't know how' is fixable. 'I don't want to' isn't. So let's start with this: when Aine tells you she's struggling, you don't call her needy. You ask what she needs."

James grimaced. "But she's always—"

I leaned forward, voice sharp again. "She's always *what*? Wanting reassurance? Wanting to feel valued? Wanting you to show up like a partner?"

He shut his mouth.

"Exactly," I said. "Congratulations. You've discovered the basic expectations of adulthood."

James sighed. "Alright. I'll try."

I narrowed my eyes. "Not 'try.' You will."

He flinched. "I will."

"Good," I said, and signaled the bartender for another pint—not for me. For him. This was going to take time, and James was the kind of idiot who needed hydration and repetition.

When the pint arrived, I slid it toward him and lowered my voice.

"One more thing," I said. "If you hurt her again, if you cheat again, if you keep treating her like she's optional—Livvie, Amber, Gina... they'll bury you."

James blinked. "They won't."

I gave him a look. “James, my wife once hacked a government database for fun. Amber negotiated a supplier into submission on camera without raising her voice. Gina would stab you with a fork and call it self-defense.”

James swallowed.

“And me?” I added. “I’ll help them.”

James stared at his pint like it was suddenly a threat. “Right.”

“Good,” I said. “Now. Tomorrow. Two hours. You show up.”

He nodded slowly. “Tomorrow. Two hours.”

“And James?” I leaned back, letting my tone soften just a hair. “If you actually want to keep them—Aine and Kiara—you’ve got to stop thinking like a bloke who got trapped and start thinking like a man who got lucky.”

James looked at me, confused. “Lucky?”

I pointed at him. “You’ve got a woman who forgave you. A baby who will love you if you earn it. And a life that could actually mean something beyond pints and pulling birds. That’s luck, mate. Don’t waste it.”

He didn’t answer right away. But he didn’t joke either.

For James, that was progress.

I drained my own pint, stood, and clapped him on the shoulder—firm.

“I’ll check in,” I said. “Don’t make me regret it.”

James nodded again, and this time, his voice was quiet but real.

“I won’t.”

I headed home and when I got there Livvie was still in her office. I knew better than to bother her if she was deep in security work so I headed upstairs to go to sleep.

Amber

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After Gina and Aine headed home, I did the same.

The drive back to my house felt longer than it should have—Cork quiet and damp, the kind of cold that didn’t bite so much as sink in and stay. By the time I unlocked the front door, my heels were starting to feel like a personal attack.

Inside, the house greeted me with stillness.

It was hard being here without Trev, Niamh, and Rachel. Not because I couldn't manage on my own—I'd built a company from the ground up, for God's sake—but because a home that was usually full of noise and movement felt wrong when it went silent. Too tidy. Too empty. Like the air was holding its breath.

Trevor hadn't wanted to go to Limerick without Rachel, and I'd agreed he could take her. It was the sensible thing. He'd been living in his childhood home during the opening week of the new restaurant, and the idea of leaving our daughter behind had genuinely made him miserable. I'd told myself it was fine—I had work, I had deadlines, I had meetings stacked like dominos. I could handle a few weeks.

But now, standing in the quiet kitchen, I admitted the truth to myself: I missed them.

At least Ellie was with me—my little cottonball companion and the only creature in this house who didn't have the audacity to leave me for a restaurant launch. She stirred in my purse the moment I set it on the counter, offended that I hadn't released her the second we walked in.

"Alright, alright," I murmured, unzipping the top. "I'm sorry. I know. It's rude to keep a queen in a handbag."

Ellie blinked up at me, yawned theatrically, and allowed me to lift her out as if she were granting a royal audience. I set her on the floor, and she immediately trotted toward her bowl like she'd been starving for days despite the fact that I'd absolutely snuck her snacks at the pub.

I scooped out her food, filled her water, and watched her eat for a moment—tiny crunches echoing in a kitchen that normally held Trevor's voice and Rachel's squeals and Niamh's humming.

"Okay, Ellie," I said softly, more to myself than to her. "You eat while Mommy gets ready for bed."

Upstairs, I kicked off my shoes and swapped my dress for comfort—orange sweatpants and a tank top, hair pulled up into a messy knot that meant I was officially off-duty. Then I went into the bathroom and started a bath, turning the tap until the water ran steaming hot and the room fogged almost instantly.

I poured in lavender bubble bath—too much, probably, because I wasn't in the mood for restraint—and watched the foam rise like a soft barrier between me and the day.

It wasn't just work that was heavy lately. It was the constant emotional labor—the way Aine was breaking in slow, quiet ways while trying to pretend she wasn't. The way Gina was holding her up with fury and loyalty. The way Trevor was stretched thin between a new restaurant and his mother's love life and the fact that Finn James had somehow become part of our orbit.

The way everything was changing.

I sat on the edge of the tub and stared at the bubbles for a long moment, listening to Ellie's nails click faintly on the floor downstairs as she made her rounds like a tiny security guard.

"Just a bath," I told myself. "Just one quiet night."

And for the first time all day, I let my shoulders drop.

I could handle tomorrow. Tomorrow I'd check in on the spring line numbers again—because I couldn't help myself. Tomorrow I'd peek at Doll 10 and the other competition, see what they were pushing and how they were positioning it. Tomorrow I'd be Amber O'Sullivan, CEO, strategist, chaos engine.

Tomorrow I would call Michelle.

Not because I wanted to—working with Michelle always came with... *weather*—but because the summer campaign idea wouldn't leave me alone, and pretending I could build a “family vacation” vibe without the most recognizable mother-daughter brand in our orbit was just bad business.

But tonight was for me.

I queued up Erasure—because sometimes you needed synth-pop therapy and nothing else would do—and let the opening notes fill the steamy bathroom like a soft curtain. Then I eased into the tub, sinking into the bubbles until the heat wrapped around me, loosening the tension in my muscles one knot at a time.

For a few minutes, I let myself be quiet.

No calls. No emails. No marketing decks. No men being disappointing. No Rachel crying in the night. No Trevor pacing over someone touching his knives. No Niamh and Finn turning my family dynamics into a romantic comedy.

Just hot water, old music, and the luxury of being alone without being needed.

I closed my eyes and let the sound carry me, floating somewhere between exhaustion and relief.

By the time the water cooled and my fingers started to wrinkle, I finally climbed out, wrapped myself in a thick towel, and padded into the bedroom. I dried off, moisturized out of habit, and pulled on my sweats, just comfortable clothes and the quiet ritual of getting ready for sleep in a house that felt too big for one person.

My phone lit up on the nightstand.

Trevor.

I smiled before I even opened it.

TREV: *Miss you, mo ghrá.*

My chest tightened in that warm, familiar way.

ME: *Miss you too, mi corazón. How was tonight?*

A moment later—

TREV: *Fantastic. The restaurant is doing really well and it's nice being back in the kitchen.*

Of course it was. Trevor in a kitchen was like a shark in water—happy, lethal, completely in his element.

ME: *I know you hate the business side, love... and I'm glad it's going well.*

TREV: *I hate to leave, but Caoimhe is a great manager. She's not Fionn, but she's gonna be fine I think... I hope.*

I could practically hear the reluctant confidence in that message—the way he trusted his instincts but still needed reassurance. Trevor could run a service for a hundred covers without breaking a sweat, but handing control over to someone else always made him twitchy.

ME: *No one is Fionn, but luckily he is holding down the Cantina like a champ while you're away.*

TREV: *I knew he would. And Kenzie.*

I laughed softly, the sound lost in the quiet bedroom.

ME: *I think your staff is starting to resent her. She's a 2nd year college student who's supposed to be a prep cook but she's already Fionn's right hand.*

TREV: *Good for her. The rest of the staff can step up or watch her fly. I don't care which.*

God, I loved him. Brutal. Fair. Unapologetic. The man ran kitchens like he ran his life—high standards, no excuses.

ME: *LOL. I agree. She is amazing. How's your mam?*

There was a longer pause this time, like he had to take a breath before answering.

TREV: *Watching TV with Finn. Amber, this will never not be uncomfortable—seeing Mam with her boyfriend in the house she raised me in. It was just us when I was a kid... now he's here.*

The humor faded, replaced by that familiar tenderness I felt whenever Trevor's childhood surfaced—the quiet, uncomplicated life he'd had with his mother, and how deeply he still carried it.

I sat on the edge of the bed, thumbs hovering over the screen. I didn't want to tease him. Not about this.

ME: *Trev, I know. But she's a grown woman, and she clearly cares about Finn. You're going to have to deal with it.*

TREV: *I know.*

Then, immediately after:

TREV: *Anyway I should get some sleep. I love you and I miss you. I can't wait to see you next week.*

My throat tightened again. I stared at the words, feeling the ache of distance in a way no amount of success or independence could fully cancel out.

ME: *I love you too. Goodnight, my love.*

I set my phone down gently, like it was something fragile, and slid under the covers.

The house was still quiet. Ellie was curled at the foot of the bed like a tiny, loyal sentinel.

And somewhere outside Limerick, in the home Trevor had grown up in, he was trying to fall asleep while his mother watched television with the man she'd fallen for.

Life was strange.

But at least we still had each other.

“Feigning Normal”

The next morning I woke up with the kind of clarity that only came after sleep, a bubble bath, and deciding to stop pretending I could avoid Michelle Morris-Bradley forever.

I made coffee, opened my laptop at the kitchen island, and pulled up the summer concept deck. The header on the first slide read:

SUMMER DROPS — “SUN DAYS” CAMPAIGN

Soft. Warm. Effortless. Family.

It was annoyingly perfect. The palette was all bronzed skin, sheer gloss, freckles, bare lashes, hair that looked “accidentally” beachy, and the kind of easy joy you couldn’t manufacture with professional models no matter how much you paid them.

The problem was, “effortless” on camera required a very particular kind of face.

Michelle’s.

Not because she was famous—though she was—but because she could sell warmth like it was oxygen. She could look like a mother without looking like a *brand*, which was rare. And Harley and Arissa... well, the girls were growing into themselves in a way that made people want to watch. Their chemistry was real. The kind of real you couldn’t fake with casting.

I stared at Michelle’s name in my contacts for exactly three seconds, then pressed call before I could talk myself out of it.

She answered on the second ring.

“Amber,” she said, voice bright and instantly suspicious. “Either you’re calling to sell me something or you’re calling to start trouble. Which is it?”

I took a slow sip of coffee. “It’s early. I’m too tired to start trouble. This is strictly capitalism.”

A pause. Then—faintly, in the background—Hunter’s voice, low and amused:

“Capitalism is her love language.”

“Tell Hunter I heard that,” I said sweetly.

Michelle didn’t bother denying he was there. “He says you’re a menace.”

“He’s not wrong,” I replied. “Are you on speaker?”

“Yes,” Michelle said, tone warning. “So behave.”

“I always behave,” I lied.

Hunter made a sound that was definitely a laugh.

“Okay,” Michelle continued. “What are you selling?”

I clicked to the next slide and leaned back, slipping seamlessly into CEO mode. “My summer drops campaign. It’s called *Sun Days*. I’m building it around a ‘family vacation’ vibe.”

“Mmhm,” Michelle said, cautious now. “And where do I come in?”

“You and your daughters,” I said. “You, Harley, and Arissa. As the faces of the campaign.”

Silence.

Not dead silence—there was likely Tomi somewhere making noise and a dog clacking across a floor—but the kind of pause that meant Michelle was processing and deciding whether to bite my head off.

Then Hunter, still in the background, said with calm disbelief, “You want Michelle *and* both girls?”

“Correct,” I replied, as if I hadn’t just proposed mixing gasoline and a lit match. “And before you start: it’s not about making them models. It’s about showing real family warmth. Summer skin, easy makeup, no heavy glam. Think beach house mornings. Ice cream runs. Hair still damp. That kind of vibe.”

Michelle’s voice sharpened. “Amber, my daughters aren’t props.”

“Agreed,” I said instantly. “Which is why I’m calling you, not Holly. If I wanted props, I’d hire three influencer clones and call it a day. I want *you*. I want your girls. I want authenticity.”

“Authenticity,” Michelle repeated, like she was tasting the word for poison.

“Don’t start,” I warned.

“Oh, I’m going to start,” she said calmly. “Because you don’t get to throw around ‘authenticity’ like it’s a palette name. Not when you also built your empire on illusion and mistletoe schemes.”

I smiled into my coffee. There it was. The spice. “First of all, my mistletoe schemes are charitable contributions to society.”

Hunter let out a snort. “Oh my God.”

“And second,” I continued, “Michelle, you are the queen of branding. Don’t act like you don’t understand what I mean. You can sell a feeling. And I want that feeling attached to my summer line.”

Michelle’s sigh was long-suffering. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” I said. “You’ll have full approval of wardrobe, final images, messaging. I’m not putting Harley in anything weird. I’m not making Arissa look twenty. And I’m not touching your parenting boundaries.”

Hunter’s voice again, quieter now, less amused. “That’s... actually reasonable.”

“It’s called being good at my job,” I said.

Michelle didn’t sound convinced yet. “And the girls’ schedules?”

"We shoot in Ireland," I replied. "Two days, max. Minimal crew. Family-friendly set. I'll build it around school and your filming schedule. And we can tie it into Arissa's and Kira's success from spring—cross-channel synergy without overexposing them."

"Harley isn't on the beauty channel," Michelle cut in.

"I know," I said. "That's what makes it stronger. It's not 'beauty influencer campaign.' It's 'real family summer.' Harley brings music energy, Arissa brings the channel audience, you bring... you."

"The mania?" Michelle offered dryly.

"The star power," I corrected.

Hunter muttered, "Both."

Michelle went quiet again for a second.

Then she asked, "Why do you want *me* involved instead of just the girls? You could do Harley and Arissa without dealing with... me."

Because you're the anchor, I thought. Because the minute you're in it, the message becomes "motherhood," not "teen marketing." Because you scare off creeps and executives and anyone who might try to turn my campaign into something gross.

But I didn't say that.

Instead, I went with the truth that would land.

"Because people trust you," I said simply. "And because you're their mother. If I'm selling 'family,' I'm not doing it without the person who actually makes your family work."

A beat.

Hunter's voice softened in the background. "That was... surprisingly not terrible."

Michelle, however, was not about to let me have the moment.

"Don't get sentimental," she warned. "It's unsettling."

"I can be sentimental," I replied. "I'm a mother."

"You're also a shark," Michelle said.

"A fashionable shark," I corrected.

Hunter laughed again. "That's accurate."

Michelle's tone shifted—still guarded, but more business now. "Send me the deck. And the contract terms. If it's fair and the messaging is clean, I'll consider it. But Amber?"

"Yes?"

"If I feel for one second like you're trying to use my daughters as a brand gimmick, I'll bury you. Publicly."

I smiled, genuinely pleased. “There she is. I missed you too.”

“Don’t push it,” she said.

“I’ll email everything in ten minutes,” I replied. “And Michelle?”

“What?”

“Tell Hunter to stop talking about me like I’m not on speaker,” I said sweetly. “He’s not subtle.”

Hunter’s voice, amused and unapologetic: “I’m not trying to be.”

“Men,” I muttered.

Michelle’s laugh came through the line—brief, real, and annoyingly warm. “Alright. Send it. We’ll talk.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Give my love to the girls.”

“I will,” she replied. “Bye, Amber.”

“Bye, Michelle.”

The call ended, and I stared at my laptop for a moment, coffee cooling beside me.

Phase one: contact established.

Phase two: negotiation.

Phase three: get a mother-daughter campaign so wholesome it made people forget summer was just another season where everyone was trying to sell them something.

I cracked my knuckles, opened my email, and got to work.

I sent Michelle the deck and the initial proposal—clean terms, clear creative, a timeline that didn’t trample school or sanity. I’d barely set my phone down when her reply pinged back.

MICHELLE: *Before I consider this, I want Thara involved.*

There it was.

The catch.

As if that diabolical Turkish Angora hadn’t caused me enough trouble during the autumn campaign—and London Fashion Week. I still had trauma from the day she’d decided a couture garment bag was her enemy and launched herself into it like it was a live target.

I stared at the screen, took a slow sip of coffee, and typed with the restraint of a woman trying not to commit a felony over email.

ME: *She is the wrong color. Her coat is autumn.*

Seconds later:

MICHELLE: *She is a cat for all seasons and she is part of my family too.*

I blinked.

Then I laughed—quietly, reluctantly—because only Michelle could weaponize motherhood and cat ownership into a contract clause with a straight face.

I typed back:

ME: *Fine. But if she bites anyone, I'm invoicing you for hazard pay.*

The typing bubbles appeared immediately, as if she'd been waiting for the opening.

MICHELLE: *Deal. She only bites people she doesn't respect.*

I stared at that for a moment, the implication landing like a tiny, perfectly aimed dart.

Then I replied:

ME: *Then we're all in danger.*

The typing bubbles popped up again so fast it was practically a threat.

MICHELLE: *She respects you. She just enjoys humbling you.*

I snorted and set my phone down before I could get dragged into a cat-based psychological war I didn't have time for.

Because unfortunately, Michelle had a point: Thara was brand gold. Not by accident, not by “oops she wandered into a shot,” but because *Michelle* and Lydia had strong-armed me into it and then I'd had to admit—through gritted teeth—that the Diabla sold product.

Thara had been the face of my autumn line. She'd had a special edition palette named after her, built entirely around her fur tones—creamy white, smoky taupe, soft warm brown, and that dramatic orange contrast that somehow looked luxurious instead of ridiculous when it was printed on packaging.

She'd even been part of the company launch—carefully staged, meticulously managed, and only mildly traumatic for everyone involved.

The internet loved her. The fans loved her. The sales numbers loved her.

I, however, remained unconvinced that society needed a feline celebrity with that much power.

Which meant now, instead of pitching one of the most powerful women in entertainment on a campaign, I was negotiating with her *cat* again.

Perfect.

I opened a new email thread titled: **THARA ADDENDUM (UNFORTUNATE)** and began adding a bullet list of “feline participation terms” that sounded absurd even as I typed them:

- Limited on-set time (no longer than 90 minutes per block)
- No bright strobes or loud sound effects

- Dedicated handler (Michelle or approved staff only)
- Separate, secure “green room” space
- Immediate removal if signs of distress/aggression present
- Full approval of final images by Michelle

I paused, then added one more clause because I’d learned the hard way:

- No couture within three feet of the Diabla without a protective garment bag

I was halfway through drafting when my phone rang.

Michelle.

I answered with exaggerated sweetness. “Michelle.”

“Amber,” she said, voice smug. I could *hear* her smiling. “Are you writing a contract for my cat?”

“I’m writing a contract for your *Diabla*,” I corrected. “And I want it on record that I’m being emotionally blackmailed by a Turkish Angora.”

“You’re not being blackmailed,” Michelle replied. “You’re being given an opportunity to work with a proven top seller.”

“Oh my God,” I muttered. “You talk about her like she’s an A-list celebrity.”

“She is,” Michelle said, perfectly serious. “You literally named a palette after her.”

“I did it under duress,” I replied. “And under protest.”

Hunter’s voice drifted faintly in the background, amused. “Amber, you loved it.”

“I loved the *profit margins*,” I corrected automatically.

Michelle made a satisfied sound. “I want one hero shot. Just one. Thara in the campaign with me and the girls—soft lighting, summer palette, family vibe. Not runway. Not high fashion. Just... us.”

The request was annoyingly reasonable, which was the problem. It made it harder to argue.

I sighed. “Fine. One hero shot. But she’s not touching product.”

“She can sit near product,” Michelle countered instantly.

“No,” I said flatly. “If she knocks over a display again, I will personally launch her into the Seine.”

Hunter, still in the background: “Amber, don’t threaten the royal cat. That’s how people disappear.”

Michelle laughed. “See? Even Hunter knows better than you.”

“I’m not afraid of your cat,” I lied.

“Everyone is afraid of my cat,” Michelle corrected, calm as a priest.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Okay. Listen. I’ll do the hero shot. But the campaign is *Sun Days*. Light. Warm. Clean. Thara is not turning this into ‘Gothic feline revenge summer.’”

“She won’t,” Michelle said. Then added cheerfully, “unless she wants to.”

I groaned. “You are impossible.”

“And you love me,” Michelle replied without hesitation.

“I love your daughters,” I said. “And I tolerate you.”

“Sure,” Michelle said, entirely unbothered. “Now tell me the schedule.”

I pulled the calendar up on my laptop. “Two shoot days. Minimal crew. One day for the main campaign, one day for the family assets and video. We keep it tight. No chaos.”

“Amber,” Michelle said, amused, “you can’t promise no chaos when you’re involved.”

I smiled despite myself. “Fine. Minimal chaos.”

“Better,” she agreed.

I tapped my pen against the desk, thinking ahead. “And Michelle—your girls. I want them protected. No weird comments from photographers. No press on set. No behind-the-scenes footage unless you approve it.”

There was a pause on the line. A real one this time.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

I didn’t soften—only because if I did, I’d end up thinking about Rachel and the future and all the things I didn’t have time to feel right now.

“This is business,” I said briskly. “And family. I’m not letting anyone be creepy around my nieces.”

Michelle’s voice warmed again. “Okay. Send the Thara addendum.”

“It’s literally called ‘THARA ADDENDUM (UNFORTUNATE),’” I informed her.

She cackled. Actually cackled.

“I’ll sign it,” she said. “And Amber?”

“What.”

“If you call her ‘Diabla’ to her face, she’ll know.”

“I hope she does,” I said sweetly. “She should be aware she has a reputation.”

Michelle hummed, satisfied. “Alright. I’ll look for the email. Bye.”

“Bye.”

The call ended, and I stared at my laptop for a moment, the ridiculousness of my life settling over me like a designer blanket.

Summer campaign: secured—pending the cooperation of one celebrity mother, two teen girls, and a cat who had already proven she could outsell half my human influencers.

I took a deep breath and went back to typing.

Because if there was one thing I knew how to do, it was make impossible logistics look effortless.

Even when the Diabla was involved.

I finished the documents, saved everything to the shared drive, and sent the final addendum off to Michelle before she could decide to negotiate on behalf of Thara's "emotional needs." Then I shut my laptop with a decisive little snap that made me feel far more in control than I probably was.

Yoga was next.

Morning yoga with Livvie had started as a desperate attempt to claw my way out of postpartum depression—back when Rachel was so small that the days blurred together and I couldn't tell if I was exhausted or hollow or both. Somewhere along the way it became a ritual we both loved. It gave Livvie a break from the twins, it kept me grounded, and it was the only hour where neither of us could check our phones without looking like absolute hypocrites.

And I needed that hour.

I had a shower and a full vanity setup at work, so I didn't bother getting properly ready at home. I just needed to get out the door.

I pulled on black yoga pants, an orange sports bra, and twisted my hair into a high ponytail. Then I packed my work clothes into my tote—something structured and CEO-appropriate—grabbed my athletic jacket, and scooped up the small essentials: keys, laptop, sunglasses.

And Ellie.

She was already in her purse, the tiny traitor, staring up at me like she was the one with a schedule to keep.

"Right," I told her, zipping the bag halfway. "You're coming too. Try not to judge my downward dog."

The yoga studio even let Ellie hang out in the lounge area while I was in class. She'd become a favorite of the regulars—mostly because she was quiet, adorable, and unlike everyone else there, had never once spoken the words *'I'm just really focusing on my breath today'* with unbearable sincerity.

I slung my tote over one shoulder, adjusted Ellie's carrier in my hand, and headed out into the morning, already feeling a little lighter simply because I was moving.

Some days, that was half the battle—forward momentum.

And if I could start the day with movement, breath, and one hour of silence... then I could handle whatever came after.

Even Michelle.

Even Thara.

Even everything.

I pulled up to the studio and slipped inside, grateful for the familiar calm—dim lighting, soft instrumental music, that faint scent of eucalyptus and expensive candles. It was one of the few places in Cork that felt consistently peaceful no matter what kind of chaos the rest of life was serving.

Livvie was already there, of course, because she was incapable of being late to anything she'd decided mattered. She'd secured our usual spots—second row, far enough from the door to avoid drafts, close enough that we didn't feel like we were hiding.

I set Ellie up in the lounge with her little travel blanket and a water bowl—she immediately began soaking up attention from the receptionist like the tiny celebrity she believed herself to be—then stashed my tote in a cubby and headed into the studio.

I rolled out my mat beside Livvie's and lowered myself to sit cross-legged, stretching my shoulders.

"Hey," I said quietly.

"Hey," Livvie replied, her voice low but immediately purposeful. "So... J talked to James."

I glanced at her. "And?"

Livvie's mouth tightened. "He's still a wanker."

"Well, obviously," I murmured.

"But," she added, because she was fair even when she didn't want to be, "he's a wanker who is allegedly going to try to do better for Aine."

I made a skeptical sound. "I'll believe it when I see it. But I hope so. Aine—God knows why—actually cares about him."

Livvie snorted softly, adjusting her mat with sharp efficiency. "And that, mate, is the great mystery of all of this."

I smiled, just a little. It was one of the things I loved about Livvie—she could be furious on someone's behalf without stripping them of agency. She could hate James and still respect Aine's choices. It was a rare balance.

The instructor dimmed the lights further and walked to the front of the room, her voice dropping into that practiced calm that made you feel like you were about to be gently hypnotized.

"Alright everyone," she said. "Let's begin."

Livvie and I exchanged a look—the silent agreement we'd developed over months of early mornings and shared exhaustion.

For the next hour, we would breathe.

And for the next hour, we would not fix anyone.

After yoga, Livvie and I decided to grab coffee—because we were human, and because caffeine was the closest thing either of us had to a coping mechanism that didn't involve swearing.

We went to our favorite Starbucks—the one at Castle West. Convenient, consistent, and familiar enough that the baristas already knew our orders before we finished speaking. I was the CEO. If I was a few minutes late to the office because I'd had coffee with a friend, the world would survive.

Livvie got her usual caramel thing that was basically dessert in a cup. I got a mocha, because I was predictable and not ashamed of it. We were creatures of habit; it was one of the few luxuries adulthood allowed.

We slid into our usual corner table with the comfortable ease of people who'd done this often enough that it was practically part of the routine.

Livvie took one sip of her drink, then looked at me over the rim with quiet menace. "You know," she said, "I should be furious with you."

I blinked. "What? What did I do?"

She leaned forward slightly, voice deadly calm. "Two words. Glitter. Pucks."

I couldn't help it—I laughed. A full laugh, the kind that made a couple at the next table glance over like I was unhinged.

"I take it Rose likes them?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"A little too much," Livvie said flatly. "She keeps figuring out where I hide them and somehow gets them down no matter where I stash them. That little girl is diabolical."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Only when it comes to glitter?"

Livvie's stare said: *Amber, don't test me.*

"Fine," I conceded, grinning. "Diabolical in general. But the glitter pucks just unlocked her final form."

Livvie groaned and dropped her forehead lightly to the table. "She demanded 'fairy dust' at bedtime last night like she was negotiating a hostage exchange."

"That's... actually impressive," I said, unable to keep the admiration out of my voice.

"It's terrifying," Livvie corrected. Then she lifted her head again and pointed at me. "And don't think I didn't notice you calling Thara 'the Diabla' like you're above the chaos. You married into it. You *birthed* it."

I took a slow sip of my mocha, wholly unrepentant. "Look, I didn't create Rose. I simply... provided tools."

Livvie narrowed her eyes. "You are absolutely banned from buying her art supplies without written consent from both parents and the United Nations."

I smiled sweetly. “Noted.”

“Also,” Livvie added, stirring her drink with unnecessary aggression, “if you ever buy her slime, I will burn your house down.”

I gasped, scandalized. “Livvie O’Brien.”

“Amber O’Sullivan,” she shot back.

We stared at each other for a beat.

Then we both laughed, the tension of the last few days loosening in that small, ordinary moment—two tired mothers, two women holding too much, finding relief in something as stupid as glitter.

I leaned back, exhaling. “Alright. No slime,” I promised. “But I can’t promise I won’t buy her something else absurd at some point. It’s part of my charm.”

Livvie rolled her eyes. “That’s one word for it.”

Michelle

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After I hung up from Amber’s call, I just stood there for a second with the phone still in my hand, staring at nothing.

Somehow I’d spent ten minutes discussing bronzer tones, shoot schedules, and—God help me—contract clauses for Thara like the world wasn’t quietly cracking open beneath our feet.

I looked at Hunter.

“It’s nice we can pretend to be normal,” I said, and my voice came out softer than I intended.

Hunter’s mouth twitched like he wanted to smile, but the expression didn’t quite make it. “I know...”

The silence that followed wasn’t empty. It was full of everything we weren’t saying. Full of the spreadsheet in my command center. Full of Carter’s warning. Full of the way SPD was tightening its grip on anything it could call “security.”

“We don’t have much more time,” I said, the words steady even as my stomach knotted. “We need the base for the civilian Rangers completed—fast. Or at least inhabitable. Something we can move people into if Wes makes his move.”

Hunter nodded once, already there mentally. He’d been living in that urgency for months—hammering, building, reinforcing, working with the Riordans to turn sanctuary into reality.

“And we need Livvie to reach out to her contacts in the Irish government,” I continued. “We have to get them to close Irish airspace to any SPD aircraft. If SPD can’t fly in, it insulates us. It buys us time.”

Hunter’s brows rose slightly. “You think Livvie has that kind of pull?”

"I think the Irish government contracted Livvie to secure their systems for a reason," I said. "And I think if Livvie O'Brien says SPD is a potential threat, it carries weight."

Because Livvie wasn't a celebrity. She wasn't a Ranger. She wasn't a known political figure.

She was something far more dangerous to people like Wes Collins: a civilian expert with credibility. The kind of person governments actually listened to when it mattered.

Hunter nodded slowly, gaze dropping for a moment as if he could see the shape of our future in the floorboards. "I hope you're right."

"I have to be right," I said quietly. Then, after a beat, I added the part that sat like a stone behind my ribs. "Because if SPD ever lands in Ireland with authority... we're not just fighting Rangers anymore."

Hunter's eyes lifted back to mine, and the look there was pure understanding—no drama, no bravado. Just the brutal clarity that came with experience.

"We're fighting a government," he said.

"Exactly," I replied. "And governments don't back down because you ask nicely."

Hunter reached for my hand, squeezing once—grounding me the way he always did when my mind threatened to sprint ahead of my body.

"Alright," he said, voice low and certain. "Then we move faster. We build. We prepare. And we keep our girls out of reach."

I nodded, holding on to his hand like it was the only solid thing in a world that kept shifting.

"Yeah," I said. "We do."

Hunter's hand stayed wrapped around mine, but his expression tightened—protective instinct and practical reality colliding the way they always did with us.

"I don't like the idea of you going back on the road tomorrow," he said.

"Neither do I," I admitted. "So I'm not."

His eyebrows lifted slightly. Hunter knew me. For me to cancel shows without an emergency was... rare.

"I'm postponing the next two dates," I continued, already feeling the familiar pinch of guilt in my chest—the reflexive need to be dependable, to show up, to never let anyone down. "I'll post a video of me looking miserable and say I have laryngitis."

Hunter's mouth twitched. "You don't have to fake looking miserable. You're already stressed."

I gave him a look. "I can do a very convincing 'sick' face. It's a skill."

He didn't smile, but the tension in his shoulders eased slightly.

"I hate doing that," I said quietly, the honesty catching in my throat. "I hate disappointing fans. I hate pushing dates. But I need to stay here a few more days and make sure we have certain safeguards in place before I go back to the States."

Hunter nodded, slow and firm. "I know how hard it is for you. You feel like you owe them something."

"I do owe them something," I said reflexively.

Hunter squeezed my hand. "You owe them a good show. And you owe your kids a mother who's alive and present."

The words hit hard—not because they were dramatic, but because they were true.

"I agree," I said, forcing myself to sit in that truth instead of arguing with it. "Two dates won't end my career. But leaving right now—before we're ready—could end everything else."

Hunter's gaze softened. "Then we'll use the time. We'll push the sanctuary build. We'll lock down comms. We'll get Livvie moving on her end."

"And I'll call Billy," I added. "If Wes is escalating, we need to assume he's already looking for leverage."

Hunter exhaled, a steadying breath. "Alright."

I nodded once, the decision settling into my bones. "Alright."

I went upstairs, crawled into bed, and recorded a quick video for my socials—hair slightly messy, lighting just bad enough to sell it, eyes a little tired-looking. I strained my voice deliberately, letting it rasp the way it did after a long show weekend.

"Hey y'all," I croaked, forcing a weak smile. "I'm so sorry... I woke up this morning with what my doctor thinks is laryngitis. I hate doing this, but I have to postpone the next two shows so I don't damage my voice."

It wasn't my proudest performance. But it was a necessary one.

I posted it, sent Holly a text—*reschedule, please; I'll take the heat later*—and let myself exhale. One less moving part. Two more days at home. Two more days to tighten the net before I stepped back into American airspace.

Then I called Jason.

He answered on the second ring. "Hey."

"Have you had a chance to talk to Andros?" I asked immediately. No small talk. No warm-up. Jason understood urgency.

"I have."

My stomach tightened. "And?"

“He’s with us,” Jason said, and I felt something in my chest loosen so sharply it almost hurt. “He said he doesn’t think Rangers should work under the direction of any government—and that’s exactly what SPD is becoming. He considers Wes a friend, but he can’t condone what Wes has been doing.”

I closed my eyes, relief washing through me in a wave. “Thank God.”

“I stressed to him that this is headed toward a civil war,” Jason continued, voice steady, “and that we needed to know where his allegiance lies. Honestly, Mich—I believe him.”

That mattered. Jason was better than anyone I knew at reading people. If he believed Andros, I could let myself believe too.

“He said he’ll talk to the other Space Rangers,” Jason added, “and Karone. He thinks she can get the Galaxy Rangers on board.”

“That’s... huge,” I breathed. The Space and Galaxy teams weren’t just allies—they were a stabilizing force. A counterweight. If they stood with us, we weren’t just resisting; we were building something strong enough to hold.

“That’s what I thought,” Jason agreed. “He’s solid.”

“If you trust him, then I do,” I said quietly. “You’re the best person I know at reading a room.”

There was a brief pause—Jason absorbing the implication of what we were doing. Drawing lines. Choosing sides.

“That just leaves Tonya and Ninja Steel as wild cards,” I added, my mind already shifting back to the spreadsheet and the unknowns it still held.

Jason’s voice hardened slightly. “I wouldn’t count on either of them as reliable. Not right now. Too many variables. Too much distance. Too little history.”

“So you think we have our team,” I said.

“I do,” Jason replied. “And we move like we do.”

“How’s that?” I asked, even though I knew.

“Quiet. Fast. With contingencies,” he said. “No hero speeches. No grandstanding. We prepare, we protect civilians, and we don’t let SPD force the narrative.”

I swallowed. “Okay.”

“And Michelle,” Jason added, and his tone softened just a fraction, “you did the right thing postponing your shows.”

I glanced toward the bedroom door, where I could hear Hunter moving around downstairs.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I did.”

“Call me if anything changes,” Jason said. “Any movement from Wes.”

"I will," I promised. "Thanks, Jase."

"Always," he said.

When I hung up, I lay back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling for a moment, letting the quiet settle. My body was still tense—still braced—but the panic that had been clawing at the edges of my thoughts finally eased.

For the first time in weeks, I felt a little less alone in the fight.

I pushed myself out of bed, got dressed quickly—comfortable clothes, boots, hair pulled back. Not stage-ready, not camera-ready. Just *ready*. Ready to move, ready to plan, ready to be the version of myself that didn't wait for permission to protect her family.

Downstairs, I could hear Hunter moving through the house with that purposeful rhythm of his—half dad, half warrior.

I found him near the back door, keys already in his palm, jacket on, expression set.

"You good?" he asked, eyes scanning my face like he could read the call with Jason in my posture.

"Jason talked to Andros," I said. "He's with us."

Hunter's shoulders loosened visibly. "Good."

"More than good," I corrected. "It stabilizes Space and Galaxy. It buys us leverage."

Hunter nodded once. "Then we use it."

I grabbed my coat and followed him out. Tomi was staying with Mom for the afternoon, which meant we could move faster—no toddler logistics, no nap timing. Just us, and the road, and the Academy.

Because we weren't going there for nostalgia.

We were going there to see how close sanctuary was to being real.

The drive out to the Ord na Toirnín always felt longer when my mind was full. The Irish countryside should've been calming—green fields, stone walls, sheep that looked eternally unimpressed—but today it felt like scenery sliding past a moving target. Like the world was still trying to be beautiful while we prepared for something ugly.

Hunter drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on my thigh for a few seconds whenever he could manage it—little touches, grounding touches. He didn't say much. Neither did I. We were both thinking, just in parallel lanes.

"You want to stop for coffee?" he asked at one point, voice casual, like this was a normal errand.

"No," I said, and my answer was too sharp, too fast. I softened it. "Sorry. No. I just... I want to get there."

Hunter nodded, no judgment. "Okay."

We turned off the main road and onto the narrower lane that led toward the concealed entrance. The energy changed almost immediately—the subtle shift I always felt on this stretch of land, like the air itself had a pulse. The Academy wasn't just hidden by geography. It was hidden by intention. By magic layered with Grid resonance, a veil that didn't just confuse the eye but dulled the instinct to look closer.

Hunter parked in the familiar clearing..

"Ready?" Hunter asked, cutting the engine.

"No," I said honestly. Then I exhaled and opened the door. "Yes."

We walked the path together—Hunter leading, of course, because he had the energy signatures mapped in his bones by now. The entrance shimmered faintly at the ancient oak, and the sensation of passing through the barrier prickled across my skin like static.

On the other side, the ruins opened up, mist hanging low over stone and earth. But it wasn't as bleak as it had been when we first found it. The changes were subtle, but they were there: scaffolding erected around crumbling walls, new timber stacked neatly beside old stone, runes freshly carved into protective markers.

Progress.

Sanctuary didn't appear overnight. It got built with splinters and sweat.

We'd barely stepped into the main courtyard when Tiernan's voice carried out from behind a half-rebuilt archway.

"Well look who's turned up," he called, wiping his hands on his work trousers as he approached. His smile was genuine, but his eyes were sharp—always assessing. Always ready.

Saoirse followed a few steps behind, braid pulled tight, sleeves rolled up, a hammer in one hand like it belonged there. It did. She looked more comfortable with tools than she ever had at a dinner table.

"Michelle," she greeted, nodding once. "Hunter."

"Hey," Hunter replied, the warmth in his voice immediate. "How's it going?"

Saoirse's mouth quirked. "Depends. Are you here as friends or inspectors?"

"Both," I admitted, and Saoirse actually snorted, like she appreciated the honesty.

Tiernan gestured behind him. "Come see. We've got the sleeping quarters framed out and the new wards anchored. Billy's remote work has been... impressive."

"Livvie's," I corrected automatically.

Tiernan's eyes flicked to me. "Aye," he conceded. "Livvie's. I still don't understand half of what she's done, but the Grid readings are stable."

Hunter and I exchanged a glance. Stable was good. Stable was what we needed if this place was going to become more than an idea.

We followed them past the training area, where new mats had been laid down under a partially restored roof. It smelled like timber and damp stone, like old history being forced back into shape.

Tieman led us toward what used to be a storage building and was now clearly being converted—partitioned rooms, reinforced doors, wiring conduits that shouldn't have looked natural in ancient stone but somehow did.

"This will be the intake area," he explained. "Where people come in first. We'll keep it separate from the main dorms. Vet who's here, what they need, whether they're bringing trouble."

My chest tightened. Refugee logistics. The kind you didn't plan unless you truly believed you'd need them.

Hunter nodded slowly. "Smart."

Saoirse watched me the entire time, her gaze steady and unreadable.

Finally she said, "So. How bad is it?"

There it was. No pretending. No easing into it.

"How bad is what?" Hunter asked carefully, though we both knew she wasn't talking about construction.

Saoirse's grip tightened on her hammer. "The thing that's got you cancelling shows and turning this place into a bunker."

My blood went cold.

Hunter's head snapped toward me. His eyes widened slightly—*How does she know about the shows?*

And then I realized: Saoirse didn't know about my shows. She was reading me. Reading the urgency in our presence, the way we walked like we were running out of time.

I swallowed once.

"It's escalating," I said quietly. "SPD is escalating."

Tieman's expression darkened. "We've heard whispers."

"Not whispers anymore," I said. "They're moving. And we're moving too."

Saoirse nodded, once, decisive. "Good."

Then she stepped closer, voice low. "If you're building a sanctuary, you better be ready to defend it."

Hunter's jaw set. "We are."

Saoirse's eyes flicked between us. "Then tell us what you need."

And suddenly the weight in my chest shifted—still heavy, but no longer solitary.

Because this wasn't just our fight anymore.

It was becoming everyone's.

I took a breath, forcing myself to speak clearly—no spiraling, no drama. Just the truth, laid out like a plan.

"We have two goals here," I said. "First—we want to get your Academy accepting recruits again. Get you fully operational. Rebuild the tradition, the training, the community."

Saoirse didn't flinch. Her expression stayed steady, but I could see the intensity behind it—the way that goal mattered to her on a level that wasn't strategic. It was personal. It was survival.

"And second," I continued, "we need a base for civilian Rangers."

Hunter's posture shifted slightly beside me. He didn't interrupt; he just anchored the moment.

"Wes hasn't made his move yet," I said, "but he's gearing up. I suspect it's only a matter of time before he criminalizes any Ranger not registered with SPD. If that happens, we need a safe haven for Rangers who won't fall in line—Rangers who refuse to be turned into a government weapon."

Saoirse's mouth tightened. She stared past me for a heartbeat, like she was picturing the kind of future I was describing.

Then she said, low and sharp, "This power was never meant for governments."

Tiernan nodded once. "We work outside governments to avoid corruption. Always have."

"I couldn't agree more," I said, relief and grimness mixing together in my chest. "And that's exactly why we're doing this."

Saoirse's gaze locked onto mine. "So you're planning for a split."

"I'm planning for survival," I corrected. "If SPD tries to take control, they're not just coming for Rangers. They're coming for anyone they can label a threat. Including our kids."

That last word landed heavier than everything else.

Tiernan shifted, gesturing toward the far side of the grounds. "We've got the base for the veterans going up on the far side of our land. Still protected, still inside the wards—but separate from the main Academy."

Hunter nodded, relief visible in the way his shoulders lowered. "Perfect. We don't want to interfere with you reopening the Academy. We just need someplace safe."

Saoirse's eyes narrowed slightly. "Safe means defended."

Hunter's jaw set. "Then we defend it."

A beat passed—one of those moments where people decide whether they're merely talking or actually committing.



Tieman nodded, decisive. “Alright. We’ll adjust the build schedule. Prioritize the veterans’ quarters and the intake area. If people start arriving suddenly, we need somewhere to put them.”

Saoirse added, almost as an afterthought but with unmistakable intent, “And we’ll expand the wards. If SPD can track Grid signatures, we’ll make sure they can’t track what’s happening here.”

I felt Hunter’s hand brush mine—small, grounding.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, and I meant it. Not just for the practical support, but for the solidarity.

“We’re not trying to take over your home. We’re trying to make sure there’s still a place left for people like us.”

Saoirse’s expression softened by a fraction. “People like us don’t ask permission from governments to do what’s right.”

Tieman’s mouth quirked. “And if Wes is gearing up, then we gear up faster.”

Hunter exhaled, a short, sharp sound that was half relief, half readiness. “Good.”

Because speed was the only advantage we had left.

Amber

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I spent the day buried in work—contracts, creative approvals, the summer palette refinements, and two new products I wanted ready for fall. The kind of work that didn’t look exciting to anyone else but was the backbone of everything: formulas, packaging specs, timelines, legal terms, manufacturing lead times. A thousand tiny decisions that shaped whether a launch soared or sank.

By seven o’clock the office was silent.

Jerrica had gone home hours ago, along with Aine, Gina, and the rest of the team. Even the building felt like it had exhaled—lights dimmed, hallways empty, the faint hum of security systems and my own laptop fan the only sounds left.

I was still at my desk, pen tapping against a margin as I re-read a clause for the third time, when there was a knock at the door.

I looked up, already annoyed—because anyone who knocked after hours either had a crisis or didn’t respect boundaries.

Then I saw Jeremy.

He strolled in like he owned the place, coat still on, keys in his hand. Trevor had given him a set while he was away—because apparently my husband trusted Jeremy more than he trusted me to stop working.

“Figured I’d find you here,” Jeremy said, his tone equal parts amused and exasperated. “We’re headed to grab a bite at the Cantina. Care to join?”

I smirked. I knew damn well Trevor had put him on babysitting duty. *Make sure Amber doesn't live at work while I'm gone.*

"I would," I said, dragging the words out like I was considering it, "but—"

Jeremy gave me a look. "Love. You have to eat. Come on."

I sighed dramatically, as if I hadn't eaten a protein bar at my desk three hours ago and called it dinner. "Jeremy—"

"Amber," he cut in, voice gentle but firm, "you don't get to negotiate this. You're coming."

I stared at him for a moment, then relented because one, he was right, and two, arguing with Jeremy was like arguing with gravity. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't get rattled. He just held the line until you gave up.

"Fine," I conceded. "Let me save my work and I'll meet you there."

"I'll wait and walk you out," he said, already settling himself into the chair across from my desk like we were having a meeting. "Livvie's in the car with the twins. They'll be fine while you wrap up."

I laughed despite myself. "You brought the entire crew as reinforcement?"

Jeremy's grin widened. "I did. Consider it an intervention."

"Okay, okay," I said, hands up in surrender as I clicked save and closed my documents. "You win."

Jeremy leaned back, satisfied. "I always do."

I rolled my eyes, grabbed my bag, and stood. "Alright. Let's go before I change my mind."

He rose too, offering his arm with exaggerated formality.

I ignored it and walked past him toward the door.

Jeremy followed, chuckling. "Trev is going to be thrilled. He's been worried you'll turn into a ghost while he's gone."

"I am not a ghost," I muttered, locking my office.

"No," he agreed. "You're worse. You're a workaholic with a skincare empire."

"Flattering," I said dryly.

"Accurate," he replied, and held the door open like the gentleman he was.

And as we stepped into the quiet evening air, I realized something annoying:

It was nice not to be alone.

Jeremy headed out first and climbed into his car. I saw Livvie in the passenger seat and waved through the windshield; she lifted her hand in a lazy salute, one of the twins' silhouettes bouncing in the backseat like a pair of caffeinated gremlins.

I slipped into my own car and followed them to the Cantina.

Even on a weeknight, it was busy—warm light spilling out onto the street, the familiar buzz of conversation and clinking glasses drifting through the doors every time someone entered or left. The Celtic Cantina had become one of those places people treated like a living room: loud, comfortable, full of regulars and stories.

Our usual table in the VIP room was already waiting. Trevor's absence didn't change that; if anything, people treated it like reserved sacred ground. The twins were ushered in ahead of us with the kind of excited shuffling that promised at least one spilled drink before the night was over.

Fionn noticed us immediately and his face lit up. He headed our way, all easy confidence now—no hesitation, no “am I allowed to do this?” energy. He moved like someone who belonged in the role he was stepping into.

“Amber. Jeremy. Livvie,” he greeted warmly, leaning in to hug me first. “Lovely to see you.”

“And me!” Rose declared at full volume, launching herself toward him like a tiny projectile.

Fionn's smile widened. He crouched slightly as if receiving royalty. “Aye, of course, wee fairy. It's always a delight to see you.”

Rose beamed, immediately satisfied.

I glanced around, taking in the smooth flow of service, the staff moving with practiced rhythm, the restaurant humming along without the slightest sign of strain. “I see the Cantina is still standing in Trev's absence,” I said, making it sound like a joke even though I had genuinely wondered if Trevor's control issues would manifest from three hours away.

Fionn snorted. “Aye. Running smooth as butter.” Then his expression turned amused in that very specific way that meant Trevor had been doing something deeply Trevor. “Chef calls multiple times a day to check. And I have to send him daily photos of Patrick.”

Jeremy burst out laughing. “Only Trev would worry about his pet lobster.”

“Excuse you,” I said with mock offense, as I sat down. “Patrick is part of the family.”

Livvie rolled her eyes as she settled beside Jeremy, Killy climbing up next to her with quiet determination while Rose attempted to stand on the seat so she could see *everything* at once.

I glanced back at Fionn. “Do you have time to join us for dinner? Five minutes. Ten. Long enough for me to confirm you aren't secretly running this place with duct tape and prayer.”

“I think I can spare a short time,” Fionn said, and there was no hesitation in it—just a quick assessment of the room before he turned and gave one of the servers a subtle hand signal.

He slid into the booth with us, relaxed but alert, the kind of calm that came from competence.

It struck me—again—how much he'd changed.

Fionn had gone from Trevor's sous chef to someone who could run the entire place while Trev was away without it collapsing into chaos. Not just technically, but emotionally too. He wasn't just capable—he believed he was.

And seeing that... seeing him settle into himself like that...

It made me proud in a way I hadn't expected.

"Alright," I said, picking up a menu even though I already knew what I wanted. "Tell me everything. How's Chef coping without micromanaging you in person?"

Fionn laughed, rubbing a hand over his face like he was trying not to betray how ridiculous Trevor could be from a distance. "He's doing pretty well, all things considered. He trusts me—as much as he can trust anyone with one of his restaurants."

"That's basically a love letter coming from Trev," Jeremy said dryly.

"It is," Fionn agreed, grin widening. "And I trust Kenzie. She's been invaluable."

Jeremy lifted an eyebrow. "I thought she was a prep cook."

"Aye, she was when Trev left," Fionn said, matter-of-fact. "But she's stepped up. For a second-year culinary student, she's surpassed every expectation."

I leaned forward slightly, genuinely curious. "And how's the rest of the staff taking that?"

Fionn's expression shifted—still calm, but with an edge of steel underneath. Leadership. "The other chefs are clearly upset," he admitted. "Egos. Pride. That sort of thing. But I told them straight—when they have her drive and passion, they won't be shown up by a second-year student."

I smiled, satisfaction warming my chest. "Good. Maybe it'll encourage the rest of them to step it up."

"Kenz is amazing," Fionn continued, his tone softening again. "She's going to do great things. Trev sees it too. Even if the staff doesn't want to admit it."

Livvie, who had been quietly unwrapping a straw for Rose with the patience of a saint, finally looked up. "How's Declan?"

Fionn's entire face changed when she said his name—like someone had turned on a light. He beamed. "He's doing wonderful. He actually just got a promotion, so he's back at the same level he was before he left Dublin."

Jeremy's jaw tightened slightly, the old anger surfacing in his eyes. "You mean when he was unceremoniously chased out of Dublin by what Alan did to him," he muttered, voice low and bitter.

"Aye," Fionn said, the smile fading but not disappearing. He nodded once, steady. "That."

The table went quiet for a beat, the kind of pause that acknowledged something ugly without letting it derail the moment. Rose, blissfully unaware, swung her legs under the table and hummed to herself, while Killy sat with his menu open, studying it like he was preparing to place a strategic order.

I broke the silence first, because I wasn't going to let bitterness have the last word.

"Well," I said briskly, lifting my menu again, "I'm glad Declan's being recognized again. He deserves stability. He deserves good things."

Fionn nodded, gratitude flickering in his eyes. "He does."

Jeremy leaned back, exhaling through his nose. "Good. Because if anyone deserves to catch a break, it's Declan."

"And," Livvie added, voice calm but pointed, "it's nice to see the Cantina running well. Trev would have a stroke if it didn't."

Fionn laughed again, the tension easing. "He'd haunt me. From Limerick."

"He already does," I said, reaching for my phone. "Do you want me to send him a photo of you sitting down? Just to really ruin his night."

Jeremy barked a laugh. "Please. Do it."

Fionn held up a hand, half amused, half pleading. "No. I'd like to live."

Then his expression shifted, like he'd remembered something important. "Oh—Jeremy, I meant to tell you. James came in a couple nights ago with Aine."

Jeremy's eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

Livvie leaned forward immediately, all humor evaporating. "Please tell me he was good to her."

Jeremy's tone was less hopeful and more resigned. "What stupid thing did he do?"

Fionn hesitated, then gave a small shrug. "Actually... he was on his best behavior."

Livvie blinked, suspicious. "That's not reassuring."

"It was a little disconcerting," Fionn admitted, lowering his voice like he didn't want the universe to hear him praising James and punish him for it. "He was putting in so much effort—holding doors, asking Aine questions, not staring at the wait staff—"

Jeremy snorted. "The bar is in hell."

"Aye," Fionn agreed, unoffended. "But he was trying. Like... visibly trying. It was almost unnatural."

Livvie's mouth tightened, equal parts hope and anger. "Did Aine seem okay?"

"She looked tired," Fionn said honestly. "But she looked... less alone. He kept checking on her, kept making sure she had what she needed. He even held the baby the whole time so she could eat."

Jeremy went quiet for a second, then muttered, "Jesus. Maybe someone finally got through to him."

Livvie shot him a look. "You *did* get through to him. Don't act like you didn't."

Jeremy shrugged, but I could see the relief in his face—small, cautious, but real.

Fionn added, "He still looked like a man who doesn't know what he's doing. But he was trying to act like he does."

"Better than acting like he doesn't care," Livvie said, voice tight.

"Aye," Fionn agreed. "Exactly."

I watched Livvie's expression—how carefully she held herself, like she didn't want to get her hopes up and then have to watch Aine get crushed again.

"Well," I said, smoothing the moment with practiced decisiveness, "if James continues behaving like a functioning adult, we'll all throw him a parade."

Jeremy nodded solemnly. "With a banner that says *Congratulations on Basic Decency*."

Fionn laughed. "I'll have Kenz make him a cake."

Livvie's mouth twitched despite herself. "Don't. He'll think it's flirting."

Jeremy groaned. "God. Please don't."

And just like that, the table tipped back into humor—light, fragile humor—because it was easier than sitting too long in the hope that James might actually change.

It was around then that Rose—who had been miraculously still for nearly ten minutes—started to get bored. I saw the shift before she even moved: the restless wiggle, the scanning eyes, the slow slide forward like she was about to attempt a tactical escape.

She tried to slip out of her chair.

Livvie caught her wrist with perfect reflexes—firm enough to stop her, gentle enough not to hurt.

"Mummy, ouch!" Rose cried immediately, voice loud and dramatic, laying the performance on thick like she was auditioning for one of Michelle's shows.

"No ma'am," Livvie said, utterly unimpressed. "Where do you think you're going?"

Rose pointed across the room as if she'd just spotted a long-lost friend. "I see Patrick."

Livvie blinked once. "And?"

"I go," Rose said, like it was the most obvious conclusion in the world.

"You can ask if someone will take you," Livvie replied, keeping her voice calm and measured, "but you cannot go alone."

Rose folded her arms with all the righteous indignation of a tiny union rep. "I pet Patrick."

"Love," Livvie sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, "we have been over this. You cannot pet a lobster."

"I can," Rose insisted. "Uncle Trev pet Patrick."

"Patrick is Uncle Trev's pet," Livvie said patiently. "He can do that."

Rose's face crumpled into a pout so intense it looked painful. She turned slowly—very slowly—toward Jeremy, deploying her most powerful weapon: big eyes and the slightly wobbling lip.

"Da," she said sweetly. "Take me?"

Jeremy's shoulders sagged in defeat before he even tried to pretend he had a spine.

Livvie shot him a look. "Jeremy."

Jeremy lifted his hands in surrender. "She asked politely."

"She's manipulating you," Livvie hissed.

Jeremy nodded. "Aye. She is. And it's working."

Rose beamed—victory immediate and complete.

Jeremy stood, slid out of the booth, and scooped her up. Rose immediately wrapped her arms around his neck like a koala with plans.

"I will hold you," Jeremy said sternly as he adjusted her on his hip. "You will not touch Patrick. You will look with your eyes."

Rose nodded solemnly. "Look eyes."

"Patrick pinch," Killy added, as if that settled it.

Livvie exhaled. "Exactly."

Meanwhile, across the room, Jeremy was already crouched near the tank, holding Rose back with one arm as she pressed her face to the glass with reverent awe.

"Hi Patrick!" she shouted.

Fionn winced from beside me. "Jesus. Trev's going to hear that from Limerick."

I smirked. "He'll feel it in the Force."

Fionn's eyes flicked toward me, his expression softening into something more personal. "How have you been doing without Trev and Ráichéal here?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I said automatically—too quick, too smooth.

Livvie scoffed into her drink. "She's 'fine' as long as Jeremy forces her to leave work from time to time."

I shot her a look. "I love what I do."

"You love what you do," Livvie echoed, dry as dust, "and you'd happily become one with your desk if no one intervened."

Fionn laughed, warm and genuine. "Sounds about right." Then he tilted his head slightly, amusement in his eyes. "He's taking care of you even when he isn't here."

“Like I can’t take care of myself,” I replied with a smirk, because I could. I did. I had built an empire. I had survived worse.

But even as I said it, I felt the truth underneath it: being capable didn’t mean you didn’t get lonely.

Fionn didn’t push. He just nodded.

“Aye,” he said simply. “You can. But it’s still nice when someone makes you eat dinner.”

Livvie lifted her cup in agreement. “Exactly.”

I sighed dramatically, then softened into a reluctant smile. “Fine. It’s nice.”

After dinner I headed home, the night air cool against my cheeks as I walked in and let the quiet wrap around me again. The house still felt too still without Trevor and Rachel, but it helped that I’d spent the evening with friends—helped that Jeremy had bullied me into eating real food like I was a teenager living on spite and caffeine.

I pulled Ellie out of my purse, her tiny body vibrating with indignation and joy. I fed her, topped off her water, and watched her crunch through her dinner with the seriousness of someone fulfilling a sacred obligation.

Then I changed into pajamas—tonight’s choice being one of Trevor’s button-ups. It smelled like him: clean, expensive cologne, and the faintest trace of kitchen spice that never fully washed out.

I climbed into bed, propped my phone against my pillow, and texted him before sleep could steal the moment.

ME: *I miss you, mi corazón. Hope you had a great day.*

His reply came quickly, like he’d been waiting for it.

TREV: *I miss you too, mo ghrá. Busy—restaurant is already a hit. Did you eat?*

I smiled despite myself. Of course that was his first question. Not “how are you,” not “did you rest,” but the one thing he knew I wouldn’t prioritize unless someone forced me.

ME: *Sí. I promise. I ate. Jeremy made me.*

TREV: *Good man. I’ll have to thank him.*

ME: *I can take care of myself.*

The typing bubbles appeared almost immediately.

TREV: *Can? Yes. Will? Probably not.*

I huffed a laugh into the dark.

ME: *I hate how well you know me.*

TREV: *No you don’t. I love you. I’ll see you in a couple days.*

My chest tightened—warmth and ache in the same breath.

ME: *Can't wait.*

I set my phone down and turned onto my side, Ellie curled at the foot of the bed like a tiny guardian.

Outside, Cork was quiet.

Inside, I let myself hold the simple truth of it: I missed him. I missed our baby. And I could handle being alone—but I didn't have to pretend I preferred it.

Not when "home" was only a couple of days away.